

## 17 Alaska, July 2000

**Our first night in Alaska** was nothing really memorable other than the relief at being back in the United States. Canada is our most friendly ally and the people were generally nice, but there's some intangible feeling of well being and safety in returning to the cradle. If I live long enough, I'd like to take a trip around the world. Imagine the relief at returning after touring hostile nations.

Of course, I had to film our first campsite in Alaska. I panned our filthy, grimy rig and zoomed on a Coors Light standing on the truck's toolbox. Pulling back, I panned past thin-but-sturdy pine trees to a green valley and distant mountains. "It's the fourth of July. It's 5:30 Alaska Time, and we're in Alaska. Gained an hour when we crossed the line. Four hours different than Ohio now. Able to get beer. The rig is beaten and dirty, but it's been our reliable home, and it'll keep on running. Our first campsite in Alaska."

The growth of the trees seemed to have been stunted by something. It may have been that the area had an especially harsh exposure to the elements or experienced a fire or was in a flood plain or some combination of those factors.

We pulled to Fairbanks and checked in for seven days at Riverview RV Park on the Chena River. The park was huge and the river was pretty clean and moderately quick running at about 40 yards wide. We were actually in the town of North Pole, Alaska.

We went into Fairbanks and found old and new buildings mixed along the river. We met some locals at a bar and found that Alaskan Indians have the same drinking problems. The city's riverfront park featured a fountain with a stately bronze statue depicting an Alaskan Indian family in skin-and-fur parkas with their dog. A fountain in Alaska didn't seem wise, but it was summer and water flowed. Two men paddled past in a canoe. There was a new clock tower, and across the street a multistory building was under construction.

While Lee Ann shopped, I filmed an electrical outlet on a post in a parking lot. "We're in Fairbanks at Fred Meyer across from Safeway. This power post is so people if they have to park their car for a long period of time in the winter they can plug it in and keep it from freezing solid so it'll start when they come back. Imagine."

At Alaskaland theme park we went to a salmon bake. The salmon is actually grilled over a wood fire with the grill racks about a foot above the flames. Basting uses a sauce of butter, honey, dill, and a couple spices we don't remember.

Time seemed to lose meaning in Fairbanks. It stayed light around the clock. One night while I slept and Egypt struggled with his body clock, Lee Ann let him out to chase a squirrel. "Cat's got a squirrel up the tree. He chased him all the way up there. You shoulda seen it. It was funny. I can't find the squirrel right now but he's up there. Cat's not going to let him come down. What do you think? Still waiting for the squirrel to come down. He says, 'Come here squirrelly, squirrelly.' Squirrel's coming down the tree. Egypt on the other side. Egypt says, 'You ain't coming down.' And the squirrel goes back up."

Another short excursion from Fairbanks took us to the tiny town of Ester. Perhaps it was never a town at all but a gold camp. In either case it has remained as a sort of living museum with its original buildings including an authentic saloon where we went to see a long-running stage show. Reservations were required and we got a good spot at a table for two near the stage where we drank our two-beer minimum and watched a delightful

show. The walls and ceiling were hung with typical Alaskan paraphernalia, bear skin, snow shoe, lantern, rope, sled-dog harness, cow skull and horns, shovel, moose antlers, mining tools. The outside of the Malemute Saloon had its name painted under a set of caribou antlers. It had a wooden front and porch and a metal roof. It even had a malemute dog tied outside a small log cabin. After the show, we met one of the actors who told us he'd replaced an actor from Elyria, Ohio who had done the show for 15 years. He was a long-winded guy and I knew Lee Ann was headed to the bathroom, so I left them talking and went out to film the buildings.

While I was standing outside the saloon waiting for Lee Ann, who was in a long line of women waiting for the bathroom, the actor we'd talked to inside came out. I told him again how much we'd enjoyed the show, which consisted of four actors doing a variety of skits, songs, and poetry readings all with an Alaskan theme. They enlightened the crowd about the hardships and subtleties most hadn't considered associated with the hunt for gold and Alaskan life in general for the early settlers. The poems were all by a man named Robert Service who was the prolific spokesman of the Alaskan frontier and authored several volumes. His work is still highly respected, and there's a statue in his honor somewhere along the Alaskan Highway. The actor scratched his stomach and looked up at the moon. "Night came on, and a full moon rose high over the trees into the sky, lighting the land till it lay bathed in ghostly day."

My first thought was that he was quoting Robert Service again, but I caught him giving me a strange glance as he stood looking up and seeming to be waiting for me to respond in kind. Ordinarily, I wouldn't say such a thing in the presence of another man but since he was an actor and I'd just seen him sing and dance I came out with the only Jack London quote I could recall. "Love, genuine passionate love, was his for the first time."

He almost choked on sudden laughter that became a big belly laugh as he put an arm around my shoulder and squeezed. "Good show. Good show. You're the first to recognize that quote."

I let him go on believing I recognized it. I've since looked it up and confirmed that both quotes came from Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. I'd retained mine from my fourth-grade fixation on Alaska.

A couple nights later, Lee Ann was watching the local news and shouted for me to come in to see something. The actor from the Malemute Saloon was the anchor on the local news. It proved to be the first of what I'm calling the Alaskan paradox: The state is enormous beyond comprehension at the same time it's the smallest of all worlds. Everywhere we went we'd hear someone say, "Small world." It would be one camper recognizing another from another campground in Alaska. Though the state was huge, the roads reached very few places. In fact, the capital city of Juneau was not accessible by road. It was surrounded by mountains, glaciers, and water and could only be reached by boat or plane.

Since it didn't get dark and I usually didn't want people in my videos, I went out late at night and filmed the trailer park. The smooth river had willow and pine and other green vegetation on both shores. A pavilion at the river's edge had inside and outside table seating. It was a huge campground with rows and rows of motor homes. "This is the Chena River as it goes past our RV park. Arctic Grayling eating mosquitoes off the top of the river. You see them jumping all the time. Earlier, I saw a spawning, red salmon

jump totally out of the water. This is where they have salmon bakes. Military aircraft going right over our heads pretty often here. The base is only a couple miles away."

The Internet had taught me that king salmon begin turning red as they approach their spawning grounds. I know the feeling.

My original plan was to drive to the Arctic Circle without the trailer. I discussed my plan with a neighbor who'd already plunked down \$700 for a flight up to Barrow, Alaska to dip his toe in the Arctic Ocean. "You're going to regret that," I warned. "Why can't you satisfy yourself with making it to the Arctic Circle?"

"Well, we just brought the motor home. We didn't pull our little car up. We don't want to take the motor home up that road."

"You and your wife are welcome to come along with us in our truck. We figure about 12 hours for the whole round trip."

"Thanks," he said, "but I'm a diver. I know there's probably not going to be anything up there, but I have to see that ocean. Do me a favor though and don't tell my wife about your offer. She's already giving me grief about the cost."

On the outside chance that he might see a polar bear, we put off our run to the Arctic Circle to wait for his report. He was man enough to admit it was the worst money he'd ever spent. While he was gone, Lee Ann and his wife had chatted, so he found out we were retired. "You're too young to be retired."

"You're too old to be working."

"How can you possibly afford it?"

"Well, I didn't blow seven bills to see the Arctic Ocean. You didn't see a polar bear did you?"

"I didn't see a damn thing. There was absolutely nothing. Not a block of ice, not even a wave, not even a bird."

"You did dip your toe?"

"I dipped my toe. But getting back to the point, how can you possibly afford this? I mean, we basically came along because my father and mother-in-law were going and she wanted to go along with them. We can't really afford it. They're helping us pay for it because they were afraid to go by themselves and figured it was now or never. They're old."

He looked at me for some insight that would resolve his money problems. I didn't have anything to tell him. "Look, I'd love to tell you how I'm doing it, but you're asking me to give you 25 years of financial education and experience in a couple minutes and I just can't do it. Even if I tried, you probably wouldn't accept my advice."

"Try me."

"How's your 401(k)?"

"We borrowed on it to buy the motor home." He saw my expression. "It's better to borrow from myself than the bank." He saw my expression. "What? A financial guy told me to do it."

"When did you do that?"

"Four years ago."

"Clean out the 401?"

"Pretty much. Took out \$85,000."

"That money would have doubled in the last four years just in the S&P 500. You could have financed the motor home over 15 years and had payments of about \$750 a month."

"And I'd still have my 85 thou."

"No, you'd have close to \$200,000, and you'd be real close to being able to do what I'm doing. It's not hard."

"I'm going to get drunk."

"Your wife has our email address."

"Thanks."

On the bright side, we didn't have that conversation before he went to the Arctic Ocean or he might have drowned himself. Most working people today could easily retire by age 50 if they only made better financial decisions during their working lives. We'd been motivated by my fear of early death, but we were discovering an alternative life style that made more sense to us with each day and every new experience.

The Arctic Circle was 200 miles of gravel road north of Fairbanks. Another 300 miles of Alaska lay within the circle but the Arctic Ocean couldn't be reached by car without permission of the oil companies. Their gate separated Deadhorse, Alaska from the oil fields at Prudhoe Bay. The Dalton Highway, called the Haul Road by the locals and the oil industry, was built along the Trans Alaskan Pipeline and serves the oil field at Prudhoe Bay. *The Milepost* called it a "challenging road." We took our time and slowed for each passing vehicle. We stopped for lunch at the Hot Spot Café. It advertised the best of everything and the lowest prices on the road but served the worst of everything at the highest prices on the road. Both statements were true because it was the only place on the road. We saw a vastly disproportionate number of people fixing flat tires and stopped to help an old couple whose trailer broke an axle. They couldn't even get off the road. There were no cell phone towers up there, so I flagged a truck. He was able to call for help with his radio. A tow back to Fairbanks was going to cost them over \$500. Lee Ann promised we'd check on them on our way back. "Do you want us to have dinner ready?" Calcium chloride is used on the road to control the dust but it causes tires to overheat and explode. We stopped often to let ours cool and made the round trip without a flat or a chip in our windshield. We saw the pipeline much of the way since the road was built as a means to build the pipeline. After seeing it, I'm not as awestruck by the engineering feat I'd thought it represented although I didn't see the hardest terrain to cross.

"This is an access road over to the Trans Alaskan Pipeline. The big pipe is the height the pipeline is above the ground. If you can't fit under that then you can't go on because you might rupture the pipeline. There's the pipeline. That's a remote-control valve to shut er down. Notice how the pipeline curves back and forth. It actually just sits on those supports. It's not connected to them. That way in case of an earthquake or contraction or expansion of the line it can shift across those supports without rupturing and spilling oil."

When I was at BP working in the Alaskan operation, I read the book *Eight Hundred Miles to Valdez* about building the pipeline. I don't recall the author, but I know a lot about the pipeline.

"Yukon River. Sixty miles from the Arctic Circle. Yukon River's wide, and we're on a wood-planked bridge. And the Trans Alaskan Pipeline is crossing with us. And there it

goes winding its way, a good view of how they snake the pipeline to guard against earthquakes."

The Bureau of Land Management had built a pullout at the Arctic Circle with an observation platform, picnic tables, and a photo-op sign. I took out my GPS to confirm and record the location. The video opened on the wooden sign picturing the earth looking down at it from above the North Pole. "Arctic Circle, Dalton Highway, Alaska Latitude 66 degrees 33 minutes. We made it. We're actually at the Arctic Circle."

Lee Ann walked into the picture and posed in her shorts and skimpy top. "And look how I'm dressed, at the Arctic Circle," she bragged.

"Seventy degrees, not a bad day." I zoomed on the North Pole and the Arctic Circle. "There's the world looking at it from the top. You see the Arctic Circle. Two days in June, the 20th and 21st I think, the sun doesn't set here. Even though it'll set for a brief while tonight, it won't get dark." I pulled back to pan small pines and tundra. "And all around us . . ."

" . . . are bees," finished Lee Ann.

" . . . tundra. We'll show you better tundra later."

We drove another 10 miles into the circle to the very top of our trip to find our sweet spot up at the end of America. We took a blanket and a sheet, two champagne flutes, and our sparkling wine and walked out onto the tundra. It was spongy beneath our feet like six inches of plush carpet. By the time I'd laid down the blanket and we'd stripped off our clothes, the first of the mosquitoes found us. When the corked popped it knocked dozens of approaching bloodthirsty mosquitoes out of the air as it flew over the tundra. We sat down and spread the sheet over us using our heads as tent posts. We drank quickly, and I threw the bottle and glasses out onto the tundra. We made love with great excitement at the top of the world secure that we wouldn't find another couple who had this experience no matter how long we lived. In order to leave her completely covered and protected, I found myself exposed for a time to tundra and mosquito below the waste. Hundreds of mosquitoes landed and drilled. My occasional swat splashed blood. Between my blood and Lee Ann's sweetness I realized with a surge of excited urgency that every grizzly in a 10-mile radius was nose up sniffing the air. I imagined them lumbering toward us and pulled myself in with dual urgency. Sticking my head out without slowing, I checked our green perimeter for a brown beast that might be looking for an experience he could brag about to his friends and male offspring. Suddenly, "I made love inside the Arctic Circle" paled next to his story.

"Did I ever tell you bruins about the time I caught a couple of those human beings with their clothes off out in the middle of the tundra? Let me tell you, a grizzly bear hasn't lived until he eats one of those human females. Sweetest meat on God's green earth."

What Lee Ann was thinking I can only imagine, but her scream could be heard from the Arctic Circle to the Arctic Ocean and surely served to precisely guide the approaching omnivores. When I finished and stood up off of her, I switched off her afterglow by telling her my grizzly fear. I stood watching her bare dash across the tundra, the prettiest sight I'd seen in Alaska, before gathering our things and running back to the truck. We laughed and dressed in the safety of the truck and never saw sign of a bear.

I got out and filmed the surrounding tundra, panning the horizon of rolling, tundra-carpeted mountains without jagged peaks. The time was activated at the bottom of the

picture, 11:11 p.m. The sky was blue with scattered clouds and it was bright daylight. "We're about 10 miles north of the Arctic Circle here. Tundra's very soft. I can testify."

Lee Ann was nervous, so we drove south a few miles and stopped just inside the circle. I dug out a spade full of tundra but didn't hit permafrost. It must have been down a foot or more. There were a few patches of snow in higher spots and trees were able to grow on the southern facing sides of the mountains where there was no permafrost. Only tundra and stunted black spruce grew in the permafrost. The mosquitoes prevented any gold prospecting or fishing. Lee Ann was hoping for a million-dollar gold nugget, and I was still after that Arctic Grayling.

She filmed as I hit two golf shots off the tundra, another accomplishment I'm guessing Tiger can't claim. The clock at the bottom of the frame read 12:09 a.m. "This is Jack hitting a golf ball off the tundra. There it goes."

We stopped to check on the old couple with the broken axle. They were taking their misfortune in stride and thanked us again. We agreed to inquire about their tow truck at the gas station if we didn't see it coming before then. We passed their rescue about an hour later heading toward them at great speed.

Lee Ann filmed two gray-and-white arctic fox on the side of the road. The skies were blue with scattered clouds and it was still bright daylight. The clock read 3:49 a.m. "Hey guys. Look at these fox. They're so curious. Get off. Go, go, go."

Storms hit Alaska the next day, and lightning strikes set fires all over the state. We learned that the average summer saw 300,000 acres burn in Alaska. Unless a town was threatened, they didn't fight the fires. There were so many natural firebreaks of mountains and glaciers and rivers, and the trees never got very dry. Wildlife thrives in the burnt areas as tender young plants that couldn't previously see sunlight through the old growth would spring up and supply tasty foliage. I spent the day in the trailer scratching my ass and getting periodic applications of calamine lotion. Our mail arrived and included Carol's retaliation to our taped pleas to Austin to come and see us. She sent heartbreaking pictures of the little guy in his pajamas, pacifier in his mouth, reaching out to touch the television screen from which Lee Ann and I were talking to him. When Lee Ann went to phone home, I told her to tell everyone we were on our way home. It would take over two months, but the Arctic Circle was as far from home as we'd get so we truly were on our way home to Austin. "It's all downhill from here."

Bored at waiting, I videotaped a stream of rainwater flowing down the outside of a small window in the side of the trailer. Seeming to defy gravity, it turned horizontal several times as it snaked down the glass. "Gravity is having problems here in Alaska."

When she came back from the phone she reported that both our mothers had asked again if it really stays light 24 hours a day. They just couldn't comprehend it though they'd heard it most of their lives.

It turned nice the following day, and we drove into town to an overlook at the University of Fairbanks. We could see smoke rising from several fires. Alaskan fires aren't the sad affairs that leave lasting scars in the Southwest. They're Nature's work, and they're almost welcomed. We stopped at an Alaskan lake where I took a quick, brisk swim. Back at our park, I finally caught that Arctic Grayling. I was throwing a big king salmon lure and caught a grayling that was only an inch or two longer than the lure. I took him to the trailer for a picture and to show Lee Ann. They're very interesting fish.

They have a relatively enormous dorsal fin and look like miniature sailfish. It marked my change of fishing luck.

Lee Ann was horrified to find that Alaskan king crab legs weren't any cheaper in Alaska than they were at home. She'd envisioned us dining greedily on them every night for pennies. She pictured us walking onto the docks and buying them by the basket. They turned out to be as rare and just as much a treat in Fairbanks as they were in Cleveland. They were just as tasty but no more so, and we had our one meal of them that night. It was our last night, and we'd be heading to Denali National Park and Mount McKinley the next day.

The entrance to Denali National Park was 120 miles down the Parks Highway from Fairbanks. It rained all the way, but it was an easy pull. It was still raining when we bought our tickets. With rare exception, the Park Service doesn't allow driving into the park but takes you in old Bluebird school buses. There's a variety of trips of different lengths all along the same road to the various visitor centers. We choose a 66-mile trip to Eielson that would take eight hours and cost \$21 each. Wanting the front seat badly enough, I stood alone in the rain to be first in line when the bus arrived. It proved worth it.

The park is several million acres and includes small pine and willow forests and tundra, lots and lots of tundra. Moose love to eat willow but are hard to spot in the trees. We didn't see one. We were actually an hour and a half into the park before we saw our first animal. We were already interrogating the driver who confidently claimed that he had never made the trip without spotting grizzlies. The tundra eventually showed us five grizzly bears, several fox, lots of dall sheep, plenty of caribou, and a willow ptarmigan. We also saw a hoary marmot. They must be worse than rabbits. The first four grizzlies were too far away to even acknowledge our presence and merely kept grazing without looking toward us. We weren't permitted to call to the animals. The Denali grizzlies are very light in color. Their blonde fur made them easy to spot. I suspected inbreeding, but the guide wouldn't admit it. We came on a fox lying next to the road. She paid no attention to us. She was wet and drying in the sun. I joked that she was meeting another fox. We didn't get 200 yards down the road until we saw the male fox carrying a ground squirrel in his mouth. He walked right past the bus and didn't bother to get off the road. Also using the road, a caribou nearly ran straight into the front of our stopped bus. In Alaska they say "all caribou are horny." Both sexes have antlers. The caribou taught us that sitting in the snow tends to keep off the mosquitoes. Thinking them much more rare, I was surprised to see so many dall sheep up on the steep mountainsides. The park claimed that they're extremely rare outside of Denali. They weren't as shabby as the stone sheep we'd seen along the Alaskan Highway, but they didn't have their full, white winter coats. We watched the state bird, a willow ptarmigan, walk across the road. Our fifth grizzly was close to the road on our way out and proved worth the price of admission. He stood up on his hind legs and looked right at me. Remember, I was in the front seat of the bus. He ran to the top of a hill then lumbered off over the crest. Be warned, they're so fast and agile that there's no such thing as a safe distance.

Among the mountains and glaciers inside Denali National Park is North America's highest peak. Called both Mount McKinley and Mount Denali, it reaches 20,320 feet. We didn't get to see it as a radiant white jewel sparkling in a blue sky. It was shrouded in clouds and only gave us infrequent teases of its highest peak. Hoping for the spectacular

sight, we boondocked at a scenic Mount Denali viewpoint another 75 miles down the Parks Highway but awoke to clouds and rain. On clear days the mountain can be seen from Anchorage.

Another last chance to see spectacular Denali, we camped at Mat-Su RV Park and drove back to Talkeetna for dinner. The town was said to be the inspiration for the sitcom *Northern Exposure*. Our visit convinced us. It was at least as bizarre a place and contained just as peculiar a population. Most streets were mud. Only the main street was paved, and it dead ended into a river. The general store was called Nagley's Store and stocked those items required for Alaskan subsistence. The two-story inn had a historic marker picturing its original form and was called Fairview Inn, Bar, Rooms. It had since received a metal roof. The West Rib Pub and Grill was a collection of shabby additions and had a log-cabin birdhouse with antlers over its entrance. A grease board standing in the rain advertised homemade Alaskan crab burgers as the day's special. The McKinley Deli had an amateur hand-painted sign depicting a mountain climber hanging on a rope delivering pizza on Mt. McKinley. "This is the little town of Talkeetna, Alaska, which goes by the alias of Sicily on *Northern Exposure* and serves as the jumping-off point for climbs of Mt. Denali. There's the historic something built in 1923. But we came here for the Talkeetna Roadhouse still to come." Down a side street we found the Roadhouse, Lodging, Meals, Bakery. Its sign was on a totem pole and had out-of-place seagulls standing on it. Inside, the walls were covered with mementos of climbs of Mt. McKinley. There were signed photos of climbers and an Italian Flag signed by climbers who'd planted it at the summit. "This is the Roadhouse we came for. Climbers of Mt. McKinley, their autographs and stuff are here. Probably came here for breakfast. Not that great a dinner menu. Mementos of climbs of Mt. McKinley are all over the walls. Here's an interesting one, 'Death Valley to Denali, -282' to 20,320' first ever lowest to highest in America.' We sort of did that too."

We went back to the West Rib Pub for their crab burgers. The handle on the draft beer tap was some kind of jawbone. A bearded guy and a blonde pony-tailed woman were sitting at the bar. She was piercing his ear. He noticed us watching and laughed and Lee Ann said, "Come on, scream in pain."

The blonde said, "You should have heard him when he was getting tattooed. We just got married with tattooed wedding rings. He's going ouch, ouch."

"He has a tattooed wedding ring," claimed Lee Ann.

"Huh?" said the blonde.

"My husband has a tattooed wedding ring too."

"He does not."

We introduced ourselves and they bought a round of some kind of sweet shots as a celebration of like spirits. Rex and I had both thought the tattooed wedding rings was an original idea, so we had a bond. I filmed our three hands overlapping, each with its own tattooed wedding ring.

"They knew each other 12 days," said Lee Ann for the video.

"They went all the way to tattoos after just 12 days."

"Oh yeah," said Rex.

"Brave girl," commented Lee Ann.

"No, I'm a brave man."

"What are you talking about?" admonished Irene.

I came to his rescue with, "We were married for 12 years before I went to the tattoo."

"Okay, cool," said Irene. "We got married in Palmer and tattooed in Culvert."

Lee Ann asked, "We were married how many years before you tattooed it on?"

We quickly learned that Irene would have preferred diamond to tattoo when she proudly showed off her wedding present, which was an anthracite necklace he'd stolen for her from a gas station. "It'll turn to diamond in a few more years," she said. We just shook our heads at Rex and tried not to laugh. She'll find out soon enough.

We left them after dinner and went to have a few drinks at the Fairview Inn, which had to be the model for "The Brick" on *Northern Exposure*. We found the expected collection of off-center locals. One guy joined us at our table and told us he'd climbed Denali twice. We had to retreat to the bar to shake him. In a couple hours we knew everyone at the bar. Behind the bar was a big mural of Mt. McKinley. There were paper flags with climbers names pasted on the summit. "There's the top of Mt. McKinley. I swore I wouldn't leave Alaska until I saw it. There it is."

A local we'd been drinking with called over, "Hey Jack. Why don't you hang something on it?"

"Right after I climb the real one," I said. "To the Top of Mt. McKinley," I toasted.

"Round on me," someone said, and we all ordered.

"You finally seen it," said Lee Ann.

"I finally saw it." A grizzly bear rug complete with its head was mounted flat against the ceiling directly over my head. I pointed up and said, "And I didn't have to answer to him."

The next morning I visited the fancy new Denali Lodge built above the town. Very well done in stone and pine timbers and with a commanding view of the mountain, it's another example of the commercializing or re-manufacturing of the real world into the world of our refined expectations. The visit yielded a nearly clear view of the mountain.

While checking out of Mat-Su, I purchased a one-week fishing license. After some conversation, which confessed the fact that I was passing through for the one and only time, our hostess gave me directions to a nearby fishing hole and a little free advice. Her husband ran a fishing-guide service in addition to the RV park and was all booked up anyway. We parked the trailer and I hiked past a bear-warning sign down a grade steep enough to require a switchback to the fishing hole. I stood on the bank at the confluence of the Susitna and the Sheep Rivers. I cast my dart lure from my location on the Sheep out to the edge of the fast moving Susitna. The kings were on their way up the Susitna to spawn near the base of Mint Glacier in the Talkeetna Mountains, but some were inclined to take a break at the end of the Sheep to rest and clear their gills of glacial silt. Less than a half-hour of cast and retrieve yielded the strike. The feel of the fish on the end of my line was different than any I'd ever hooked. Rather than the rapid jerking and frantic fighting of a small fish, I felt the deliberate pull of the king. His strategy was to break my line, tear the rod from my hands, or drag me up the river behind him. He put up a fierce battle. He was very nearly too much for my rod and reel, but eventually, he tired and I was able to bring him to shore. Not having a net or waders, I had to get down in the dirt on my stomach and reach over the bank to grab him by the gills and wrestle him up onto dry land. Fearing the smell of blood and fish might attract the grizzly that was rumored to be nearby, I grabbed my gear, hugged the fish, and started climbing back up the switchback to the trailer. Gasping for breath, I proudly showed off the king and posed

with him for pictures. He'd more than fill our freezer with prime salmon filets, and his carcass would no doubt provide a good meal to some other form of Alaskan wildlife.

The pictures show me holding a huge and beautiful fish. There's blood and mud on my sweatshirt. The lure is hanging from his mouth, and I'm displaying him proudly to the camera holding him forward to make him look even bigger.

"Look at how dirty your shirt is. He's a big boy. A salmon of some kind right?"

"He's a salmon. Must be 40 pounds. If he's not a king, he's a record. Still kicking. Better get him cleaned before he attracts a bear."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Get my knife. I'll get him filleted and get rid of him."

"Dinner's here," said Lee Ann. "Wished I liked salmon."

"You're trying some sushi. This is the purest, freshest fish we'll ever get."

Before we left the parking lot, a native Alaskan arrived to try his luck. I took him to my fish carcass, and he confirmed it was a king. He had a 44 strapped to his side. I asked him about it and he explained about the grizzlies. He went to his truck and came back with a photo album. It was just as carefully put together and labeled as was Lee Ann's photo documentary of our trip. His contained dead animals. He turned to a photo of himself kneeling next to an enormous dead grizzly. The other pages had moose, deer, sheep, black bear, and I don't recall what else. I was sickened by it and tried not to show it. I asked how he killed the grizzly. He put an arrow in him then filled him full of lead with two 44s after he stood up on two legs. He claimed the bear fell right at his feet. Lee Ann was terrified of him. I had little doubt that he'd like to add a few dead humans to his collection. After he got his fishing gear and headed to the river, we wasted little time getting out.

I think it's wrong to kill wild animals, but I won't preach it. It's a truth that's true for me. I'm not trying to tell anyone anything they don't want to know. Man is not part of Nature. Let the animals kill each other as Nature planned. Whenever we kill one, we interfere with her plan. Austin's father kills, and there's a chance Austin will too. He'll have my example to compare. He'll see animal heads mounted on the wall and watch my videos of live wild animals. He'll have to decide for himself.

If God is Mother Nature, then we're surely Alien. Mother Nature certainly didn't create us to destroy her creatures and creation.

We put some miles behind us and boondocked along the highway. We put out our awning and I grilled, sheltered from a steady, easy rain. Four bright reddish filets filled our portable grill. "Later that same day . . . We figured that big mama yielded about \$200 worth of salmon filets. And there's the evening's dinner. There's our campsite. Something strange and wonderful about Alaskan rain."

Reaching Anchorage the next morning, we stopped with the trailer and got a picture in front of the BP Exploration Building. The town holds half the population of Alaska but is surprisingly small and compact. We stayed a night and headed down the Kenai Peninsula the next day after I'd promised Lee Ann we'd be back for the Saturday market.

We stopped briefly at a point of interest to film. "There goes the train. This is an old railroad-track snowplow. I think it's just on display though I imagine they still have to clear the tracks somehow. Over across the tracks, that's an arm of Cook Inlet. It's obviously not high tide. I don't know if its low tide. But if you come here at the right time at times there's a six-foot wall of water that moves up the arm. It has a 42-foot tide,

second largest in the world to the Bay of Fundy in eastern Canada. But I don't know enough. I think the wall of water is just held up by the moon and the earth rotates under it and that's a bore tide. We'll catch it on the way back up to Anchorage for sure."

The Tesoro Gas Pump sat on four-by-fours next to its aboveground gas tank. Nearby sat old, unused gas pumps and tanks and an old Tesoro sign. A short walk up a slight hill sat a trailer that seemed to have been there forever and had grown into its surroundings. "This is the gas station at Hope, Alaska where we were happy to pay over \$2 a gallon. We were out of fuel. It's a Tesoro. And this is Hope, Alaska. Lee Ann had to go wake up an old lady in that trailer to pay for the gas. We detoured up here just for gas and by the looks of this place were lucky to get it. They don't get many people up here."

I'd never seen another, so Lee Ann filmed me standing next to a strange animal. The wall behind me was made of logs and held a variety of stuffed heads and a piece of a whale. I pat the ox on the head and say, "This is a musk ox."

Combat fishing is the term that applies to an overcrowded shoreline during a salmon run. We saw our first and pulled in to check it out. There wasn't a single fisherman where we stood, but on the opposite bank they were nearly shoulder to shoulder, all wearing waders. One guy seemed to be acting as the net man for an entire brigade. We watched him wait as a salmon was fought then skillfully net it. "A mere shadow of the king salmon I caught." We watched the Russian River Ferry cross the rushing river using a steel cable attached to each bank. We quickly learned that we were at the confluence of the Kenai and the Russian Rivers. Salmon fishing is prohibited in the Kenai but it's legal in the Russian, so the ferry makes its living by taking people across the confluence to fish the Russian. "And there they are in the Russian. They're lining the banks. They're trying to catch their salmon. They all harbor the dream of catching the fish I just caught the other day." Being just downstream from the mouth of the Kenai they were twice as likely to catch a fish as they were upstream from the mouth of the Kenai because half the salmon turned up the Kenai and the other half continued up the Russian. The amazing fish all headed for the place of their birth using a means of navigation man may never comprehend. We walked upriver a ways to the point that both banks are considered the Russian. There we found women fishing. To avoid combat they were willing to accept a reduced concentration of fish. Curiously, the Kenai was a radiant shade of turquoise blue while the Russian was grayish blue. The beautiful color of the Kenai is accounted for by glacial runoff. We saw a sign depicting an idyllic Indian village that used to occupy the site. It showed Indians herding salmon into a fish weir and pulling them out. We walked back downstream to observe the combat. It was comical, especially when a big fish took a fly on light tackle. The lucky fisherman would yell out "fish on" and those nearby would scramble to get their line in before the running fish caused a tangle. Often they were too late and several combatants would have to follow the net man away from the river to separate their lines. Looking up the Kenai to the mountain background was a gorgeous site few of the combatants noticed. We watched one fisherman whose pole was bent double. He waved off the net man and eventually came up holding the fish by its gills. I checked him out through my binoculars. "I think that's a red, a good sized red." While the reds are silver they're good eating, but as they get up river to spawn they turn red and their meat is no good anymore. The reds being caught here were still silver, but a large red rarely exceeded twelve pounds. My 40-pound king had taken the pressure off, and I was smug and relishing my success. If I'd still been fishless, I probably would have

been forced to join the battle. "I might try to catch one if we find ourselves boondocked next to one of these rivers."

We stopped at an overlook and watched four men in a boat working with some sort of net or line suspended between floats. Behind them were snow-covered mountains on the opposite shore. "I'm standing on the edge of Cook Inlet. I don't know what kind of fishing operation these guys are running here. Gill netting I'd guess. There's a nice mountain range across Cook Inlet. Starting to get blue skies. I just saw an eagle soar past. Those are seagulls."

Homer, Alaska was as far down the Kenai Peninsula as road building was possible, 233 miles south of Anchorage. Much of the drive was along the shore of Cook Inlet with views across to mountains that were actually part of the Aleutian Range. The road ended out on the Homer Spit, a narrow stretch of land just wide enough for the road, a strip of tourist businesses, and some parking. The spit sheltered the small boat harbor from which the halibut charters ran. Though we could have camped out on the spit, Lee Ann felt safer higher up from the water. From our campsite we could see three glaciers, the largest of which had a mountain growing out of it. I walked down to the beach at around 11 p.m. to find a bald eagle standing on a rock left dry by the low tide. I filmed him as he spread his wings and flew past me. "Coming right for me, oh nooooo." The wing span was shockingly large. I walked out over rocks to wet, soft sand and small, breaking waves. Out in Kachemak Bay I could see the lights of the Homer Spit. Across the bay, snow-capped mountains towered. Looking back across the tide pool, I could see our trailer up on the bluff. There was a very peaceful, warm feeling on the beach surrounded by mountains, so close to the calm sea yet so close to home.

We caught the first nice day in a while for my halibut charter. Captain Dave and the Fringe Benefit took our group of six potential castaways two hours down Cook Inlet to the Gulf of Alaska. Dave was a superstitious guy. Bananas were unlucky and forbidden, and he checked each of our lunches. Our group included a plump kid who would have fished 24/7 if allowed, a retired couple from Michigan who strained to land their fish, a clean-cut guy who the Captain thought was unlucky and ignored much of the day, an old salt who chewed tobacco, and me. The water was smooth all day, and I was the lucky fisherman. I had a halibut on within seconds of hitting the bottom every time. I must have caught 18 fish, but you could only keep two each. At first we were all shocked that the captain threw them back. They were large fish. Later, we started catching and keeping much bigger halibut. I spotted humpback whales surfacing and blowing. The spray from their blowholes appeared to go 30 feet up in the air. "Thar she blows," I yelled much too loud. They all looked at me. "Always wanted to do that." They laughed. We saw tufted puffins on the water but never saw one fly. Though I caught the most by far, the kid won the pool with the biggest fish. My share was much more than we could eat and freeze, so we shipped most of it home at great expense. It turned out to be the best gift we sent home. Everyone loved getting Alaskan halibut.

Lee Ann planned to shop while I was gone, but she did see me off at the dock to film our rookie group of tourist fisherman and the Fringe Benefit. "Make room in the freezer." She learned the sad story that was behind the kid's presence. His grandmother was there to see him off on the adventure. Her husband had dreamed all his life of coming to Alaska but put it off for the usual reasons. The trip was already paid for when he dropped dead of a heart attack. The grandmother was still a new widow, yet she

summoned the courage to bring the kid in her dead husband's place to live out his dream for him. What advice would that old man have for me now?

Our catch of huge white fish was hung by length across a horizontal board for videotape and photos. Captain Dave turned out to be quite the ham, posing in his orange waders with our smiling group of veteran halibut fisherman. "There's our fish. I'm the third biggest. There's our Captain. Hey Dave."

Our female fisherman pats his shoulder and calls out, "Derby Dave."

He smiles and thrusts his head toward the camera, "Yass." I move around behind the fish to show they're dark brown on the opposite side.

That night we went back out to the world famous Homer Spit to the Salty Dawg Saloon, a bar put together out of three old buildings which were salvaged and moved after the 1964 earthquake caused the spit to sink five feet. A wooden sign read, "Last known building from the original townsight of Homer, Alaska 1898." Apparently they needed a bar more than a post office. The doorway was less than six feet high and made Lee Ann look like a giant on the film. Deep sawdust covered the floor, and the walls and ceiling were covered with dollar bills and life rings in addition to the typical Alaskan paraphernalia. I try to stay with the local specialty, but a Salty Dawg tasted like a seawater margarita. A young woman at the bar was a local schoolteacher who lived there year round. She told us about the 50 below temperature levels and the "square tire syndrome." When the temperature goes far below zero, tire pressure drops and the bottom flattens. You have to drive a while before the tires warm enough to re-inflate the flat spot. Your car bounces as if riding on square tires. There was a human foot hanging over our heads at the bar, so I filmed it. "Only in Alaska can you find a human foot hanging over the bar," said Lee Ann. She was adapting to Alaska. Before this trip she would have screamed and moved to a table.

The waitress added, "I don't know where the jaw is but it's up there somewhere. It used to have like the bottom jaw on it cause we used to put cigarettes in its mouth."

"Could be TB Cooper," I said. "We don't know."

We enjoyed partying with Alaskans. They aren't so future oriented. We must have been pretty loaded when we left because half the bar yelled at me to watch my head as I went through the door.

We retraced over half our drive down to Homer from Anchorage before turning south again into Kenai Fjords National Park outside Seward. The park protects the 30-by-50-mile Harding Ice Field. One of 32 glaciers within the park, Exit Glacier, extends just a few miles from that ice field. We were able to boondock inside the park and hike to the glacier. It didn't extend to the sea but terminated at the head of a stream created by its melt water, freed after thousands of years as ice. The glacier has been retreating for many years by advancing two feet per day while melting back two and a half feet per day. From the trailer we hiked past signs marking its face in 1928, 1951, etcetera until we reached it. Actually I'd made an extensive exploration of it by the time Lee Ann reached it. There were caves and spires and all kinds of cool formations. It cracked loudly and you never knew when a chunk might fall. Signs warned away those inclined to follow rules. I'd located an easy climb and prompted her up, and she can say she climbed a glacier. The ice was deep blue due to clarity. Compression of snow rather than the freezing of water created it. I carried a hammer and broke off several pieces of ice that had to be thousands of years old and could have been hundreds of thousands of years old.

You could see right through it. Rain accompanied our hike back to the trailer. We used the ice in a variety of drinks as well as just eating it and drinking the melt water. The ice was pure, clear, took an unbelievable amount of time to melt, and made drinks cold and especially refreshing. We used it in Zima, Stoli, Coke, and ice water. Sucking on it caused it to melt in a strange way. It would become rough with tiny slower-melting humps. These could have been tiny bubbles of centuries-old air. It lasted many days in the refrigerator since it's nine times as dense as ice made by freezing water.

On a rainy and foggy day we pulled into the town of Seward and made a brief walking tour. The cruise ships, passenger trains, and tourist trolleys went on about their activities. "This is the town of Seward. Wasn't much of a town, Seward. We don't like it. It's a cruise-ship stop and the closest place to Kenai Fjords National Park. It's also a coal-mining town so it's dirty and gloomy, has no character, and we decided not to go on the cruise that we were going to take since it's raining and we can't see the mountaintops in the fog."

Lee Ann added, "It smells of fish and coal."

"Here comes the Seward Trolley. Hey, they should call it Seward's Folly."

"Why?"

"It's a historical thing. There's the train. It too stops in Seward."

We stopped overlooking a large lake with mountains going right into it. Close peaks were snow capped and distant peaks lost in fog. It was a nice blue color complementing the blue spruce in the foreground. A passing seaplane seemed to be considering a landing. "This is Ke'nai Lake or Kenai' Lake, 22 miles north of Seward. We stopped here yesterday but we didn't take any film because the weather was bad."

"That was supposed to be sarcasm," said Lee Ann.

"I think this lake is the destination for those Kenai red salmon, but you can't catch them here. They only have one thing on their minds."

"Maybe you can still catch the females," joked Lee Ann.

"Plane coming in to land on the lake. Can you land on water? Lake takes its color from glacier runoff."

We came back to Anchorage eating halibut and made camp for a couple days in the city. After Lee Ann's Saturday market, we explored the rest of the town. Combat fishing was going on at Ship Creek right in the city of Anchorage. Fishermen were lined up crowding the banks trying to float their fly into a salmon's mouth. We were able to watch the salmon make their way around a dam from on top.

We checked out and parked our rig on the street near the bus station in Anchorage. A bar fight spilled out onto the street, and two degenerates were banned from the bar. They shouted obscenities and threats of revenge as they walked away. This made us a bit apprehensive about leaving our rig, but it was too late to find another place for it. Our bus was about to leave. We were taking a bus to Whittier for a day cruise on Prince William Sound.

The bus would take us back down Turnagain Arm. I'd learned more about its tide. The Turnagain Arm of Cook Inlet has the second biggest tide in the world. It nearly drains at low tide and actually has a bore tide with the incoming tide. A bore tide is a wall of water moving up the arm as the earth rotates under it. The arm got its name when Captain Cook sailed up fooled into thinking it was a river by the flow of the outgoing tide. When he realized it was not a river, he had to "Turn again."

To increase access to the town of Whittier, someone came up with the idea of allowing cars and buses to share a two-and-a-half-mile tunnel with the train. They open the tunnel every hour and a half for car and bus traffic one way or the other. If you miss it, you're stuck for another three hours. Whittier is a tiny town with virtually its whole population living in one high-rise apartment building. An old Army barracks and tank farm is closed. The Alaska Ferry stops there along with the railroad and now busses and cars. People come for access to the sound. The goal of our cruise was the beauty of the sound and the glaciers that calve into it. Whales did not typically frequent that part of the sound, but we expected eagles, seals, and grizzlies. We'd have a salmon bake on the return trip.

Standing on the rear deck as we left Whittier in our wake, we could see the small town and the mountains surrounding it. In addition to the zoom on the camera, I'd brought binoculars. I checked out an Alaska state ferry against a distant mountain and appreciated the mountains were enormous. We were lucky to have blue skies, a rarity on the Kenai Peninsula in the summer. Across a few miles of smooth water ahead we could see the ever-present glacier. Prince William Sound is known for tremendous glacial calving, and this was the first we'd see with that ability. We passed it without seeing a single piece of ice fall. Lee Ann was looking in the direction of my extended arm at the eagles I'd spotted in the trees when the captain announced, "There's a few eagles in the tops of these trees. Keep your eyes open. They're all over through here. Look for the white heads. They're easy to spot." Golfers have an advantage finding eagles in trees. Locating the white heads calls for the same skills as finding a golf ball in the rough.

"There goes a cruise ship behind us." Prince William Sound is large and has ships passing in every direction. The big, white cruise ship was crossing our wake several miles behind and was a beautiful site against spectacular scenery.

The glacially carved fjords had steep walls that went nearly vertically to great depths, so ships had little worry of running aground and could get very close to the mountainsides. Our Captain took us within a few feet of a rock face and nosed the bow within feet of a hidden falls. Lee Ann and a lot of the passengers lined up to get their minute on the bow in the pure spray, but I stayed on the deck taking in the big view surrounding me and keeping an eye on a nearby glacier, nearby being about 10 miles. I was rewarded when I caught movement out of the corner of an eye and watched a gigantic section of the glacial wall break loose and crash into the sound. It had already hit the water by the time the rifle-shot sound of cracking ice reached our ears and the other tourists came running. "Right there," I said pointing. "It was fabulous. See the iceberg. I watched it fall. It was 10 times the size of that iceberg. See the wave coming across the sound." The Captain had the experience to know he had to back the boat away from the mountainside before the wave reached us. The engine roared and we backed out. I was the only one on deck to see the glacier calve off, and it made my day and turned everyone else green. We'd nearly forget about the wave by the time it rocked the boat.

Using the binoculars, I focused on a black spot in a field several hundred feet above the water with a mountain rising behind it. "That's a bear over there grazing, that black spot. He's a grizzly. I can see the hump on his back."

As we approached our destination at the end of a fjord the rock faces of the mountains were lined with frequent waterfalls. They were fed by the melting ice field behind the

glaciers. Zooming in on the glaciers we could see they were melting and had their own waterfalls within them. The scene turned absolutely picture-postcard perfect as we approached. Great walls of ice towered over us with small icebergs floating in front of them. The sky was blue and the glaciers white with some patches of deep blue, the gorgeous site they use to advertise Alaskan cruises. Small chunks fell off but nothing big enough to rock the boat.

The Captain's voice rang out again, "Coming up on Blackstone Glacier. Now, all the crash ice we're going through is new ice. We were here yesterday and it was ice free. So all this ice right here has come off the glacier since yesterday afternoon when we were here. Hopefully that activity will continue today so we can see some of it. We could come out here tomorrow and all this ice could be gone, pushed out by the winds and tides. You never know what's going to be out here as you approach these glaciers." We could hear the sound of ice hitting the metal boat as we moved through it and could feel the vibrations with our feet.

Placing faith in coincidence, I turned on the camera and hoped for a calve scanning from glacier to glacier. "We're waiting for the glacier to calve off."

"Hello again," began the Captain. "As we approach Blackstone Glacier in front of us, I'll direct your attention to our starboard or right side. Up on the rock cliffs over there just in front of us is another glacier over there. That one is named North Land Glacier. That's a hanging style of glacier, so called because it's hanging on those rock-cliff walls. When North Land calves off it is a spectacular sight to see. Ice tumbles a long way down those rock cliff walls, breaks up, and hits the water making a lot of noise. So keep a close eye on North Land over here to our right. Of course, keep an eye on Blackstone. I'm still a mile away, and I'm going to weave my way closer."

Lee Ann said, "We're probably lucky we saw the one piece calve off."

"Okay. There's Blackstone Glacier about to calve off into the sound. I'm taking a gamble with my remaining film right now. Come on baby. Fall. Fall." The sound of cracking ice builds anticipation. "Hear it cracking? We hear it cracking. We think a big chunk is about to fall."

"Come on baby," says Lee Ann, and several people laugh.

A male German accent pleads, "It's sunny. Sky's blue. The tourists are here. It's time."

Lee Ann agrees, "It's time."

"If I only had a shotgun," I said. "Fire a few shells into that thing." A smaller boat was dangerously closer to the face of the glacier. A thrill seeker was out of the boat standing on an iceberg. "Look at this idiot. At the rate this ice is melting we gotta have a calve. This cow is definitely pregnant. Gotta drop a calf soon." We could see a group of kayaks near the shoreline but at a respectable distance from the glacier. Well up on the glacier we monitored the fast-flowing waterfall. Fed by the melting ice field we couldn't see, it disappeared into the face of the glacier and coupled with the cracking we were hearing gave us hope we'd witness the whole face calve off with a monster splash. "Look at the water falling behind it."

"Are those seals?" asked Lee Ann, pointing toward the base of the glacier.

She took the binoculars and confirmed they were and discovered that they were scattered around us lying on icebergs. She made her way out on a platform that extended

from the bow with her camera to look down at the water where she noticed seals close to the boat. By then, we were backing away from the glacier and I'd turned off the camera.

"There he is," I called.

"Where?"

"Ten o'clock." She got her seal picture and returned. "There're about six or eight seals hauled out at the base of the glacier. We're waiting for it to calve off, and they don't think it ever will."

"They know more than we do," said Lee Ann. "They live here all the time."

"Well, the ice they're lying on had to come off the glacier. They get hit by a block of ice that falls 20 stories and it's good night seals. All those white birds flying must be hoping for scraps of fish from the seals or possibly pieces of crushed seal." The boat started its turn and passengers started down to claim seats for dinner.

Blackstone Glacier was named after a mailman who was in the habit of shortcutting across the glacier. One day he set off on his multi-day mail route to Whittier and vanished. The most likely but certainly not the only way he may have met his end on that route was by falling into a crevasse. Many years later, his body fell out of the face of the glacier after having been moved along over the years by the advancing ice. The mail eventually got delivered and the glacier took his name.

We shared a table with a couple who told us about trips to London and Paris. Their travel agent told them about another glacier cruise she'd taken on a smaller boat. She'd been witness to an enormous chunk of glacial ice calving off from high up on the face of the glacier. She was on the stern, which was pointed at the glacier. The wave the falling ice generated rocked the small boat from stern to bow to such a degree that she feared the bow would go under and they'd sink straight to the bottom. That was her last small-boat cruise, and she'd convinced this couple to take the big boat. The meal was hardly worth a mention, but it filled our time on the ride back. I noticed a passing landmark and went out to film Whittier.

"Approaching the town of Whittier where we boarded this vessel. Fishing boats at the dock. The Army built it during World War II. That building has since been abandoned by the Army, and so has the tank farm, but they were important to the war effort. This other building, practically the only other building in town, that high rise back there, houses the town of Whittier. There's our bus. When we get on it we're going to drive a short way up this road past the tank farm through that A-frame-looking thing. That A-frame is the entrance to the tunnel, the train tunnel that goes two and a half miles through that mountain. Our bus is going to take us through that tunnel."

The bus ride back to Anchorage had frequent stops for no apparent reason. It wasn't until we reached a large group of Alaskan dall sheep feeding on a rocky mountainside just over the road that we realized everyone was stopping to observe them. They had horns curving back along their heads, and they leaned into the hillside as they ate. They were bright white and close. Our driver spoke over his intercom, "Get your picture. They held us up, so we may as well hold them up a little too."

Lee Ann directed me with, "Right here Jack. Right above you."

"You get em?" asked the driver. "Got em?"

"Got em," said Lee Ann.

That bus driver was quite a character and gave us most of his life story on the return trip. He drove the bus in the summer but lived the winter months off the land in the wilds

in a log cabin without electricity or running water. Alaskan subsistence living had a certain appeal to a particular sort of person I may never comprehend. Some of what he said didn't hold up to close scrutiny, but he was interesting. A few days before our trip, a camper had been eaten by a grizzly bear. He wasn't just mauled or killed but actually eaten. Taken right out of his tent. They hunted down the animal and retrieved a lot of the man's body from its stomach. According to the bus driver, a young grizzly is like a human teenager. He's likely to do anything.

We were relieved to find our trailer as we'd left it. We were afraid it would be towed or vandalized. We set off on our drive to Valdez, 300 miles. This far south in Alaska we got a few hours of darkness each night but still had plenty of daylight in which to travel. We covered about half the distance and boondocked for the night.

We woke to a big view of mountains and a glacier and blue skies. The glacier was below us, so we could see part of its ice field. Ironically, we could also see a volcano in the distance down a road with short spruce trees on either side. "Here's the view we're waking up to from our night on the Glen Highway on the way to Valdez. That's the Chugach Mountains and the Matanuska Glacier. Beautiful day. Looks like we're going to have the second consecutive day of blue skies. And there's our campsite. This is Mount Wrangell, the largest active volcano in Alaska. After the 1964 quake it had a 164-foot-thick ice pack over it. Now it's bare rock, and that rock is at 180 degrees. You almost never see the peak because steam is usually rising from it."

Cow moose had become so common we'd stopped filming them until we came across a particularly active yearling grazing in a particularly attractive setting. She jumped and turned toward the camera as I approached. She walked a few steps toward me and went back to grazing. She looked up again, turned, and bounded into the forest. "Are you talking to me? Well, you're the only one here. Hey moose. Come back and fight you coward."

We drove over the wonderful Thompson Pass where it once snowed 64 inches in a single day and through Keystone Canyon, a spot so magnificent that Lee Ann asked me to stop. She took her pictures, and we went on to the little port of Valdez, Alaska.

Some people who toured Alaska choose to do it in reverse. Whenever we'd cross paths at an attraction or in a campground, we'd exchange advice. One had told Lee Ann that it was best to spend the first night in Valdez opposite the town across the harbor near the pipeline-terminal gate. They only charged a few dollars to park, and you could catch and grill salmon from the campsite when they were running.

We set up camp quickly since we stayed connected to the truck and there were no hookups. My old trusty fishing rod was set for kings, so I took the little telescoping rod that came with my tackle box with six pound test and a fluorescent trout lure down the little incline to the water to cast for a pink salmon. Most were catching their limits quickly, but others couldn't land a fish. I caught mine, a good size pink they said, on the third cast. The people I'd been talking with watched me until they were sure I was quitting. They needed an explanation. Fishing was hardly my one driving interest as it was for many people. Nothing is, really. I like to do everything but nothing a lot. I want to catch one good one of each type of fish, but I don't want to catch a lot or do it often. I just want the experience. These people wouldn't understand it. "This is dinner, and it's dinner time."

Lee Ann stood at the top of the rise smiling. We'd been together more than two decades, and she didn't quite understand it. She'd seen me switch from one goal to another and pursue it with such an effort that she was certain I'd found that one thing I was meant to do. Once I'd met with success or some sort of fulfillment and she'd completely adjusted to a new way of life, I'd broach a change of direction to her and she'd collapse in incredulity. She'd pray and hope it would pass, but she'd slowly come around and make the adjustment, and now she was a camper. She stood up there listening and reminding herself not to get too comfortable in this new way of life. You only live once, so why not try to fit a few extra lives into that life?

We grilled and ate our pink salmon and walked along the sound. We watched an otter swimming on his back eating a fish. He finished, rolled over, and dived up and under in that cute otter style. This was in Prince William Sound less than a quarter mile from the Trans Alaska Pipeline terminal at the Port of Valdez, and we could see the salmon jumping all across the sound, and the whole natural harbor, and the surrounding mountains and forests, and the little town across the bay.

The next morning we moved across the harbor to town and the Bear Paw RV Park where we got a spot on the bay looking across at the pipeline terminal. There were otters and the occasional seal in the bay. I filmed an otter-seagull confrontation over a fish. The otter had it and the seagull wanted it. The otter ate it all, floating on his back and ignoring the gull.

We were able to see the ultimate destination of the pinks, or humpbacks, and watch them spawn. They were in about a foot of water. The humps on the backs of the males would often be out of the water. They can swim in as little as a couple inches of water. We watched a particular male guarding his position behind a female. When other males approached, he'd fight them off and reclaim his position right behind her. He was big, and he'd bite and chase the other males away. Some would fight, but he was just too big and determined for them. He waited for her to lay her eggs so he could fertilize.

The 1964 earthquake leveled the original town of Valdez. The new town stands four miles from the original. There wasn't a single traffic signal in town and only about six bars. The surprisingly small size of the town gave me an idea. That evening we set out on a quest to discover where Captain Hazelwood was drinking the night he wrecked the Exxon Valdez. Even after all the intervening years, the information had to be pried out.

Our first stop was the Valdez Museum, where we couldn't find anyone willing to discuss the spill. They did have a mounted piece of pipe from the Trans Alaska Pipeline. It was cut away to reveal a pipeline-cleaning device inside called a weasel. It runs right along with the oil and rotates so its fins scour and clean the inside diameter of the line.

Directly across the street was the first bar in a little strip center, the Glacial Sound Inn. We partied quite a while and got to know the bartender and barmaid a little before we brought up the tender topic. Even though we'd talked about our trip and heard their stories, they made sure we weren't reporters or novelists before they'd discuss it. It very nearly brought tears to the eyes of the barmaid, who'd been a close friend of the barmaid who'd served Hazelwood. "What they put that poor woman through took years off her life." She went on to tell us what she knew. After promising we wouldn't tell how we found out, we proceeded to the actual bar involved.

It required videotape, which opened focused on the sign reading "The Pipeline Club, Steak, Seafood, Cocktails." It was an upscale place in a stand-alone building with a

pretty full parking lot. "Here we are at The Pipeline Club. We've already found the answer to our question. We have it on good authority from the barmaid at the last bar that Irma Lee got Hazelwood drunk. She was the barmaid right here at the Pipeline Club. Irma Lee, sadly, has left us a year or so ago."

Inside The Pipeline Club I asked what he'd been drinking. The manager returned a look of utter disgust. "You don't have to tell me, just make me one."

"Do you like gin?"

"No."

"Then you won't like it."

"He doesn't care," said Lee Ann. "He'll drink it."

The bar was too busy for further argument. She gave another look and reached for a glass. "Give us both one." She looked again. Lee Ann nodded.

When she handed them over she announced, "Tangueray on the Rocks."

"What table was he sitting at?"

No doubt hoping to get us away from the bar, she pointed. As I opened my mouth again she said, "The chair closest to the door."

We shared Captain Hazelwood's table with two young women who were already sitting there. They were nice enough to give me his seat. They were interesting and fun. Everyone in Alaska is interesting. Most are fun. The uninteresting and dull do not go to Alaska. One of them worked as a waitress in Florida in the winters and did the same thing in Valdez in the summers. We still email her as "Girl from Valdez." Like most single young women in a bar, they were there to meet a man, but they enjoyed us enough to chase their pursuers away for a night. We took turns ordering drinks for the table. Everyone had to have whatever the turnholder ordered. My first choice was a Hazelwood, the name I'd given to his Tangueray on the Rocks. The manager didn't like it. They came with a message that they were now out of Tangueray. "I want a film," I said to Lee Ann.

She picked up the camera and moved away. She filmed a quick view of the bar and the band, pausing on the female drummer, then focused on me standing between the two young women on bar stools at a high, round table. "You're on."

I start talking and Lee Ann shouts over bad rock music and bar noise. "We can't hear you, but you're on."

I raise my glass and start again, loudly. "This is the drink Hazelwood was drinking, Tangueray on the Rocks, the night he wrecked the Exxon Valdez. This is the bar. This is the table. This is the chair."

Lee Ann adds, "And these are the locals. Say hi to Ohio."

One young woman says, "Hello."

The other says, "Hi Ohio. Woo."

"All right," says Lee Ann.

I resume my slurred bragging, "Drinking Tangueray on the Rocks. A Senate committee heard months of testimony, and they didn't find out as much as I found out by stopping at two bars."

The first young woman clicks glasses with me and says, "Cheers to that."

"Job well done Detective Jack."

Valdez was still recovering from the consequences of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. It was a tender topic for the whole town, and we let go of it. Since the spill, everyone

entering the pipeline terminal has to take a Breathalyzer Test. Each oil tanker is escorted in and out of the sound by two other boats, one leads and the other follows. There won't be another spill.

After the third female-ordered sweet drink, I ordered one out of Kerouac's road book. It stumped the waitresses and the barmaid. A wine spodioidi is a shot of port wine, a shot of whiskey, and another shot of port wine. They brought the 12 shots, lined them up on the table, and announced we were cut off for the night. I'd have called it a whisky sandwich, and it was hilarious watching the women down the shots. Looking it up later, it was a "nice sweet jacket for all that bad whisky."

Lee Ann needed to recover from the Hazelwood detective work of the prior evening, and I had a date with Mother Nature. My first stop was Keystone Canyon just outside Valdez. BP had named one of its super tankers after it, and it had a spectacular Bridal Veil Falls, one of many Bridal Veil Falls we'd seen going across the country. My second stop was unscheduled, a bull moose. I pulled quickly off the road, grabbed the camera, and chased after him. He was already on the move and stopped at the edge of the woods. As I approached he moved into the underbrush and stood still. Amazingly, the big brown animal blended in and became nearly invisible in the green trees, which were barely taller than his antlers. There was a vine dragging from his antlers. I zoomed in on him. "There he is. He's a big boy. 'No. No moose here. Just a dead tree.' I'm only about 30 feet from him now. I probably pass these things all day without noticing. He's not moving. Thinks I can't see him. Hey moose. I know you're there. He's the biggest bull moose I've seen so far." He didn't move, and I start backing away. I noticed a stone and decided to take a chance. You only die once. I focused the camera on him and threw the stone. He was a huge target, and it hit him on the rump. He jumped and ran a few strides and was out of the woods. He stopped and looked at me and I froze, thinking what would be my best course of action if he charged. He turned and trotted away. "Thanks Moose."

Worthington Glacier was 26 miles out of town, and I'd planned to climb and hike on the glacier, hit a golf ball off of it, and collect some glacial ice. The crystal blue glacier coming down between sugar-loaf mountains under blue skies and puff clouds was awesome and reaching its summit was gratifying. My five iron served as a walking stick and struck two good shots. I was feeling like I'd climbed Denali when Nature provided the added thrill of discovering an ice cave. Thrill was a combination of the incredible beauty the cave and the incredible danger of a cave-in. Deep in the cave a long, round melt hole reached through the roof and provided dazzling light. I shot some film rotating under it giving a dizzying effect.

Thompson Pass, the name of another BP super tanker, was above the tree line and known for unique wildflowers. I was on a high and found energy for a couple-mile hike off the highway into another form of Nature's beauty. I GPSed my way back.

When I returned to the campground, Lee Ann was sitting with the couple I'd gone halibut fishing with in Homer. They ran into each other doing laundry and had already discussed the Alaskan paradox. We had dinner with them that night. We went home early, but they stayed out to visit the Pipeline Club and drink a Hazelwood.

Standing on a picnic table at our campsite, I filmed the oil tanks clustered in two tiers on the side of a mountain across the harbor and a super tanker at the dock. "There's the terminal at the end of the Trans Alaskan Pipeline across Valdez Harbor from where we're camped. They're apparently loading a VLCC called the Polar California. That's oil-

company talk for the largest of super tankers called a Very Large Crude Carrier. It takes about 22 hours to load that big a vessel. Pipeline constantly pumps. If they don't have a ship standing by to accept the oil they use those tanks."

The next morning, I took a hike above the pipeline terminal to Solomon Lake, a mountain lake below green slopes with patches of snow that was backed up by the oil companies with a tiny dam and could only be reached by hiking. The lake emptied through a pipe and turned a generator that powered the pipeline terminal as well as the town of Valdez. It was an amazing hike and climb through a rain forest to the lake. At one point the town of Valdez was visible. Discovering myself through the recent day's encounters with Nature, I was emboldened to skinny dip in the cold pure. On the hike down, I walked along the last piece of the Trans Alaskan Pipeline, several miles down a clear cut through the forest. I didn't see any bears though I did see two other hikers. We talked about the bears. They flew to Alaska and still believed that all you had to do was make plenty of noise as you walked and the bears would be scared away. I told them my experiences with bears, that they weren't afraid of anything. They brought up the suggestion that all you had to do was play dead and they'd leave you alone. I told them about the teenage bear up by Anchorage that ate the guy inside his tent. They didn't enjoy their hike out. Toward the bottom of the hike I explored the lushness of an Alaskan rain forest with its ferns and mosses. I got to see the big-leafed devil's glove or club, probably glove, that early trailblazers whacked their way through with machetes. I couldn't find cow parsnips, but I'm certain they were there. Lee Ann was supposed to meet me at the bottom of the hike, but poor timing left me sitting another hour on the edge of the bay watching salmon jump and otters play.

Leaving Valdez we faced a 328-mile drive northeast to reach the Alaskan Highway at Tok, Alaska. Tok is the only place in Alaska that you absolutely have to pass through twice if you're driving. From Tok it would be another 300 miles to Haines Junction. That was the place where we made the decision to see northern Alaska before the Inside Passage. From that junction it would be 150 miles south into Alaska again to the town of Haines on the Inside Passage. The rest of the Inside Passage would be accessible by boat from Haines, so we'd spend time there, using it as our base for expeditions to Skagway, Juneau, Glacier Bay, and Tracy Arm Fjord.

*The Milepost* indicated a gas station, but it looked to be a junkyard. There was an old dump truck, an older camper, and barrels of scrap metal. Next to a log shed expanded by a plywood addition, I saw the rear of a relatively new gas truck from which a black hose snaked to a beat-up gas pump mounted on two-by-fours. The glass face was busted out, and the words "self service" were hand written in magic marker. I pulled the rig up next to a couple old jeeps and a front-end loader. Switching on the pump, I heard a generator start in the shed. I filled my tank. There was another little shed, a car seat, and other miscellaneous junk in front of a small house about 50 feet back into the woods. I went into the house through the back door, found an old man in the living room, and gave him the money.

We stopped for lunch at our last chance to actually touch the Trans Alaskan Pipeline and posed for pictures leaning against one of its supports. I'll claim some authority of this subject based on my first-hand look at it. The oil companies can extract huge quantities of oil from the Arctic without damaging the environment. We drove along the pipeline all the way into the Arctic Circle, and we saw the ships moving in and out of the

terminal at Valdez. We saw caribou grazing under the pipeline and otters eating salmon in the shadow of a super tanker taking on crude. We never saw a drop of crude or even smelled oil. Prince William Sound and the harbor at Valdez remain unspoiled treasures. Every citizen of Alaska gets a check from the state each year paid out of oil revenues. Before technology drastically reduces our need for oil, we need to get our own oil out of the ground and stop sending our dollars to the Middle Eastern dictatorships that refuse to share the wealth with their neighbors. The oil companies are not harming Alaska, and our dollars are tearing apart the Arab world and way of life.

We stopped briefly at Kluane Lake, Yukon Territory to have lunch and enjoy the stillness. A short ways later we saw a grizzly in a field of Alaska cotton. We got out and cautiously filmed and followed him as he grazed and ambled. He slumped down to eat in the cotton. He was an amazing sight, a magnificent animal happily munching, secure in his status and power.

*The Milepost* talked about the Chilkat Pass, the highest summit on the Haines Highway at 3,493 feet. We'd have to pull over it, but that wasn't the important part of its story. Prior to the gold rush a group of especially tenacious Tlingit Indians guarded the pass as their own and wouldn't let the white man or the coastal Indians use it. They reserved it for themselves and used it to trade furs with the coastal Indians and Russians. It was the easiest and essentially the only practical route from the Yukon Territory to the Inside Passage. The gold rush of 1898 brought white prospectors by the thousands and overwhelmed the Tlingits, forever altering their way of life. I thought it an interesting piece of history and nothing more.

*The Milepost* talked about the Takhanne River as a grizzly feeding area and warned to use extreme caution when fishing or exploring its banks.

*The Milepost* talked about the Indian village of Klukshu, which is a summer fish camp where the Indians use fish traps and other methods of catching salmon that are not legal for the white man.

We found a beautiful spot on the banks of the Takhanne River where we hoped to see grizzly bears fishing for salmon. We were 60 miles from the United States border, 40 miles from Chilkat Pass, and a few miles from the Tlingit Indian village and fish camp. That's the background. Nothing happened that day; we spent a peaceful afternoon communing with Nature, enjoying the campsite, and grilling and eating our salmon dinner. Everything happened that night.

Lee Ann was inside the trailer cleaning up from dinner and I was sitting by the river waiting for a grizzly. A white van turned off the Haines Highway, which was only about a quarter mile away, and headed right for us. It pulled to a stop between our trailer and the river. Stretched along the top of the van from front to back and a few feet longer than the van were tied long flexible wooden poles with large hooks on one end. It appeared to me that they must be used to reach out into the river and grab passing salmon, perhaps from a bridge or overhanging tree or perhaps to grab them out of some sort of trap built in the river. Four Indians got out and went quickly about their business. They carried a cooler full of king salmon to the very edge of the water and set into them handling long knives with great skill. I walked over to watch. I commented on their catch and was answered with quick smiles from the two women and brief glances from the two men. I assumed they didn't speak English and didn't say anything more. The women scooped the eggs out of the female salmon with their bare hands and sealed them in zip-lock-type

plastic bags. The men filleted the salmon and let their carcasses float away with the current. I guessed that they cleaned their fish here so as not to attract grizzlies to their village. That was fine by me as it might mean there were grizzlies waiting nearby. Lee Ann joined me carrying a Zima and a beer. Her greeting to the Indians was met with the same quick smiles and brief glances. They quickly cleaned up, loaded their cooler into the truck, and drove away.

We were inside the trailer discussing the Indians about an hour after they'd gone when we noticed a car coming down the hill from the highway going very fast and throwing up a dusk cloud. Just as the Indians of the old West threatened the pioneers from the backs of horses, the Subaru full of braves began circling our trailer and shouting through its open windows in that high-pitched, whooping way. These Indians added the universal sign of contempt with arms thrust out the windows closest to our trailer. Was that censored from the Westerns or was it recently learned from the white man and added? I quickly closed the door and windows to protect against the flying dirt. After about five laps around, they sped off up the hill to the highway blowing their horn all the way.

"Can you believe it?" I said excitedly. "Just like the Indians of the old West in the movies."

"Let's get out of here before they come back." There was a touch of fear in Lee Ann's voice.

"That was unbelievable. Wish I would've thought fast enough to get that on film. Too bad we're alone. We could circle the wagons and prepare to fight them off."

"Can we please go?"

"Don't worry. We're going. We have some time. First they're going to park somewhere and drink some more whiskey and work up their hatred of the white man. Then they'll probably collect a few more braves and maybe get the chief's permission. Incredible. The same behavior for 200 years. Let's pack it up and get out of here."

Though I didn't have a gun and wouldn't want to shoot Indians anyway, I figured they probably assumed I was armed. Still, teenage Indians were probably as unpredictable as teenage grizzlies. *The Milepost* wasn't clear about whether we were actually on Indian land. Our cell phone was definitely out of range. I filmed our campsite with Lee Ann and Egypt already sitting in the truck waiting.

"How far to reach the Alaskan border?"

"Only about an hour." Though I didn't mention it to Lee Ann, I feared those Indians might try to run us off the road if they got drunk enough. There was no way I'd allow that little Subaru to push our rig off the road. They'd regret it if they tried. Hopefully, they'd live to regret it. Fortunately for all of us they never found us again.

The American Indian is an ancient culture that's still able to thrive in the Yukon Territory and in Alaska because we haven't killed the things they traditionally live on and we don't give them too much. Their subsistence life style is one to be respected. When our civilized, technological society destroys itself and we starve, they might well live on in the proven old ways, those teenagers as tribal elders telling the story of chasing the white man off their river.

Once we'd cleared Chilkat Pass and had only 20 miles downhill to the United States border, Lee Ann was laughing about our Indian encounter. As amazing and unexpected as the encounter with the Tlingit braves had been, at least we could understand it. That

couldn't be said of the night's final surprise. We pulled up to the U.S. Customs Station to find the border closed for the night.

"The United States is closed?"

"Sign says it opens again at seven in the morning." It was after midnight when we pulled into the parking lot and went to bed. I couldn't sleep and went out to check if it might be dark enough to see the Big Dipper. In over a month in Alaska, I'd only seen it on the Alaskan Flag and painted on the blue smokestacks of the Alaskan Ferries. There was one lonely star visible, and when I went in to bed I could see it through the skylight. Long before actual sunrise a wet, white cotton glow streamed through the skylight and I pulled on that pink sleeping mask and hugged sleeping Lee Ann.

We drove into Alaska and stopped at an eagle observation site by the river. Salmon weren't running in that particular river at the time, so we didn't see eagles. We learned that there had once been a bounty on eagles because people thought they were eating too many salmon. Reaching Haines later that morning, we found yet another tiny community clinging to the water's edge. There were just 35 students in the prior year's graduating high school class. The small boat harbor was smaller than Homer's but bigger than the one in Whittier. The train doesn't reach, but they're on the ferry route and even get the occasional cruise ship.

"Not much of a town, Haines. Surrounded by mountains though. There's a decent view of a mountain. Inverted cone sticking through the clouds into blue skies. And here's our campsite for a few days at the Haines Hitch Up RV Park. Right there on the other side of those mountains, in fact that snow pack is probably it, starts Glacier National Park. To get there from here, the best we can do is spend about \$400 each. We'll have to ferry down to Juneau, catch a day cruise, spend a night in Juneau, and ferry back from Juneau, all to get over that mountain for the opportunity to see whales that may or may not be in Glacier Bay."

We took a water taxi from the small boat harbor in Haines, not that there's a big boat harbor. Alaskan towns are tiny and seem more so from the stern of a boat leaving them in its wake. Snow-covered mountains tower over and dwarf the towns to insignificance. We were heading to Skagway to ride the White Pass and Yukon narrow-gauge railroad. The ride down featured young harbor seals on the rocks next to pale greenish water, plenty of seals in the water, and other groups lying on seaweed left above the water by the low tide. We passed an Alaskan Ferry with its familiar Big Dipper painted on the blue smokestack.

We found Skagway a tiny town that serves only as a tourist trap. Its docks were built along a rocky mountainside covered with international graffiti. Its buildings have false fronts like Disney World's Main Street. They tell their gold-rush history. The gold dome of the Golden North Hotel is the most dominant, but we selected the Red Onion Saloon and Brothel on a small-world recommendation for its food and authenticity. Beyond the usual moose antlers and standard Alaskan objects, the saloon featured a striking nude painting drawing all eyes to the bar. We had lunch and beers, and they primed us for our train ride. The barmaid was dressed as a whore. We enjoyed talking to the bartender and two barmaids and filmed them. The redhead looked like a whore pictured on the menu. I asked her what you called a girl from Skagway. She pretended it was the first time she'd heard that joke. The brothel was upstairs and the menu described its workings. They

used to have a doll for each of their whores behind the bar. When a particular whore was working, her doll would be lying down, too. If it was standing, she was available.

The train was originally built to haul gold miners and their equipment and was an exciting and nice ride. It went over some old trestles where we would "fly the train." You couldn't see what was holding you up, so you had the illusion of flying. I filmed the rugged mountain scenery from a platform between cars of the moving train and panned down into a gorge to see white water. We passed another train pulled by a steam locomotive as we made our way around a horseshoe curve. We went through two tunnels and everything went dark then got gradually light as we came out. I zoomed down a deep gorge in order to read an old sign "Bracketts Toll Road" and pulled back to see the trestle and gorge. "We're flying the train." Inside was no wine train, but it was Alaskan nice.

We learned that the toll road at the bottom of the gorge was used during periods of low water. They had leveled the stream bottom enough to take teams of horses and mules through it. It turned out to be a bit of a desperate gamble just to save the price of the train ride as a sudden storm could set the river flowing. Your animals would still make it to Skagway but they'd be drowned, and you'd be left clinging to a tree or hanging on the rock face of the gorge.

Back at the dock in Skagway waiting to board our boat, I shot a final film of the town. "Look at this old yellow cab made by White Motors. All means of transportation in Skagway. There's a helicopter landing. There's a cruise ship. The White Horse and Yukon train. There's a plane taking off. This town has about 98 residents and every means possible to get in and out of here. There goes a plane. Shows how enormous those mountains are. Pretty nice size cruise ship in the port of Skagway. There's a smaller one getting ready to cast off. An Alaskan flagged . . . no that's a ferry."

"That's a ferry?" said Lee Ann with obvious surprise. "It's big."

We'd already reserved passage from Haines to Juneau on an Alaskan Ferry, and Lee Ann was quite happy to see it was so large a vessel. I don't know how she could have possibly missed seeing them operating on every cruise we'd taken. Still it was nice that she was relieved. Who knows what she had pictured as an Alaskan Ferry.

On the ride back I had the camera on for a while waiting for a humpback whale to blow and its tail to come high up out of the water and slowly disappear for the dive. A female voice over a speaker says, "You see heavy throat pleats all the way down their body and the throat pleats expands like an accordion when they take in the water. When they expel the water through the baleen the brill and little fish get stuck on the baleen. That's how they feed. Keep watching behind us too. When these whales sound they can come up just about anywhere. Those of you on the upper deck, if you see one, stomp your feet up and down."

There's stomping and laughter in the background as I say, "There he is. And there he goes."

We saw several whales on our one-hour return trip to Haines though we only managed to film one. When one would surface to blow and breathe only a few foot circle would appear above water. However, that did signal that the tail was about to come out of the water and slowly sink back in for the dive. Though you don't see much of their size and length and they aren't plentiful, it's heartfelt awesome to see them. The humpbacks can be over 50 feet long and weigh more than our 52-foot steel boat. They rarely jump out of

the water and crash back the way the Alaskan-cruise-ship advertisements would have you believe. Prepare for a shock; our tour guide and Captain had never seen one do it.

Back in Haines we went to their oldest bar, Harbor Bar and Lighthouse Restaurant. We enjoyed the restaurant that served an Alaskan seafood meal that did not involve salmon or halibut. The bar had over hyped its backbar in the brochures. It probably was shipped in one piece from Russia a long time ago, but I'd seen better all over the country. The place had been modified for the tourist business and lacked Alaskan authenticity. It did have the characters we'd come to expect. Entertainment for the evening was a big woman who recited poetry and played acoustic guitar. She carried a glass of beer from the bar where she'd been talking with several local guys and sat right down at our table. Seeing our Coronas nearly empty, she called to the bartender and motioned for another round. When the beers arrived, she didn't pay but demanded we be given the local rate. Because of the bar's proximity to the harbor and the landing tourists it had a secret two-tier pricing policy. There was no cruise ship at the dock that night. The bartender acquiesced. We were able to buy three beers for less than Lee Ann and I had been paying for two. She told us the sad story that explained how she came to be stranded in Haines, but I can't remember it well enough to relate. What I do remember was her philosophizing. She came directly to it. "Life has no meaning and time as you know it doesn't exist." She paused. "Agree? Disagree?"

"These wrinkles around my eyes say time does exist," answered Lee Ann.

"You?" she asked, completely dismissing Lee Ann.

"Life has meaning in the context of time."

She smiled. "Well then Einstein. You make it easy for me. If there's no time, you'll have to admit life has no meaning. True?"

"True."

"Or if I can prove life has no meaning, you'll have to admit there's no time. True?"

"Okay. For the sake of argument."

"So if I can prove time doesn't exist, you'll admit life is meaningless?"

"I've read most philosophers, and I've never heard of one claiming time doesn't exist. In fact, that could be the only place they all agree."

"It's not a philosophical issue. It's physics. I can prove it."

"You setting me up for a joke?"

"Nope. But I did say time as you know it."

"Okay. We went to Skagway this morning."

"Or are you in Skagway right now?"

"Simultaneously, you mean?"

"Yes. Everything's happening at once. There's no time."

"That's why you're not trying to get out of Haines?"

"True."

"So you're just going to stay in Haines and wait until some past event changes the circumstances that brought you here?"

"You got it. But it's a simultaneous event. What do you think?"

"I think I'll go back to paying full price for my beer."

"You will if I don't walk over here."

"So if you suddenly vanish, I'm paying full price?"

"True."

Lee Ann gave me a look that asked whether or not she was insane. I returned an affirmative look. "Let's assume you're correct. Why not wait in a place you enjoy?"

"I've only come to my insights through suffering."

"I'm going for another round," announced Lee Ann as she stood and walked away. She stayed at the bar, and the bartender brought two beers. Lee Ann motioned that she'd be fine at the bar. She was soon laughing, and I guessed they were talking about the big philosopher.

"What other insights have you come to through your suffering?"

"God is dead," she declared.

That made me choke on my beer. When I recovered I laughed. "That's a contradiction."

"How?"

"If God is dead, then he must have lived. If everything is happening simultaneously, how can he be both alive and dead?"

"He's not. He's just dead."

"And always has been?"

"There's no always in the absence of time."

"How long have you been in Haines?"

"Nice try. I've always been here and always will be, but I can also be somewhere else."

"Sounds like you're God."

"Nope. I'm alive. God's dead."

"Are we alone in the universe?"

"True."

"Time travel?"

"Duh."

"What do you mean?"

"If there was no time travel I'd be pretty dumb waiting here for a past event to change the circumstances that brought me here wouldn't I?" She spoke to me like I was a moron.

"But if there's no time . . ."

"Time is relative Einstein." Her voice was turning hostile, and I was beginning to fear she was going to lose her slippery grip of reality. "There's no time as you think you understand time. All time exists at the same time but it's relative to everyone and everything. Human progress is unstoppable, so stepping forward and backward in time is inevitable. Every step backward changes events and some step somewhere will zap us right out of this bar."

"Is everyone who has ever been in this bar here right now?"

"True."

"True? Truth is an idea that works in practical experience."

"True."

"Life is life and time is time. God is not dead and this conversation is over." Without another word I stood and headed to join Lee Ann at the bar. It may have been rude, but I figured I'd just say I was never there. Everyone at the bar was high fiving. Lee Ann explained that she'd lost a bet that I'd last more than five minutes alone with the philosopher. I'd come close. They all had stories of their first encounter with her.

"Does anyone remember her not being around here?" I asked. They didn't.

The next afternoon we met the couple I'd gone halibut fishing with in Homer and we'd gone to dinner with in Valdez. They were camped just four spots from us and invited us over for cocktails. We told them our plans for Juneau. We were taking a late-night ferry. We had a cabin with a bed and would be taking champagne. We were bringing our truck below decks. That would save us from getting a room in Juneau and provide us someplace to keep our gear and catch a nap. It added almost nothing to the cost of the trip. From Juneau we'd catch a cruise up Tracy Arm Fjord, said to be the most beautiful glacial cruise in Alaska. After the cruise, we'd spend the evening partying in Juneau before lining up for morning boarding for our ferry trip back to Haines. Since it would be a daytime ferry ride, we wouldn't get a cabin but spend our time sightseeing. The RV park had helped us plan the trip, and we were able to purchase our tickets right at the campground.

They'd been considering a king salmon charter. It would cost them far more than our trip and would only be a few hours on a rushing river. They wouldn't be guaranteed a catch. I showed them the movie of my king salmon and me, and that sealed the deal for them. They had to catch one. They'd probably be gone before we returned from Juneau, so we exchanged names and addresses and email addresses and wished them luck. They thanked us again for sending them to the Pipeline Club and invited us to visit at their cottage in the Florida Keys where they were learning to catch dolphin and shark.

We caught our midnight ferry for a four-hour trip down the Lynn Canal and were lucky enough to get a cabin suitable for Inside-Passage sex. This was the second body of water I'd come across that wasn't man made yet is called a canal. We finished the night in the parking lot and boarded a catamaran for our Tracy Arm Fjord trip early the next day. Though we did see a couple more humpbacks blow and do their slow-motion tail-exposed dives and a few black bear right down at the waterline licking salt and eating muscles off the rock at low tide, it was the glacial history and geology of the fjord that was the star of the tour. The water was greenish blue in the narrow fjord, nearly the color of the spruce forests. We saw two u-shaped glacially carved valleys that would have been fjords if they were below sea level. It's an easily recognizable contrast to the river-carved v-shaped gorges we've seen elsewhere. I remember the newness of the jagged mountains of Hawaii and how much that contrasted with the rounded and older Appalachians. On the fjord we could see both jagged and rounded mountains. The height or depth of the glaciers during the ice age explained the different shapes. Those mountains that were under glaciers were rounded off by the grinding action of the moving glaciers. The missing rock was broken off and eventually ground into glacial silt. The jagged peaks were above the level of the ice and retained their relative newness. I'd been bothered by all the glacial silt in many of the rivers and finally got my explanation. I'd planned to dip out a bucket and wait to see what settled out. Our naturalist saved me the trouble by bringing a glass of it. Silt is rock ground as fine as flour. It's so fine that it remains in suspension for a very long time and only requires the slightest movement to re-suspend it.

At the face of both North and South Sawyer Glaciers we were able to witness some calving, though nothing as dramatic as the travel channel made us all expect. The sound of a large chunk of ice breaking off was louder than we'd heard in Prince William Sound for some combination of reasons. The glacier ice is at its bluest before it get exposed to air, so ice recently revealed by calving is much deeper blue and fades to white. Sawyer

Glacier had carved out Tracy Fjord, which is 26 miles long, and the existing glacier goes another 20 some miles back into the ice field. The water covers 1,500 feet below the exposed face of the glacier, and a lot of times the glacier calves underneath and the iceberg will come popping up out of the water. The face reaches 20 stories above the surface of the water, so when a piece falls off the top it makes a mean splash. We saw plenty of pup seals being raised in the relative safety of the icebergs. It seems that the killer whales don't like navigating through ice and stay out of the end of the fjord. Lee Ann always took my binoculars when she saw seal pups. They were always more active than those in zoos. She'd stand there, binocs pressed to her eyes, saying "How cute" over and over again. I was disappointed at not seeing a wild killer whale jump out and eat one, but held out hope for the four-hour daylight return trip to Haines.

Our Captain guided our bow very close to a waterfall. Lee Ann and other tourists went to the bow to experience it. I filmed it through the wheelhouse and zoomed on flowering plants and mosses and a group of five black-and-white birds with bright-orange feet sitting on a stone ledge. Pulling back showed another group of six above them. We saw a lot of waterfalls, and I couldn't help thinking that there must be some solution to the worldwide water distribution problem. Icebergs bigger than our boat were melting rapidly away while the Southwest was parched and much of it burning. The icebergs would become mushroom shaped because they melted faster under water than exposed to air. As they melted and became lighter, they floated higher revealing the thinner portion that had been under water and you could see the mushroom top raining into the fjord.

Approaching Juneau the waterway widened and we watched a soaring eagle. His wings didn't flap. Mountains, forests, and blue skies with white clouds surrounded the capital city. We passed the rotting wreck of a ship. The Islander was supposed to have been unsinkable, built in Scotland with airtight compartments and a double haul, but there she lay outside Juneau.

The birds turned out to be black guillemots, uncommon in Alaska but too distinctively marked to misidentify.

After the cruise we explored Juneau. It's the capital but contains only 30,000 people and has very little land area. A glacial ice field the size of Rhode Island sits behind it and blocks access over land. Much of the land area it has was made of landfill from mine tailings. The mountain behind the city is honeycombed with tunnels from three large gold mines. It's interesting the way gold was originally found in Juneau. There are bronze busts to the cities three founders, Richard Harris, Joe Juneau, and Chief Kowee. Juneau and Harris spread the word that they would pay 100 Hudson Bay Company blankets to the Indian who found gold. Gold held no value to the Tlingit Indians and the Chief knew where to find it. His sale of that knowledge for blankets cost his people their land and way of living, yet they immortalize him in bronze. I don't know how the remaining Tlingits feel about him, but from our experience with them I can guess.

We did some shopping. That is, I browsed around waiting while Lee Ann shopped. I stumbled onto a small-world find. There was a book of photos of the Northern Lights. Being summer, we wouldn't actually see the lights. I examined every page and even read the credits and biographical information about the photographers. One of them was born in the same year as Lee Ann and had graduated from the same Aurora High. I grabbed Lee Ann over to look. "Larry Anderson. He was in my class. My parents know his parents." She looked at the cover. "*Aurora Borealis, A Photo Memory.*" She'd known

him for her entire childhood. She bought the book and sent it home. Her parents loved getting the book almost as much as my halibut.

The oldest bar in the city was the Alaskan Hotel and Saloon. It retained much of its character unlike the tourists' choice, the Red Dog Saloon which featured two sets of Western style swinging doors at the entrance. One seemed to be used primarily for foreigners as a photo backdrop.

With time to kill we took in a movie, *The Perfect Storm*. Lee Ann had been wanting to see it, and I didn't explain how an earthquake could send such a wave moving up the canal that it could sink our ferry and even wash Juneau off the map.

We checked in at the Auke Bay Ferry Terminal early and slept in the truck until they began loading the next morning. The cruise back to Haines in the daylight was nearly as beautiful as the Tracy Arm cruise and showed us a pod of killers. The water in the canal was not glacial and didn't have the pretty green and pastel blue colors.

Our fishing buddies were still there when we got back to the RV park. I think they only stayed to tell us about their salmon charter. They caught their limits, though the charter captain had to hug her around the waist while she fought her fish after she almost went overboard. He joked that she was more thrilled with the hugging than the fishing. They caught a 40 pounder, which may have been as big as the one I'd caught and possibly bigger since I couldn't actually weigh mine. They had their fish sent home at tremendous added expense. We didn't have long to spend with them as checkout time was approaching. I left Lee Ann to get her things in order and went downtown to pick up some film she had in for developing. I found a huge black-and-white photo from earlier times covering the whole side of a building. It included six can-can girls in fishnet nylons and garters sitting on barstools, legs crossed with one knee held high and smiling. A plump dancer looked an awful lot like the big woman stuck in time at the Harbor Bar.

We could have ferried the truck and trailer to Skagway and driven back to the Alaskan Highway from there, but the cost was unreasonable and the schedule didn't suit us. We headed out the Haines Highway.

We stopped to observe an operating fish wheel. "There's a fish wheel outside Haines. The current going down stream drives the fish wheel and the salmon swimming upstream are caught in the scoops. It comes around and they fall into the container there on the side. Only Indians are allowed to use these. This one is waiting for the fall salmon run. We're just outside the bald eagle preserve where the world's largest concentration of eagles appears each fall and winter."

We crossed into Canada and made the dash through Indian Territory to catch the Alaskan Highway at Haines Junction.

There was plenty to see in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory that we didn't bother with on the way up, so we boondocked there for the night. They had a log cabin skyscraper, four stories. We found the bust of Robert Service. Permanently docked as a tourist draw, they had the Klondike paddle wheeler that used to take the miners to the gold fields or at least far enough to catch the train to Skagway. Whitehorse took its name from the Yukon River which ran clean and fast through the town. There's supposed to be a spot where white water surges up and looks like the flowing manes of a herd of running white horses. Whether myths or ghosts, the white horses didn't reveal themselves to us. We filled our tanks at the Northern Beaver Post, ate at the Wolf-it-Down Restaurant, and

went to a show called the Frantic Follies. It featured can-can girls and Robert Service poetry and ballads. It was a disappointing overkill. We'd had our Alaskan experience.

There were a couple places we'd seen on our way across the first time that we couldn't miss on the way back. The first was the Lliard Hot Springs near Muncho Lake. It was right off the highway, and we just couldn't pass it. She accused me of hoping the mineral hot springs would make my hair grow back. We hadn't taken the camera the first time, and Lee Ann wanted filmed memory. The springs were a long walk from the parking lot on a wood walkway above a marsh. After shooting some film, I shivered my way back to the rig to lock up the camera and trotted back up the walkway to a hot splash. Don't do that.

The other was Lee Ann's favorite campsite, the place where we'd seen the wild horses. You can't go back or at least the horses wouldn't come back. Still, we loved the campsite the second time. It was cold and Lee Ann wanted a fire. It wasn't until much later that we wondered if the fire had kept the animals away.

When we'd come up from Washington on the western access route, there was a little shortcut that saved a few miles and caused us to miss the actual start of the Alaskan Highway in Dawson Creek, British Columbia. Since we'd be taking the eastern route down into Montana, Dawson Creek was on our path. I filmed the famous sign "You are now entering the World Famous Alaska Highway, Dawson Creek, B.C."

"There it is the World Famous Alaskan Highway. We made it back. Turn south here 750 miles to the good old U S of A and the Montana line."

It wasn't until this writing, watching that piece of film, that I noticed it's called the Alaska Highway not the Alaskan Highway. Checking *The Milepost*, it wasn't to blame. Somehow I saw Alaskan even though it said Alaska for the entire time. I'm not going back to change it. Did that guy who presented the slide show to my fourth grade class call it the Alaskan Highway? What else must the filter of past experience be hiding?

There was no way to slide on past the world's largest mall, so we boondocked in its parking lot with a surprising number of mobile homes and trailers. "The pool at Edmonton Mall, the largest mall in the world, 800 stores, 100 restaurants in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Wave pool and waterslide. There's a submarine and a pirate ship below, still in the mall. More of the mall. Summer tourist attraction, winter escape from cabin fever for three-quarters of a million Edmontonians. There's a shopper. An ice hockey game in progress. Still at Edmonton Mall. A double-loop roller coaster. Still at the mall." I kissed Lee Ann and left her to shop.

The easterly route down was much smoother driving, and we were confident we'd make it home without a problem. We didn't go into the city of Calgary, home to the Calgary Stampede and a Winter Olympics and just 200 miles from the U.S. border. We boondocked at a Wal-Mart outside Calgary where we met a guy and his wife on their way up and having second thoughts. They'd been in the parking lot for three days soliciting opinions from people on the return trip. It surprised us that they were getting mixed reviews of what we found to be the trip of a lifetime. We really didn't have a single bad experience. Some might consider being driven off by wild Indians a bad experience. I didn't. Though we did see some misfortune, it usually was the direct result of poor decision making or carelessness. I was surprised when he brought up the cost. He was in a huge expensive motor home. "That? I'll never own it. I'm just making payments."

When I told him how rarely we actually paid for camping and that we'd just crossed Canada in four days without using a campground, he was astonished and called his wife back out. When she heard it, she asked me to call my wife back out. Lee Ann happily verified that we'd spent most nights boondocked alone at beautiful spots along the various highways. She admitted our Indian encounter but said she wasn't really even scared. She talked about many of our campsites and raved about the one with the wild horses. Lee Ann is the very best judge of people. She pulled me away from them telling me dinner was about ready. Back at the trailer she predicted, "They're as far north as they're going to get. No sense wasting your time."

Lee Ann would be right, but I wanted to understand. "This guy's not much different than me."

"Oh, that guy's nothing like you."

"No, I mean he's always wanted to go to Alaska."

"He should've booked a cruise up the Inside Passage from Seattle. He's more like me. If you would've tried to take me directly to Alaska, I wouldn't've enjoyed it. I would've been scared to death the whole time. Maybe after he's had that motor home a few years and gets some confidence up, maybe then. Or maybe if she can get him to spend some money and get with one of those caravans they'll go."

"What about her?"

"She only agreed to go because it's his dream. There's no way she's ever going to enjoy Alaska. And there's no way she's going to agree to camp alone in the wilderness. She'll need a trailer park every night."

Lee Ann was right. They were frozen by worry. Even if I'd succeeded in talking them into going, they'd be like those others they'd talked to who returned without having a good time, not that anything bad really happened to those people. It was just that they couldn't enjoy the road while worrying, *Milepost* firmly in hand, where they would spend the night or whether they had the fuel to reach the next station, watching the speedometer, odometer, clock, and gas gauge as spectacular Nature passed unnoticed. Moose and bear for them would be fleeting dark spots along a highway they were afraid to permit their tires to leave, and seeing that, they'd worry that they were missing the very things they'd come to see. They'd be Pavlovian dogs salivating as they cowered, hungry to see the sights yet unable to slow from the speed limit lest they be beaten with the stick.

Perhaps that was the situation with the big woman in Haines. She'd exhausted her bravery on route to Alaska and had none with which to return, so she was stuck in time waiting for the past to change.

He wasn't that different from me? Did Lee Ann know I couldn't have gone without her? Self-discovery is part of the wilderness experience, and I was grateful to Lee Ann for Alaska. Through this book, I want to be a courage teacher and send other couples out on the adventure. If I can do that this book is a success.

We left without a goodbye early the next morning and pulled toward the border. The land was rolling and supported wheat, oats, and grass-type crops. The Canadians even harvested the grass from the freeway median for animal feed. It became progressively drier as we fell south into the cradle.