

BEYOND the End of the Road

A Winter of Contentment North of the Arctic Circle

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Agio 
PUBLISHING HOUSE



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DEDICATION

To Kathleen, my companion in life and adventure.

People often tell me how lucky I am to have a wife who shares my passion for 'roughing it' in northern Canada. I usually smile, and simply nod my head in agreement. For without Kathleen, I would not have experienced this marvellous and profoundly satisfying Arctic winter.

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FOREWORD



Before I begin this book I would like to tell you a little bit about myself, and how it came to be that Kathleen and I spent the winter of 1999, from January 31 to June 20, in a one-room cabin 100 km north of the Arctic Circle. We were all alone, 40 km from the nearest community, 350 km from the nearest road. No running water. No electricity. A grand adventure shared with wintering caribou, proud Ravens, and one inquisitive mink. All around us, the boreal forest rested silently – waiting for the snow to recede – waiting for the rivers to thaw – waiting for spring to return. One hundred and forty-one days of complete satisfaction and contentment.

For you see, I have always been in love with the land that lies beyond the end of the road. I am drawn to this mystical place – like the moth is drawn to the flame – like the caribou are drawn to their summer calving grounds – like a young man is drawn to his first lover. My passion never subsides. I am never satisfied. I always want more. I dream always of the land beyond the end of the road.

These dreams began very early in my life. One of my earliest memories is perhaps at five years of age. It was early on a Saturday morning, in suburban Sacramento, California. My parents were sleeping, and the house belonged to me. I opened the cupboard and poured a box of cereal into a bowl. I sat at the kitchen table, looking out the window, beyond the walls and security of my house, beyond to the backyard. Light trickled across the lawn while morning shadows played in the shrubs lining the fence.

I opened the back door, carried my bowl and spoon across the threshold, and headed slowly over to my sandbox. I felt so very adventurous. I sat all alone in the morning stillness, and for the first time felt the warmth of the rising sun on my back. This memory remains very vivid to me, even now, more than half-a-century later.

At ten years of age, like other boys, I was reading and collecting comic books. The one that I remember most was an edition where Donald Duck's nephews, Huey, Dewey and Louie, along with Scrooge McDuck, were

camped on the edge of a lake deep in the Canadian forest. The Beagle Boys had just broken out of prison, and were drifting through the trees around the ducks' campfire intending to steal Scrooge's money. The nephews were understandably worried about the impending attack. My interest in this story, however, focused not on the boys' predicament. Rather, I spent literally hours staring at the scene, studying the forest beyond the Beagle Boys, wondering what other mysteries lay beyond the reach of the fire's light. I wished that I were camping by that fire with Huey, Dewey and Louie. I wished that I could explore that pristine Canadian forest.

Our Sunday newspaper featured a colour comic strip titled *Prince Valiant*. I know today that the strip's setting was Arthurian, and Valiant himself was a Nordic prince from Norway. Early in the story, Valiant had come to Camelot, earned the respect of King Arthur and Merlin, and became a Knight of the Round Table. I wasn't aware of any of this at the time, though. In fact, I never even read the words. I simply enjoyed the drawings of Valiant on his horse, riding down lonesome and isolated trails, always seeking adventures beyond the next ridge. I wished that I were riding with Prince Valiant. I wished that I could penetrate that ancient English forest.

I began backpacking into the mountains of California with my father when I was 12 years old. We would leave after my father got off work on a Friday night, drive for several hours, and then set off down the trail by moonlight – just like Prince Valiant in the English forest. We would camp for two nights around the fire – just like Huey, Dewey and Louie in the Canadian forest. We would return late on Sunday night, and I would lie in bed, wishing that my father didn't have to be back at work on Monday morning. I wished that we were still camping and living in the mountains.

When I enrolled at the University of California at Davis in 1965 I entered the two-year pre-forestry program. I presumed that such a career would allow me to wander through California's mountains while also earning a living. An easy and obvious career choice for me. During these first two years I studied mathematics, physics, chemistry, geology, surveying and other technical subjects. The actual professional forestry program began in the summer between my sophomore and junior years, at the summer camp operated by the University of California at Berkeley. It was here that I learned that the forestry profession focused mostly on cutting down trees. There would be precious little walking along lonely trails or exploring pristine forests.

Other than two summer jobs, I never actually worked in the forestry profession. I wasn't interested in cutting down trees for profit, nor in managing blocks of even-aged monocultures masquerading as regenerating forests. Rather, after receiving my degree, I entered graduate school in grassland ecology. All the while I continued backpacking at every opportunity, always seeking more distant and more remote locations. Except for Alaska, however, true wilderness no longer existed in the United States. In fact, a 1975 report on the status of wilderness in America claimed that nowhere in the lower 48 states was farther than 16 km from a road of some kind. It seemed that I had been born at least a century too late to pursue my inherent passion and love for un-peopled and un-roaded landscapes.

When I graduated with my doctoral degree in 1975, I saw an advertisement for a teaching and research position at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. I had visited central British Columbia once before, on a family vacation, when I was 16 years old. I remembered a heavily-forested landscape that seemed relatively undeveloped and less impacted by industrial forestry compared to my home of California. A little research revealed that Canada was the world's second largest country, yet had a population equal only to that of California. Moreover, nearly 90% of Canada's population lived within 160 km of the border, leaving most of the country relatively unpopulated. British Columbia was larger in area than California, Oregon and Washington combined, yet its population was less than one-tenth that of California's. Wow! British Columbia was obviously the place for me. I applied, and felt very fortunate to be offered the position.

I met my wife Kathleen in 1976, and she quickly came to share my passion for silent, empty landscapes. At first we pursued weekend hiking trips into the mountains of southwestern British Columbia. These short sojourns soon lengthened into week-long withdrawals to more isolated alpine retreats of northern British Columbia and the southern Yukon. We always sought those peaceful, special places that remained least insulted by noise, pollution and degradation.

Finally, perhaps inevitably, we discovered the pristine purity of Canada's Far North. For 10 summers we paddled, mostly alone, on month-long canoeing expeditions across the remote Barren Grounds of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Rarely did we see other people. Only the occasional bush

cabin reminded us that we lived in a congested world of six billion other human beings.

Yet, my thirst for purer, more extended isolation remained unquenched. My hunger to experience the natural, pre-industrial world became more compelling and more irresistible with each additional expedition, and with each passing year. Short bursts of only 30 days beyond the end of the road were no longer sufficient.

By now Kathleen and I had also realized that we wanted to spend a winter in Canada's Arctic. Our experience on summer canoe trips seemed incomplete. We wanted to spend a winter in the North, where rivers, lakes and muskeg remain frozen for 7 to 8 months of the year. Summer is for visitors. Only by following the winter trail did we believe that we could truly understand and know the character and soul of Canada's seemingly limitless northern landscape.

We wished to immerse ourselves in cold. We wanted to be surrounded by snow and ice. We longed to know the exquisite joy of seeing the ice break apart in the warmth of spring. We yearned to witness the rivers burst through the frozen chains of winter to once again run free and sparkling in the sunlight. We shared an unfulfilled desire to hear the swans, the geese, the loons and the multitudes of ducks that would suddenly and joyously return to their northern nesting grounds.

These goals and visions were not possible to achieve in our home of Vancouver. The adjacent Pacific Ocean seldom allows temperatures to dip below -10 degrees. Snowdrops and crocuses normally bloom in their flowerbeds by late January. In Vancouver, it is not possible to even begin to understand what it means to live in Canada, a vast realm that for much of the year lies slumbering beneath snow, ice and frigid sky. [Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all temperatures are presented in degrees Celsius. For a simple but imprecise conversion to degrees Fahrenheit, multiply by two and add 30. For an accurate conversion to degrees Fahrenheit, multiply degrees C by 9/5 and add 32. Similarly, all distances are presented in kilometres. For an accurate conversion to miles, multiply by 0.62. For a simpler conversion, divide kilometres in half, and then add a few miles for good measure.]

We would need to find a true winter retreat. We would need to find some hidden place to which we could escape as soon as possible after the first snowfall. We couldn't arrive just a day or two before the ducks returned.

Where would be the excitement in that? We couldn't show up, like tourists, only a week or two before the rivers began to flow. Where would be the anticipation in that?

No, to truly experience the thrill of spring renewal, we needed to spend most of the winter in a remote, isolated cabin. Ideally, we would paddle down the headwaters of a western Canadian Arctic river in the fall. We would reach our cabin, north of the Arctic Circle, a few days before freeze-up. We would then spend the winter exploring our private domain. We would snowshoe down frozen rivers. We would set up our wall tent on the shores of ice-covered lakes. On most nights, we would hunker down in our cabin, reading quietly by candle light, waiting for the excitement of spring. When the ice finally broke, we would climb back into our canoe and paddle a month, maybe more, down to the Arctic coast. That would be the ultimate experience.

We began to formulate these plans in the spring of 1997, and serendipitously found our cabin at the north end of Colville Lake, on a tributary of the Anderson River, in the Northwest Territories. This book describes our life in that cabin during the winter of 1999. For those 141 days Kathleen and I lived my dreams that began so long ago in that suburban Sacramento sandbox. For those wonderful 141 days we lived a simple life of cutting wood, hauling water and travelling along our own snowshoe trails.

We also experienced and better appreciated how native people and the early European explorers of Canada could live and travel, seemingly in comfort, when the mercury fell below minus forty for weeks at a time. The history of northern Canada's early exploration is truly extraordinary. I particularly admire men like John Rae, an explorer, surgeon and Chief Trader for the Hudson Bay Company. Ken McGoogan details Rae's exploits in *Fatal Passage: The Untold Story of John Rae, the Arctic Adventurer Who Discovered the Fate of Franklin*. During the winter of 1844–45, Rae trekked nearly 2000 km on snowshoes between Manitoba and Ontario in only two months. Nearly a decade later, in the winter of 1851–52, Rae averaged 40 km per day on another 2000-km trek above the Arctic Circle in search of the lost Franklin Expedition.

Rae entered the wilderness lightly, on its own terms. Often accompanied by only a few companions, with virtually no food or supplies, Rae moved quickly and easily by dogsled or canoe, hunting caribou and other game for subsistence as he built a phenomenal reputation for winter exploration and

travel. Rae invariably returned from his expeditions healthier and stronger than when he had departed civilization.

For me, John Rae lived like a man should live! Such a contrast to my life in Vancouver – a life of ties and suits – a life of meetings and walls – a life of traffic jams – a life of line-ups at the checkout stand in the grocery store. I wish that I could have travelled with John Rae to the Arctic coast.

Like many other readers of Canadian history, I also admire John Hornby, a more recent adventurer of northern Canada, whose legend is due mostly to his feats of strength and endurance. Malcolm Waldron's book, *Snow Man – John Hornby in the Barren Lands*, describes a prototypical Hornby event on the edge of the Barren Grounds in 1924. Susie Benjamin, a 22-year-old son of an Indian friend of Hornby's, arrived at the Lockhart River just as Hornby and six other men were moving across Pike's Portage out of Great Slave Lake. After talking to Susie for a few minutes, the 44-year-old Hornby rejoined his crew and said, "Susie and I are going to show you boys how to pack."

Five canoes still lay at the south end of the portage. The two men shouldered the first canoe and started off at a sprint across the uneven terrain. The second soon followed the first. Hornby's face apparently showed a little discomfort with the third canoe. Nevertheless, all five canoes were run across the portage without a break. At the finish, Susie was breathing more heavily than Hornby, whose shirt was stained red from where the canoes had rested on his shoulder. One of Hornby's companions asked, "Are you hurt?"

Hornby scornfully replied, "No, nothing can hurt you if you don't think about it."

Hornby lived like a man should live. Such a contrast to the modern world – a world where television commercials feature 'men' rejoicing over having purchased a new dust mop.

During the winter of 1924–25, Hornby and James C. Critchfield-Bullock lived out on the Barren Grounds in a small cave dug into the side of an esker. Both men nearly died before reaching the relative comfort at Baker Lake the following spring. At a feast that very first night, according to Waldron, Hornby told Critchfield-Bullock:

A week of this, Bullock, and we'll wish we were back in the Barrens. [Men] live by routine at these posts. We can go back

to the Barrens again next year. We can profit by the mistakes we made this time.

After Critchfield-Bullock observed that they had no money left, Hornby continued:

We don't need money. The caribou and the white wolves and foxes and the fish are free. Free, that is, to men who know how to get them. Men like you and me. You're going back to civilization where every man is your enemy, because he is in competition with you. Back where the man with the cleanest shirt is the most respected. And what'll you do? You've built a fine body for yourself up here. You will weigh close to two hundred pounds in a couple of weeks, and all of it solid bone and muscle. Try to sell that in a city. It may get you a day laborer's job or a third assistant's birth in some gymnasium. That's not for you, is it? Money! It isn't in the Barrens that you need money, but in the cities.

It's perhaps fortunate for me, though, that I did not have the opportunity to travel with John Hornby back to the Barren Grounds. For in the winter of 1927 he starved to death, with his companions Christian and Adlard, in a small cabin on the banks of the Thelon River. Waldron says that Hornby "loved the rugged, desolate, heroically beautiful part of the North known as the Barren Grounds. He loved them more than women. He loved them more than his cushy, privileged background in England. He loved them more than his own life."

I love Canada's North, and I particularly love the Barren Grounds. I don't know, though, whether I love the Barren Grounds more than my own life. And I certainly don't love them more than I love my wife Kathleen! Nevertheless, I empathize with the following quote from Hornby, found in George Whalley's *The Legend of John Hornby*:

In civilization there is no peace. Here in the North, in my country, there is peace. No past, no future, no regret, no anticipation; just doing. That is peace.

While Kathleen and I lived in the cabin I played at being like Rae and

Hornby. I exalted in the beauty of winter as I dragged my sled, loaded with wall tent and portable wood stove through the Arctic forest. I thrilled at camping out at minus 30 degrees. I revelled in physical adversity, and came back to Vancouver very lean, and as strong as I have ever been in my entire life. I lived fully and completely, and, as Hornby predicted, I needed very little money. Except for the cabin rental, we spent only \$150.00 in six months, and only then because we went to town twice. Most importantly, those 141 days in the cabin remain, nearly 10 years later, the most enjoyable period of my life. Like Hornby, and many others like him, Kathleen and I had both found peace.

Kathleen and I have told our story, through slide shows and conversations with friends and family many times since 1999. People often remark how ‘adventurous’ or ‘brave’ we are. These accolades are unwarranted, however. We did nothing special. Many people live in small, isolated communities and remote cabins all across northern Canada. Our experiences presented in this book are common, everyday occurrences to them.

Our experiences are ‘unique’ only to those people who have always lived in urban centres. Indeed, Grey Owl dedicated his marvellous book, *Tales of an Empty Cabin*, to ‘those whose souls are longing for the freedom of the open road, but who are prevented by the invincible decrees of Fate from ever seeing the wonders of the Wilderness save in the pages of a book.’ I could easily and logically adopt the same dedication. I also write this book, though, for all of you who dream of stepping beyond the end of your road, no matter what physical, fanciful or philosophical form it might take.

CHAPTER 1



Planning Our Escape

To pursue our dream, Kathleen and I both applied for one-year leaves of absence from our positions at the University of British Columbia. Leaves of absence at the University of British Columbia normally coincide with the academic year. Accordingly, our leaves had been granted from July 1, 1998 to June 30, 1999. This would certainly give us plenty of time in the summer of 1998 to find some unknown cabin, on a river still to be determined. It would also give us time to paddle to that cabin, and to arrange the logistics of shipping our winter food and gear to that cabin.

This plan, however, contained a major flaw. Break-up north of the Arctic Circle in western Canada generally occurs in early to mid-June. Even if we set off downriver from our cabin at the first signs of break-up, we likely wouldn't reach the Arctic coast by canoe until early to mid-July. We would then need a minimum of seven days to drive back to Vancouver. All this meant that we couldn't possibly be back on campus until at least three weeks after our leaves of absence had ended and the new academic year had begun. Our plan required tweaking. Damn that academic year! So very restrictive.

So, let's review the original plan – the ideal plan – which was to paddle, stay in a cabin, and then paddle some more. What if, though, we paddled the entire river first, and then went back to stay in the cabin? This strategy included several benefits. We could paddle the river in summer, when the Arctic would be filled with migratory birds and drenched with 24-hour sunlight. We could use the summer, and our trip north, to find a suitable cabin. In fact, with this revised plan, the cabin no longer even had to be on the same river that we paddled. It could be on any Arctic river. This new approach provided much more flexibility and opportunity.

We also realized that being away for the entire year was not entirely feasible. We could, perhaps should, use part of our leave to visit family and friends. I certainly should also use part of my leave to write and submit research grants. My career would certainly suffer if I abandoned it for an entire year. We would also likely need significant time to arrange for food and gear to be purchased and shipped to our remote, winter accommodation, wherever it might be.

So, while celebrating my 50th birthday in September of 1997, Kathleen and I agreed that the best plan would be to paddle an Arctic river in the summer of 1998. We would visit family and friends that fall. We would share Christmas at home with family, and then depart immediately for the cabin, where we could still enjoy more than five months of winter. After break-up in June 1999 we would return directly to Vancouver, rested and ready to resume work on the first of July.

Selecting the river to paddle that next summer was actually very easy. For several years I had wanted to descend the Anderson River, the headwaters of which rise north of the Arctic Circle. The Anderson then flows nearly 600 km north to Liverpool Bay on the Arctic coast. To access the river we planned to drive 3800 km to Inuvik, on the east channel of the Mackenzie River delta. From there we would charter a float plane to the small community of Colville Lake, where most people begin trips down the Anderson River. After reaching the coast we would be picked up by float plane, at a specified date, to be flown back to Inuvik.

While in Inuvik we could also visit and stay with our friends Marilyn and Alan Fehr. Alan, a former graduate student of mine, now worked for Parks Canada, and had extensive knowledge of the western Arctic. Both he and Marilyn could give us much needed advice on potential cabins, as well as proper clothing and equipment for enjoying an Arctic winter. They would also likely know whom we should contact regarding getting our food and supplies to an isolated cabin.

On 29 October 1997, I ordered topographic maps from Natural Resources Canada for our trip down the Anderson River. Five of the maps, at the scale of 1:250,000, covered our entire route. The town of Colville Lake actually sits on a tributary of the Anderson River, which the canoeist eventually reaches along a very circuitous route extending nearly 150 km through Ketaniatue, Legetentue, Sakatue, Niwelín and Gassend Lakes. Narrow outlets

of lakes, with little change in elevation, can sometimes be difficult to find. For this stretch of the journey I ordered six maps at the scale of 1:50,000.

By mid-November I had applied waterproofing map seal to all 11 maps, and had finalized a tentative 30-day itinerary. I could already visualize our campsites, where we might have to portage around rapids, and where we might spend our rest days hiking, fishing, birding and botanizing. At this stage of planning a river trip, my mind always becomes irreversibly fixed. I now HAD to paddle down the Anderson River. I had my maps, didn't I? I had my itinerary, didn't I? I HAD to go.

OK. So now the river portion of our adventure was in place. The priority for next year, though, was winter, not summer. We still needed a cabin. I called Alan, and told him about our plans.

"It's going to be hard to find a suitable cabin, Mike," he said. "First of all, very few communities, let alone cabins, even exist north of the Arctic Circle. Secondly, trappers use most of those cabins that do exist. And, since trapping occurs primarily in winter, the cabins aren't available then. And it's possible that many trappers wouldn't even want to rent their cabin to tourists from the South. And also, as you know, many bush cabins aren't all that great. I think it will be difficult to find what you want."

"I need only one cabin, Alan. If you don't mind just asking around, I would appreciate it."

"OK, I'll see what I can do."

I hung up the phone feeling pretty optimistic. Something would work out. It always does.

In addition to finding a cabin, another, more serious, and now quite nagging obstacle remained – our lack of winter experience. I grew up in Sacramento, in California's Great Central Valley. Only very rarely did ice form on our backyard fish pond. One winter, when I was about 10 years old, hail beat down on our house for about 10 minutes, piling up several centimetres against our garage door. A very memorable event for me. I also clearly remember the first time I actually saw snow falling. I was a 22-year-old graduate student, collecting data for a professor researching the accumulation and decay rates of leaves and twigs in Sequoia National Park. As I bent over the collection trays in late September, a white, ash-like substance began swirling around my head.

"Who would be starting fires way out here, and at this time of year?" I

wondered. There were no buildings around, and I hadn't seen anyone on the road.

Yes, I am almost embarrassed to admit it, but for that first brief moment, I mistook snow for wood ash. Since moving to Vancouver in 1975, I had taken up cross-country and back-country skiing. Nevertheless, in 1998 I still had never lived with snow and ice, and had never endured a long, cold winter.

Kathleen's winter résumé was not much longer. From the age of two she had lived in Vancouver, where snow occasionally falls for a few days each winter. The nearly incessant rain, however, usually quickly follows, turning everything to dirty slush and mush. Kathleen and I both faced a steep learning curve before we headed north of the Arctic Circle for winter.

We needed to learn about walking on frozen lakes and rivers. We needed to learn about winter camping. We needed to acquire the most appropriate clothing and gear. To begin our education, we purchased a copy of *A Snow Walker's Companion*, by Garrett and Alexandra Conover, a truly excellent book that provided detailed advice and recommendations on clothing and gear. Chapters included *Snowshoes and Footwear*; *Toboggans*; *Tents and Trail Stoves*; *Clothing for the Elements*; *Tools of the Trail*; and *Provisioning*. Additional information included addresses and telephone numbers of suppliers of winter equipment, plus detailed plans for making clothing.

We were especially intrigued with the Conover's recommendation for footwear: 'The [traditional] sock-felt-moccasin system is entirely breathable, very lightweight, and magnificently functional in conditions ranging from twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit [minus 4 degrees C] to as cold as temperatures go on earth. [The system] is comfortable and light as can be. You feel as if you are prancing around in bedroom slippers.'

That was quite a testimonial. I emailed Alan to get his opinion. He agreed completely with the Conovers, and recommended that we make our own duffel-cloth liners for our mukluks: "They are simple to make. Since Kathleen sews she could easily make them to fit your mukluks. As you know, patterns are available in the Conover book."

The Conovers also advised that we would need different boots during the transition season, at temperatures warmer than minus 4 degrees, when one's body weight will supply enough compression to melt the snow, making our moccasins wet. In an email Alan wrote that he preferred, "the Sorel boot [which is] far more commonly used [here in Inuvik] than [other brands]. I

find the Sorel is more versatile because the rubber bottom means it can be used in fairly wet conditions and still keep you warm and dry.”

Alan also cautioned us that we would: “need heavy mitts, leather I would suggest, for working around the camp. Hauling wood and fixing the stove, for example, require material that will stand up to snags and heat.”

It was good to have access to Alan’s experience.

A couple of weeks later I sat in my living room leafing through *Up Here*, a magazine devoted to articles about Canada’s Far North. This particular issue featured a story about a man named Bern Will Brown. It seems that Bern had cabins for rent at the north end of Colville Lake. Cabins that we would be paddling by next summer on our way to the Anderson River! Could this be true? If so, it seemed like fate, and I called Bern the next afternoon, on November 29.

“Hello, my name is Mike, and my wife Kathleen and I are planning to overwinter, in a small cabin, as a holiday, somewhere north of the Arctic Circle. I read in *Up Here* magazine that you have cabins to rent at the north end of Colville Lake.”

“Yes, I have two cabins at North End, but one is for storage. I rent out only the smaller one.”

“We’d prefer a smaller cabin anyway. It would be easier to heat than a larger cabin.”

“I’ve never rented it out in the winter before. Mostly I rent to fishermen in the summer and hunters in the fall. It’s not really a winter cabin.”

“Would it be liveable in the winter though? We are going to paddle the Anderson River next July, and we could get a look at the cabin then.”

“That sounds good. You would want to see it, before you committed to staying there in the winter. You say your name is Mike? Would you be coming for the entire winter?”

“Ideally, we would like to come from January to break-up. What kind of heat does the cabin have? We would prefer to have wood heat.”

“Both cabins have wood-burning stoves. If you do come, I could make sure that firewood is cut and stacked for you. But I would have to charge for it.”

“Sounds fair to me. What are the cabins like? Are they in good shape? I’ve seen a lot of bush cabins. Some are good. Many are not so good. What would it cost to rent your cabin?”

“I made the cabins myself, Mike. They’re both in good shape. I can send you some brochures, and we can talk some more after you’ve read them. What’s your address?”

I hung up the phone, very excited, and thoroughly pleased with myself. This seems to be working out quite well. We’re learning about clothing and gear, and now I have a great lead on a cabin north of the Arctic Circle.

The brochures arrived a week later, and from the pictures, the cabins were excellent. They were fully furnished, and sat on a small knoll above the outlet of Colville Lake. Docks extended on both sides of a short, narrow point extending into the lake. This couldn’t be any better. The only potential drawback was the listed rate of \$100 per person per night. Two hundred dollars per night for Kathleen and me. Six thousand dollars per month. Break-up normally occurs in mid-June. So the total cost, for 5.5 months would be \$33,000. Certainly much more than any reasonable person would expect to pay or to receive. Obviously Bern intended these prices for short-term sportsmen, not for long-term winter enthusiasts.

What would be a fair price to pay, though? Once again, I called Alan.

“You’re lucky to find such a cabin, Mike. Price is hard to determine. So many variables, such as location, condition, furnishings. But bush cabins in the Inuvik area generally go from between \$500 to \$1,000 per month.”

For the next few days I spent a lot of time looking at the brochures. The north end of Colville Lake, and its little collection of buildings and docks, seemed perfect for our winter adventure.

I called Bern again to find out what price he actually would charge for the winter.

“So, Bern, Kathleen and I are very interested in coming. You mentioned before that you could provide firewood for us. How much wood do you think we would need?” [I thought I would proceed cautiously to the question of rent. There was a very large spread between Alan’s estimate and Bern’s brochure.]

“I think you would need at least two cords.”

“What would be the cost for that?”

“Two hundred and fifty dollars a cord – split and stacked.”

I didn’t know if that was a fair price, but it was about the same that I pay for cordwood in Vancouver. The price certainly seemed acceptable.

Bern continued. “There’s also two propane tanks on the porch. They’re

for the propane cook stove and for lights. There's also a generator that you're welcome to use."

"We're not really interested in a generator. They make too much noise. One of the reasons we're coming is for the quiet."

"I see. Do you know how to drive a ski-doo? It's a long way to town. About 40 km. I can rent you a ski-doo."

"I don't think we need a ski-doo. We want to do a lot of snowshoeing. Snow mobiles make a lot of noise."

"I see. Can you use a chain saw? There's one in the storage shed."

"If we pay to have firewood already there when we arrive, then I don't think we will need a chain saw. Besides, they make a lot of noise. We will bring a bow saw and axe. I like physical work. I think we'll be fine without the chain saw. But it's good to know that it's there if we need it."

"I see."

And now for the big question – "We're very interested, Bern. What is the monthly rent?"

"Did you get my brochures?"

"Yes, we did. So is the price in the brochure what you would expect for renting during the winter?"

"Yes."

"But," I countered, "the price seemed to be for people who are staying for only a few days. Or maybe a week. On a monthly basis, that would be \$6,000. We can't afford that."

"What can you afford?"

"I don't think it's a question of what we can afford, Bern. I think it's a question of what it's worth. I have a friend in Inuvik who says that bush cabins generally go for about \$500 to \$1,000 per month."

Bern, after a short pause, offered a few more comments regarding the amenities of the Anderson River and Colville Lake: "As I mentioned in my letter, I do have a printed résumé of a canoe trip down the Anderson River, which I sell for \$25.00. My wife Margaret and I have paddled down the Anderson River to the Arctic coast, so have first-hand knowledge of the trip. Pretty much everyone who goes down the Anderson River stays a few days here in town, at my compound and lodge. The town here is quite nice. You'll probably want to visit before you go down the Anderson."

Bern paused again, and then said, “You know, I’d be happier with the higher price mentioned by your friend.”

“That sounds fair to me, Bern.”

So it was all set. We were going to live at the north end of Colville Lake, a full 100 km north of the Arctic Circle, from January 1999 to break-up in June. The next day I ordered six more topographic maps at the 1:50,000 scale for the area surrounding the cabin.

Most of our friends thought that \$1,000 per month was an exorbitant price. “Hey, you could get a pretty nice apartment in Vancouver for that amount of money. Why would you pay that much for just a cabin in the bush?”

They implied that Kathleen and I were getting ripped off. But I disagree. It’s a question of value, and of supply and demand. Bern’s is the only cabin available at the north end of Colville Lake, a perfect place for us to over-winter. And it seems that the cabin’s well made and maintained. I actually preferred to pay the upper end of the range mentioned by Alan. Bern would be my primary contact for any emergencies and help throughout the winter. I wanted to begin with a good relationship. I certainly didn’t want Bern to feel that I was taking advantage of him.

On March First, 1998, I prepared the following purchase order to send to Craig MacDonald, in Dwight, Ontario. Of all the suppliers listed in the Con-over book, Craig provided the most complete selection of both clothing and equipment. He also included detailed instructions on techniques for hauling sleds, for travelling safely during winter, for erecting tents, and for avoiding tent fires. In fact, Craig would sell his winter wall tents and stoves only to those people who also purchased his use-and-safety guide. We appreciated Craig’s prudent and careful approach.

Egyptian Cotton Tent	\$1,199.00
Tent Fly (12 x 12 feet)	149.00
Tent Stove (3900 cubic inches)	239.00
Stove Heat Shield	9.00
Stove Pipe Thimble (4-inch pipe)	19.00
Stainless Steel Baking Trivets	4.00
Flat-faced Ice Chisel	59.00
Chrome-plated Iron Tent Poles	109.00
Ten-oz Duck Canvas Wind Suits (2)	338.00

Snowshoe Moccasins (4 pairs)	316.00
One Roll Lamp Wick (for snowshoe bindings)	24.00
Snowshoes (2 pairs)	258.00
Tent Candles (2 boxes)	38.00
Candle Holders (4)	1.00
8-foot Standard Trail Sled (45 pounds)	399.00
Tumpline	59.00
Shipping Deposit	100.00
Total	\$3,320.00

In 1998, Craig manufactured and listed all his items in Imperial units. The tent measured 8 feet by 10 feet, with a 3-foot wall and a 6.5-foot ridge height, yet weighed only 16 pounds (7.25 kg). Very light considering that the tent's fairly roomy size could easily accommodate Kathleen and me, the stove, and much of our gear. Yet the tent was small enough to be set up quickly using metal tent poles, without needing to spend time cutting larger poles from the forest.

Before sending the order to Craig, I shared this list by email with Alan, who wrote that, "If you pull a toboggan [while snowshoeing], I would suggest a light plastic kids-type sled. These are cheap and slide very easily. You may want to have two – either two light ones, or one light one and a heavier-style (wood perhaps). We use these little sleds at camp for hauling ice, wood and fish. They are like winter wheelbarrows."

This recommendation seemed inappropriate to me. We planned to be hauling our gear over long distances and perhaps difficult terrain. A plastic 'kids-type sled' would certainly be too flimsy to endure six months of heavy winter use. I would go with Craig's sturdy, heavy (20 kg) sled. I sent the order off the next day. Craig called a week later to say that everything except the sled had been shipped by Canada Post. The bulky, heavy sled would be delivered by a small shipping company sometime in mid-July.

The Conover book advised that fur ruffs, which are much warmer than synthetic materials, should always be added to wind suits. Based on Alan's suggestion, we called the Winnipeg Fur Exchange to order two coyote ruffs. As soon as they arrived, Kathleen easily sewed both onto our canvas wind suits. Based on the patterns in the Conover book, Kathleen also made duffel-cloth inserts for all four pairs of our new moccasins. These moccasins,

also known as mukluks, with their light canvas uppers and tanned moosehide bottoms, did appear very much like cosy bedroom slippers.

Duffel cloth is normally very expensive, around \$50.00 per metre, but the pre-eminent fabric store in Vancouver offered remnants marked down to only \$5.00 per metre. In fact, we obtained most of our winter clothing quite inexpensively, primarily because, like the Conovers, we prefer wool. Like many modern synthetic materials, wool breathes well and retains heat, even when wet. Unlike synthetics such as fleece, however, wool is easily repaired in the field, and does not ‘melt’ when contacted by heat or campfire embers. Several trips to the various thrift and army surplus stores provided all we needed in the way of wool pants, wool shirts and wool sweaters. We purchased medium and heavy sets of wool long underwear, both top and bottom, at the Army & Navy, Vancouver’s most ‘blue collar’ department store.

Periodically I practiced setting up the wall tent. Most nights I studied my maps, or leafed through the Conover book, or reread Craig MacDonald’s instructions – on some nights I did all three.

By late April, everything was set. We had our cabin. We had most of our equipment. We had most of our clothing. Our leaves of absence would begin in just over two months, when we would drive to Inuvik, and from there fly to Colville Lake to meet Bern, to see the cabin, and to canoe down the Anderson River. After returning home, we would make plans for shipping six months of food, equipment, supplies and ourselves to the north end of Colville Lake, where we would immerse ourselves in the cold and isolation of a true Canadian winter.

CHAPTER 2



A Bump in the Road

My appointment as Associate Dean in the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences at the University of British Columbia included secretarial support. I considered myself very fortunate that Lynn brought such skill and enthusiasm to her position and responsibilities. I therefore felt privileged in May when she asked me to serve as emcee at her wedding. And, to be honest, I also enjoy the microphone. I love the stage. I welcomed the opportunity to at least try to entertain her guests. On the afternoon of Lynn's wedding I reached into the closet for my most formal clothing, including some black dress slacks that I had not worn for more than two years. The slacks fit very snugly on my right thigh. In fact, I could barely get them on. The left leg was loose. The waist was loose. But the right pant leg fit extremely tightly.

Like most men, I immediately asked my wife to explain my predicament. "Kathleen, I can't seem to get these slacks over my right leg. Why would that be?"

As is her style, Kathleen answered honestly and candidly. "Why would I know why your slacks don't fit anymore? Clothes don't fit forever." See. I told you Kathleen would know the answer.

"Let me see, though. Turn around. Let me have a look. You're right, Michael. They are very tight. You know, for a while now, your right thigh muscle seems to have been getting bigger. You look almost lopsided."

"I do?"

"Haven't you noticed?" Kathleen asked.

"No. Why would I notice? I never look at myself from behind. These pants sure don't fit though. We both need to go to the dentist and the doctor for checkups before we head north, anyway. Maybe my thigh muscle has

been strained or something. Maybe the doctor can recommend some physiotherapy. I'll make an appointment for next week. It's less than two months before we go now, but there's still time to do something, if something needs to be done."

A week later I sat in the doctor's tiny, cramped examination room reading decades-old *Canadian Geographic* magazines and daydreaming about the first of July, when Kathleen and I would head north into our year of freedom. The doctor entered, peered into my eyes and ears, took my blood pressure and tapped on my knees.

"Everything looks OK," he said. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes, there is," I began, as I hopped down from the table. "Some of my slacks no longer fit over my right leg. My thigh muscle seems to have gotten larger. Maybe I should see a physiotherapist," I suggested.

"Turn around. Let's have a look."

I'm not making this next part up. It happened exactly like this. I turned around, and my doctor yelled out, "Oh my God!" as he more or less fell backwards out through the door of the examination room. I generally try not to read too much extra into what people say or do. But I definitely interpreted a falling-backward, Oh-my-God to be a bad sign.

The doctor recovered from his initial reaction, and came back into the room.

"So do you think I need to see a physiotherapist?" I asked.

"No. I'm going to send you for some tests, starting with an ultrasound, and then, if necessary, an MRI."

"Does it take long to get those tests scheduled?" I asked. "I have to go away for a couple of months on July First. I need to get those tests done before then."

"You won't be going anywhere this summer," he replied.

Once again, I generally try not to read too much extra into what people say or do. But I definitely interpreted 'You won't be going anywhere this summer' to be a bad sign. Oh well, there's almost two months before we leave. Still plenty of time. And besides, I HAD to paddle down the Anderson River. I had my waterproofed maps, didn't I? I had my itinerary, didn't I? I HAD to go.

I went for the ultrasound test three days later. The technician told me that a cyst, which the ultrasound would detect, could be the cause my swollen

thigh. Cysts are usually not serious, I thought. Besides, according to Kathleen, I seem to have had this cyst for at least a couple of years, and the only problem I've had is that my dress slacks didn't fit any more. Who cares about my dress slacks, anyway? I don't. I certainly won't be taking dress slacks north with me.

After the ultrasound I chatted briefly with the technician. "So, is it a cyst?"

"I don't think so," she replied.

"What is it then?"

"You should ask your doctor. Here's the phone number to schedule an MRI."

Damn! I hate going for all these tests.

I drove back to my office and called the number on the card. "I have been asked to schedule an MRI."

"Our first available slot is early July. Is that OK?"

"No. That doesn't work for me. I'm going away for a couple of months on July First. Are there any other MRI facilities around that might have earlier dates?"

"I'll check and get back to you."

Thirty minutes later the receptionist called back to say that they could take me tomorrow, at 1:30.

"Great! Thanks very much for your help."

The next day, at Vancouver General Hospital, I filled out all the forms, and checked the 'No' box to the question 'Are you claustrophobic?' The technician strapped me to the table, and slid me into the narrow tube where I spent the next 45 minutes listening to a series of loud, jackhammer-like noises. Afterwards, I took the rest of the day off, went home, sat in my garden, and wondered what all these tests would reveal.

Three days later my falling-backward, Oh-my-God doctor called me at work. "I'm afraid that the MRI results indicate that you have a tumour in your thigh – a liposarcoma. I can't tell you how serious it might be. I have forwarded your test results to the oncologist, and have made an appointment for you at the cancer clinic. You should be there next Tuesday, at 10:30 in the morning."

As I've said twice before, I generally try not to read too much extra into what people say or do. But I absolutely interpreted 'I've scheduled an ap-

pointment for you at the cancer clinic' to be a very bad sign. I had gotten quite a few laughs during the last week telling the story of my falling-backward, Oh-my-God doctor. It was good material. But this cancer clinic appointment didn't sound funny at all. For the first time, I began to worry.

"So what is a liposarcoma? I've never heard of it before."

"It's a cancer of the fat cells. If you want, I can send you some information, and I can give you some website addresses."

"Yes, please. I would like to have the website addresses and the brochures."

How could this be happening? Oh well, I might not actually have this cancer. The MRI test might be only suggestive, and not conclusive. And even if I do have cancer, many cancers are easily treated. And besides, there's more than a month left before we head north. Still plenty of time.

Despite what kind of cancer I might have, or how treatable it might be, just hearing the word 'cancer' applied to yourself is frightening enough. I don't feel ashamed telling you that when I called my father that afternoon, I had difficulty even saying, "I have cancer, Dad."

I didn't actually cry, but I wasn't entirely composed either.

On the Internet, Kathleen and I read that:

A liposarcoma is a malignant tumour that arises in fat cells in deep soft tissue, such as that inside the thigh. They are typically large bulky tumours, which tend to have multiple smaller satellites extending beyond the main confines of the tumour. Only when the tumour is very large do symptoms of pain or functional disturbances occur. The prognosis varies depending on the site of origin, the tumour size, the depth, and proximity to lymph nodes. In advanced cases, amputation is sometimes necessary. Metastases are common. The 5-year survival rate for a high-grade liposarcoma is less than 50%.

Amputation? Damn. I felt real bad. And not just because I had cancer. I felt sorrow and wrenching disappointment that this liposarcoma, this bulging thigh, might keep me from pursuing my dream of spending an isolated winter in the Far North – a dream that was supposed to begin in only a month from now. I spent the next several days feeling quite morose.

Next Tuesday Kathleen took the day off, and we both went down to the

cancer clinic, where we sat waiting with scores of other sombre, worried-looking people. Not a very happy place at all. When my turn came, Kathleen joined me, as together we walked into the small meeting room, where we met with Dr. Masri, the oncologist. He was smiling, and seemed happy. How could he possibly have bad news?

“As you probably know,” he began, “cancers are generally rated in four stages, with stage one being the least advanced, and stage four being the most advanced. Your tumour is very large, one of the largest liposarcomas I have ever seen. Even so, it is still confined within the fat cells, and has not moved. It is not likely to metastasize, as it is not in contact with any organs. It’s big, but it is still stage one. I am confident that surgery will be completely successful in removing all of it.”

I didn’t know what to think. I should have been pleased. And I suppose I was. But my first reaction was almost one of shame. For the past week I had been feeling very sorry for myself, fearing the worst. And now he tells me that my self-pity was entirely unwarranted and undeserved? I simply go into the hospital, he cuts the cancer out, and I go on with my life. I regretted that I ever even mentioned my cancer to anybody. My health problem didn’t seem to be any worse than swollen tonsils or an enlarged appendix. What a baby I was.

Dr. Masri outlined two possible scenarios for me: “I know that you were planning to go on a canoe trip in July. You can still do that, and we can operate when you get back. Or we can operate now, say early next month.”

What, I thought, the surgery is not even urgent? What a wuss I have been.

“Well, I’m sort of geared up to dealing with this. The sooner the better. Let’s get it over with. Let’s have the surgery now.” I forgot all about my waterproofed maps and my itinerary for the Anderson River.

Kathleen and I left Dr. Masri’s office, and walked past the waiting room filled with scores of sombre, worried-looking people. My week of anxiety now seemed quite trivial compared to the uncertainty and peril that surely awaited many of them. I slinked past, hoping they wouldn’t notice the spring in my step and the relief in my heart.

Back at work the next day I relayed the good news to my colleagues, who suggested that I should take sick leave while I recovered from surgery. “No need to waste your leave on being sick. Why don’t you begin your

administrative leave of absence when you're better? Take as much time as you need."

This had never occurred to me. I always had believed that my bad luck is just that. My bad luck. I should have to deal with my bad luck. Other people should not have to make adjustments to accommodate me. Postponing my leave by just one month, though, to end July 31, created a tremendous opportunity. Kathleen and I could now go to the cabin and canoe out to the Arctic coast after break-up. This approach provided a more natural flow of events, compared to canoeing by the cabin in summer, and then returning in winter. I called Kathleen to see if she could change the terms of her leave. As it turns out, her Computing Services unit gladly supported her request to extend her leave of absence. Kathleen's leave was without pay, and Computing Services, which had been suffering financial cutbacks, welcomed the opportunity to save additional salary.

So one never knows about life. Because of my cancer, our original, ideal plan for how we would spend our year of freedom had been restored.

That evening, over a relaxing dinner, we discussed our new situation, particularly the greater challenge of getting food and gear to the cabin. The logistics were more difficult now that the canoeing and overwintering both had to be outfitted at the same time. A month-long canoe trip requires its own, unique set of gear (canoe, paddles, PFDs, canoe packs, small camp stove, food buckets) and dried food. These items fill most of our van. There would not be enough room left for the nearly six months of food and gear that we would need for our winter adventure. Somehow, we needed to get most of our winter and summer gear to a staging area close to Colville Lake this summer. [Note: PFD stands for 'personal flotation device' which is worn by most canoeists and kayakers. PFDs are less bulky than lifejackets but will not keep the head of an unconscious person above water.]

I should remind you that no roads go to Colville Lake. No roads went anywhere near Colville Lake. That's one of the main reasons we were so excited about spending the winter there. We would be truly and very isolated.

Colville Lake lies east of the Mackenzie River, which stretches more than 1500 km from its source at Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories to its vast delta at Inuvik. In 1998 most of this great river corridor contained no roads, and the few towns spread along its length were supplied in summer primarily by barges operated by the Northern Transportation Company

Limited [NTCL]. Norman Wells (often called ‘The Wells’), the closest town with air service to Colville Lake, lies 195 km to the southeast. The last shipment downriver before winter was early September. So we could drive to the NTCL terminus in the town of Hay River on the south shore of Great Slave Lake in late August, loaded with as much gear and supplies as possible, and send everything by barge approximately 900 km to ‘The Wells.’

We could then drive after Christmas to Inuvik with the rest of our gear, and leave our van with Alan and Marilyn. Our van would then be available to drive home to Vancouver when we came off the Anderson River in July of 1999. This approach would be less expensive than shipping our gear an additional 650 km to Inuvik, from where there was no scheduled air service to Colville Lake. Instead, when we reached Inuvik after Christmas, we would take a scheduled flight with North-Wright Airways to Norman Wells, where we would collect our supplies. We could then take our gear on a scheduled flight to Colville Lake. Once in town we could hire someone to take us and our supplies by snow machine to our cabin at the north end of Colville Lake. Although complex, we liked this plan very much. We just needed to find somebody to look after our supplies once they reached Norman Wells.

The next day I called North-Wright Airways, and talked to a pleasant lady who agreed to store our supplies in their compound when the NTCL barge arrived. I also sent Bern a letter, telling him of my impending surgery, and that we wouldn’t be passing through Colville Lake in July. I assured him, though, that we still planned to fly in to the cabin in January.

On July 4, our wedding anniversary, Kathleen and I drove to Vancouver General Hospital, where I immediately entered the preparation room. Next to my gurney stood an intern and Dr. Masri, who still seemed happy as he patted my liposarcoma. “See, it’s massive.” The intern nodded in agreement.

Across the room, in a corner, a man about my age whimpered that he was going to die. I wasn’t worried about dying. I just hoped that when I woke up my leg would still be attached to my body.

My gurney rolled out the door and down the hallway, beneath glaring lights, into the operating room. The anesthetist instructed me to count backwards from ten. I assumed he meant that I should stop at zero, and not enter negative territory. I think I made it to plus seven. I woke groggily and felt for my leg. It seemed to still be there; but I have heard that sometimes people continue to ‘sense’ hands, feet and legs that have been blown off or

amputated. The next time I woke, Kathleen stood next to my bed. I had to ask her, “Is my leg still there?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I checked. It’s still there. Dr. Masri said that everything went very well. He believes that he got all the cancer.”

I spent the next four days in a room that I shared with three other patients. I could have opted for a private room, at \$4.00 per day, but I thought it would be more entertaining to have company. The man immediately opposite me rarely ate his food. He just moaned and slept. I mentioned to the nurse that he didn’t seem to be eating. “I’m a bit worried about him,” I said.

“Don’t worry. That’s our problem. We’ll take care of him.”

But he’s not eating, I thought. How can he get better if he doesn’t eat?

Several tubes ran into and out of my body. I won’t go into too much detail except to say that one of them delivered doses of morphine, which I was supposed to administer myself.

“You should not allow the pain to build before squeezing the button,” the nurse cautioned. “It’s better to prevent pain before it begins.”

On the second day of my stay the nurse asked, “How are you feeling?”

“OK, except that my hands are always tingling, and feel kind of numb.”

“That’s just the morphine taking effect.”

To my way of thinking, hands should not tingle and feel numb. I didn’t want my hands to tingle and feel numb. I never squeezed the button again. Even without morphine, I didn’t experience much pain. I slept most of the time, but when awake, I spent most of my time daydreaming of Colville Lake, while listening to a cassette tape of a musical stream flowing through a mountain meadow – a special gift from Kathleen.

On the third day, a young woman came to teach me how to use crutches, with particular emphasis on going up and down stairs. Everyone should try this sometime. Going up and down stairs on crutches is very challenging, particularly for those who actually need crutches. The experience was humbling. I would need to regain strength quickly so that we could get our food and gear to Hay River by late August.

Dr. Masri stopped by to see me during dinner. “How are you feeling?”

“OK, but my leg is pretty weak. Maybe you can recommend some physiotherapy. We have to get to Hay River by August 25. I need to be stronger by then.”

Dr. Masri just chuckled. He still seemed happy. “We generally recommend

physiotherapy to those people who need a kick in the butt. I don't think you're going to need physiotherapy."

I generally try not to read too much extra into what people say or do, but I took his words as a good sign.

On my last day, a few hours before checkout, the nurse came by to ask if I wanted to rent the crutches.

"No, thanks," I said.

Now I don't intend this next comment to sound overly dramatic or macho, but I didn't want to use any crutches. Four days ago I walked into this hospital, and I wanted to leave the same way.

The nurse continued. "Well, I can make sure a wheelchair is here to take you down to the parking lot.

"No, thanks," I said. "I'm going to try to walk."

I could mostly dress myself, but couldn't bend over, so Kathleen put my shoes on and tied the laces. We walked slowly down the corridor, toward the elevator and stairwell. "You know, Kathleen. I always take the stairs. I want to take the stairs now, just to see if I can do it."

"There's no need to rush things, Michael. It's three flights down. Besides, you don't want to tear your staples or open your wound."

"That won't happen. I'll be going real slow. Believe me. And at least I'll be going down. Besides, we have stairs at home, and no elevator. I have to be able to go up and down stairs."

Kathleen opened the door for me, and I shuffled through, leaning up against the wall. I reached the stairs, and grabbed the right-hand rail. I felt nauseous. I slid my right foot forward until it dropped over the edge onto the step below. While supporting my weight on the rail, I stepped down with my left foot. I glanced at Kathleen, who looked worried. "I think I can do this, Kathleen. It's going to take a while, though, one step at a time."

I eventually reached the bottom floor, and walked outside into glorious sunshine. "I'm glad that's over, Kathleen. Let's go home. I don't feel so well."

Kathleen opened the middle door of our van, and I crawled onto the seat.

"I can't sit up, Kathleen. I feel sick. I'm gonna lie down on the floor. Don't go too fast, or make any sudden stops."

Thirty minutes later I climbed the stairs up to our bedroom. Kathleen untied my shoelaces and took my shoes off. I finished undressing and struggled into bed. I felt pretty satisfied. I was out of the hospital, and the cancer was

allegedly gone. It was still only July 8. We didn't need to get our supplies and gear up to Hay River until August 25. Plenty of time to recover by then.

I spent the next two weeks mostly sleeping late, watching reruns of *Columbo* episodes, eating grilled cheese sandwiches, and dozing on the deck in the afternoon sun. Every two days a young home-care nurse came to my bedroom to change my bandages and to assess my wound, which continued to bleed. The nurse instructed Kathleen and me to empty my hemovac of blood and record the amount of accumulation three times per day. We continued monitoring until July 13, when the bleeding more or less stopped. We also measured the circumference of my swollen leg two times per day, until it reached the size of my healthy leg on July 31.

We had picked up our sled in an industrial area of nearby Burnaby on July 16. My leg was still quite weak, and although the crate and sled weighed only about 34 kg, we had a great deal of difficulty getting it up onto the racks of the van. Despite my frustration, though, we now had all of our winter gear.

Things were going very well, and I appreciated the genuine concern of friends and family. I still have all their get-well cards and letters. I also still have all the correspondence with Bern Will Brown, including the following letter of July 26:

Dear Friends;

Sorry to hear about your recent illness, Mike, which might influence your winter trip here. I feel that it would be essential for you both to see our Outpost setup before committing yourselves to a winter stay there.

Although I did take 200 lbs of propane down by ski-doo in May (for your light & stove), without any means of transportation yourselves I would be obliged to bring in a couple of cords of firewood before freeze-up for your fuel. Otherwise you would be faced with the task using a hand sled. And are you used to using a chain saw?

These considerations lead me to discourage you making this sojourn this winter. What do you think?

Regards,

Bern Will Brown

What do I think? I'll tell you what I think. I think that I'm going to the cabin in January. I don't really need to see the cabin first. And we have already talked about bringing in firewood before freeze-up anyway. Nothing has really changed. I'll have to get back to Bern about this. But right now I still needed to convince Dr. Masri, whom I visited once a week.

It was now August 10, and we planned to leave for Hay River, three days driving, on August 22. My wound was still bleeding. I still walked with a lot of pain, and a severe limp. Although I was now driving again, I had to lift my right leg up with my hands to get it into the driver's seat of our van. Dr. Masri consistently indicated that he did not support my going to Hay River, and advised against even going to Colville Lake this winter.

Those words depressed me almost as much as the initial news of my cancer. I HAD to go to Colville Lake. I HAD to get my gear to Hay River by August 25. I wasn't sick – just a little weak. No reason to abandon my plans and dreams.

My next meeting with Dr. Masri was scheduled for Wednesday, August 12. That gave me two days to practice walking without limping. I could show Dr. Masri that I was indeed getting better. I made four daily circuits around the backyard, and soon could walk 20 to 30 m, more or less normally, before the pain became too great. This ruse should work.

Kathleen and I arrived at the hospital, and quite coincidentally, saw Dr. Masri at the far end of the hall. It was as though Providence had intervened on my behalf. I went into my practiced walk. Dr. Masri seemed impressed. "You're walking pretty well."

"That's because I am pretty much better. I should have no problem driving to Hay River," I said, planting the idea in his mind.

"Well, come on in, and let's have a look at your leg."

Dr. Masri poked at the back of my thigh, and said, "You know, the swelling has disappeared, but your wound is still bleeding. You're not ready to drive to Hay River, and you're not ready to spend a winter so isolated from medical care. Your leg is still weak. There might be complications. Your liposarcoma was massive – 2.0 kg. We'll have to do more tests to determine if the cancer reappears. I'll need to see you every month for at least a year. You'll need another MRI in six months. I'll ask the nurse to come in and change your bandages."

The nurse came in, and I pleaded my case with her. "I have to go to

Colville Lake this winter. I might never get another chance. My leg is bleeding less every day, and Kathleen and I change the bandages ourselves anyway. We can do that in Colville Lake. I can get an MRI in December, and then another one in July when we get back. That's not much more than a six-month interval. I'll be fine. I'll come in for tests and checkups when I get back next year. And you know, I don't think Dr. Masri really has the power to prevent me from going, does he?"

The nurse seemed sympathetic to my argument and plight. "I'll talk to Dr. Masri."

She returned a few minutes later and reported that, "Dr. Masri says to enjoy your trip."

We spent the next week busily buying the food that we would need for approximately five-and-one-half months at the cabin, plus one more month on the river. There would be no re-supply once we reached the north end of Colville Lake. Kathleen said that it wasn't difficult to prepare a list of supplies: "I just figured out how much we would need for a week, and then multiplied by the number of weeks we would be away."

It did sound easy. And besides, she knows what she's doing when it comes to food. I'm sure, though, that these few paragraphs don't adequately convey the effort, care and concern expended by Kathleen to ensure that we would remain healthy, that we would be well fed, and that we would enjoy a variety of meals. The potential success of our adventure depended a great deal on Kathleen.

By August 20 we had finally completed most of our shopping. We were still three cans short, though, of crushed and whole tomatoes. Three major grocery suppliers, including Costco and Safeway, had only 37 cans among them. Despite this minor shortfall, we began packing the van. I called North-Wright Airways one more time, and the same pleasant lady assured me that they could store and look after our supplies when the barge arrived. We were ready.

FOOD SUPPLIES FOR COLVILLE LAKE

<i>Item</i>	<i>Amount</i>
Sugar	20 kg
Maple Syrup	5 litres
Crushed & Whole Tomatoes	40 large cans
Scalloped Potatoes	20 packages

Soups	120 packages
Vegetable Oil	4 litres
Margarine	10 kg
Shortening	20 kg
Cheese	10 kg
Dried Fruit	20 kg
Spaghetti, Gravy & Chili Spice	60 packages
Pudding	50 packages
Spaghetti, Macaroni & Pastas	20 kg
Prem & Ham	40 cans
Chicken, Turkey & Corned Beef	60 cans
Salami	5 kg
Sardines, Tuna & Salmon	60 cans
Tea	600 bags
Ground Coffee	4 kg
Chocolate Drink Mix	9 kg
Dried Milk	5 kg
Jam	10 jars
Honey	5 kg
Flour	45 kg
Pancake Mix	10 kg
Corn Meal	6 kg
Oatmeal	8 kg
Granola	3 kg
Peanut Butter	8 kg
Various Dried Beans	9 kg
Assorted Crackers	10 kg
Yeast	2 canisters
Baking Powder	3 kg
Pepper	0.5 kg
Salt	1 kg
Assorted Spices	15 jars

CHAPTER 3



Barging North

On Saturday morning, August 22, Kathleen and I prepared to head up the road to Hay River. Kathleen's brother Frank, and his wife Patricia joined us for our adventure, and they looked forward to their first-ever visit to the Northwest Territories. They had also generously offered to take turns driving. By 9:00 am the four of us had loaded the van with 25 plastic bins, gear and supplies, which filled the back of our vehicle from floor to ceiling. We tied the canoe and sled onto the roof rack, and checked in the house one more time for anything that we might have left behind. Frank and Patricia stuffed themselves into the middle seat, surrounded by bins, blankets, pillows, luggage, sleeping bags and summer tent. I backed the van out of the driveway, and headed east, in the morning sunshine, toward the Trans-Canada Highway.

We planned to spend three days on the road to reach Hay River, a distance of about 2,000 km. On the first night we rented an A-frame cabin in a private campground just north of the British Columbia interior town of Quesnel. I sat before our campfire feeling very contented. On the second day, as we neared Dawson Creek in eastern British Columbia, we approached a highway sign that read 1,400 km to Whitehorse. Damn. Fourteen hundred km to Whitehorse, which Kathleen and I would pass through on our way to Inuvik this winter. That's a heck of a long way! After only two days on the road, I'm already a little tired of driving, and it's still 1,400 km more just to reach Whitehorse. Even in summer, it takes me three days after Whitehorse to reach Inuvik. In winter it would take us even longer.

I am not comfortable or confident driving in snow. My only real experience with winter driving is in Vancouver, where snow and freezing rain often

occur together. To me, snow means ice, slippery roads and imminent danger. When I see snow, I immediately slow down to the point where elderly women whiz on by me. I'm not making any statements about elderly women. I'm just saying that I drive painfully slowly in snow. We'll never get to Inuvik in winter.

I was particularly worried about driving the Dempster Highway, which begins at the Klondike Corners in the Yukon, 40 km east of Dawson City. The gravel road then extends north to Inuvik 737 km through very isolated country and over several windswept passes. Services are available only at the Eagle Plains Motel 372 km north of the 'Corners' and at the small community of Fort McPherson, another 180 km farther north. During winter, this would be a very difficult and perhaps dangerous drive for me. Maybe Kathleen and I should take a bus, or maybe hook up with a truck driver. Perhaps a truck driver would like to have company. Kathleen and I would be very happy to share expenses. I made a mental note to call Alan, and ask his advice.

We stopped at the tourist information centre in Dawson Creek to pick up information on accommodation, and read about a bed & breakfast in Peace River, Alberta, only 44 km out of our way. We were all intrigued by the description of an early 1900s, three-storey house originally built for the Northwest Mounted Police. We knocked on the door of *Kozy Quarters*, and were greeted warmly by our host, Irene Kelly, who showed us the available rooms. The frilly, pink-walled room on the third floor, filled with antiques, was by far the most charming. Kathleen and I won the coin toss, and we carried our luggage upstairs to the pink room.

I sat in a soft, comfy chair, enjoying the evening light streaming through the window. We would be in Hay River tomorrow night, and I called North-Wright Airways just to confirm one more time that they could store and look after our supplies when the barge arrived in Norman Wells. A pleasant man answered the telephone. I explained my situation and mentioned my previous two conversations with his female colleague.

"What was her name?" he asked.

"I don't know. She never gave me her name."

"Well, we can't store your gear inside our hangar. We don't have enough space as it is. We would have to leave it outside, in our fenced compound. But we couldn't guarantee its safety, particularly for four months. I can't even

guarantee you that we could be there to unload the barge when it arrives. I don't know why anyone here would have told you otherwise."

I thanked the man and hung up. This certainly put a bit of a crimp in our plans. What would we do now? We certainly weren't going to take six months of supplies back home to Vancouver. We would be in Hay River tomorrow. We had to ship our stuff somewhere down the Mackenzie River.

Obviously, our only other choice was to barge our goods all the way to Inuvik, where Alan and Marilyn might be willing to unload and find a place to store 25 plastic bins, one canoe and one sled. This scenario meant an additional 650 km of shipping cost. More importantly, it meant that we would need to charter a plane from Inuvik to Colville Lake, a distance of approximately 350 km. Chartered air service is expensive. At this point, though, we didn't have any other feasible alternatives. On the positive side of the financial ledger, if we barged everything to Inuvik, we would no longer have to fly back to Norman Wells next winter. We could fly, with our supplies, directly to Colville Lake. In fact, with a chartered flight, we could probably land on the frozen lake right in front of our cabin. We would then avoid the cost of hiring someone to transport our supplies and gear from the town of Colville Lake out to the cabin. Kathleen and I liked this plan. In fact, we loved this new plan! By comparison, our old plan appeared needlessly cumbersome. Almost stupid one might say.

I immediately called Alan, who said he would be happy to pick up our gear. "Thanks very much, Alan. Would it be possible to store our stuff in a heated place?"

"Heated space in the winter is very expensive, Mike. I don't think that such a space is even available. Besides, your stuff will be fine."

"Are you sure? We've heard stories that canned goods explode when it gets too cold."

"I've not really heard of that, Mike. People up here store canned goods in the cold all the time. The only problem I've ever heard about is canned milk. Those cans sometimes explode. Juice cartons would also explode. Everything else, which doesn't have so much water in the can, should be fine."

"OK, when we get to Hay River, we'll put everything on the barge for Inuvik."

"I think this is a good idea, Mike. Best to have all of your gear with us, here in Inuvik when you arrive. In fact, I think it would also be best for you to

stay with us for the month of January. You could then practice winter camping, and try out all your gear. Marilyn and I agree that this would be better than flying directly to Colville Lake as soon as you get here. You don't really have any previous experience in very cold temperatures. It would be good to get some experience before you go to the cabin."

Of course Alan was right, and I immediately accepted his very generous offer. "Thanks, Alan, we'll do that. We look forward to visiting with you, and in spending some time in Inuvik, which should be very interesting. An adventure in itself! I have to tell you, though, that I'm not looking forward to driving up to Inuvik in the winter, particularly along the Dempster Highway. I'm not very good with snow, and our van, with its long wheel base, fishtails and slides out quite easily. Do you know if truckers coming up to Inuvik might we willing to bring us and our van?"

Alan hesitated for a moment, and then said, "You know Mike, pregnant women here in Inuvik drive down the Dempster all alone in winter, on their way to see doctors in Whitehorse. You say you want to spend the winter out at Colville Lake, but you're worried about driving up?"

"I accept your point Alan, although it's not entirely fair. I'm not worried about myself in the winter. I'm worried about my van. I won't be driving when we're out at Colville. I'll be on snowshoes. I won't be fishtailing or skidding on ice over cliffs."

"All the same, Mike, I think you ought to drive up yourself."

"OK," I replied, "I'll talk to Kathleen about it. Thanks, again, Alan."

After hanging up, Kathleen and I agreed that we would still inquire about the possibility of hiring a trucker to take us up to Inuvik. Neither one of us was happy driving on snow and ice, particularly on the Dempster Highway.

I was on a telephoning roll. I next called Bern, to let him know that we were now planning to arrive on February 1 rather than in early January.

"Good to hear from you, Mike," he said. "But did you get my letter of July 26? I think it's essential that you see the cabin before staying there."

"We have seen the brochures, Bern, and the cabin looks great. We're happy with it."

"But you need to know how to work the wood stove."

"I've used wood stoves before. What's there to know? Don't you just put the wood in and adjust the damper?"

Bern thought for a moment. “That’s right, but I still think you shouldn’t come until you’ve seen the cabin.”

In fairness to Bern, he knew nothing about me, other than I was some guy from Vancouver. An urbanite. Perhaps I was simply a romantic, and unaware of the very real rigours and challenges of living so isolated and so rustic. He could be thinking that Kathleen and I might give up after the first week. He would then have gone to a great deal of effort for no reason. Worse yet, from his perspective, an inexperienced couple might find themselves in trouble, and needing rescue. Or, Bern simply might have wanted us to be absolutely sure that the cabin met our expectations and comfort levels.

These reasons were all valid, but none of them applied to Kathleen and me. I quickly played my strongest cards. “I appreciate your concern, Bern, but we’re going to be putting our gear and supplies on the barge in Hay River on Tuesday to ship them to Inuvik. We’re going to spend the winter in some cabin, and if we have to, we’ll find another one. We much prefer to stay in your cabin, though. It’s at the headwaters of the Anderson River, which we want to paddle. Your brochures looked very nice. I’m sure we’ll be happy with the cabin.”

“OK, Mike. I’ll need to get some cordwood for you. How many cords do you want?”

“How many do you think we’ll need?”

“I think two should do it.”

“That sounds good.”

With today’s business now complete, Frank, Patricia, Kathleen and I walked into town for dinner. Things certainly seem to be coming together.

The next morning, after a fantastic breakfast that included fresh home-made biscuits, we drove to Hay River, nearly 600 km north. We arrived in the late afternoon, planning to stay at a bed & breakfast that Irene had recommended. We had thoroughly enjoyed staying at *Kozy Quarters*, arguably the best B&B we had ever visited. We called the number given to us by Irene, and were told to go downtown, to a bar, to pick up the key. Although surprised to be picking up a B&B key at a bar, we drove off as instructed. Inside, the man behind the bar indicated that he didn’t know anything about a key. We persevered though, and pointed to the information written down by Irene. The name seemed familiar to him.

“Just a minute,” he said, “I’ll be right back.” Moments later he handed

us a small piece of paper, on which were written an address and directions. “You can get the key there.”

“Is this the address for the B&B?”

“No, it’s where you can get the key.”

We climbed back into the van, rolled off to a suburban street, and parked in front of the house indicated by our instructions. This certainly didn’t seem like a B&B. Patricia and I knocked on the door, while Frank and Kathleen waited in the van.

A young woman greeted us, and thrust a key at Patricia. “There’s no one at the bed & breakfast,” she said. “Let yourself in, and pick any room you like.”

“Will someone be coming by in the morning to cook breakfast? What time would that be?”

“There’s no one there,” she repeated. “Here’s a loaf of bread for toast. There’s butter and jam in the refrigerator.”

After that, we always referred to our Hay River accommodation as a ‘bed & bread.’ The building was essentially a two-storey dormitory, with a kitchen in the centre of the first floor. Partial loaves of bread filled the refrigerator. Perhaps the worst B&B we had ever visited. On the plus side though, the shores of Great Slave Lake beckoned from just across the road. We collected driftwood for a fire, cooked hotdogs on the beach, and watched the Northern Lights flicker above us when darkness finally arrived.

The next morning we drove out to the Northern Transportation Company dock, and began unloading our supplies and gear onto pallets. I much appreciated Frank’s skill at organizing and marking everything for shipment down the Mackenzie River. His management background in the helicopter industry shone through. With Frank at the helm, we completed our task efficiently, and were done before noon.

Our 25 plastic bins, plus one canoe and one sled would soon be heading down river toward Inuvik, over 1,550 km away. The total cost to barge 585 kg of groceries and gear was only \$225.00 – a fantastic price, I thought. Our supplies would enjoy a leisurely journey on the river, with the expected arrival date sometime in late September or early October. Before heading back south, we spent a comfortable afternoon driving to and visiting Fort Providence, west of Great Slave Lake, on the Mackenzie River. We ended our very successful day in the Lady Evelyn Falls campground, high above the Kakisa

River. Frank and Patricia set up house in the back of the empty van. I lay in our tent, next to Kathleen, snug in my sleeping bag, relishing my now inevitable winter escape.

The next morning we headed south, back into northern Alberta. We intended to camp again that evening, as the weather remained warm and dry. Approximately 100 km north of the turnoff to Peace River, the van began to act strangely. During acceleration it no longer seemed to shift easily into the next higher gear, particularly when going uphill. I wasn't really sure, but something certainly did seem amiss. When I stopped at a small restaurant-gas station for our afternoon coffee break, I asked Frank, who knows about engines, if he noticed anything unusual.

"I think there's something wrong with the transmission, Mike. The shifting seems very sluggish."

"That's what I think too. It's still a long way to Vancouver. I hope we can make it."

Back in the van, the problem became much worse. The automatic transmission no longer shifted into fourth gear. This was not good, as we were still about 50 km from Peace River, the nearest community that would likely have a mechanic. If we could get to Peace River, either on our own or by calling a tow truck, we could spend another night at Irene's bed & breakfast. That wouldn't be so bad.

We limped into Peace River, and stopped at the first service station we could find, the *All-Rite Transmission* shop on 102nd Avenue. We explained our story, and the mechanic drove our van away for a test drive. He returned to confirm that, "your transmission is toast."

"How long will it take to fix it?"

"Well, first of all, you need to decide if you want a new transmission, which is pretty expensive, or a rebuilt transmission."

"How long does a rebuilt transmission last?"

"Hard to say. Depending on how you treat it. Rebuilds can last as long as a new one."

I looked over at Frank, who nodded in agreement.

"I'm happy with a rebuilt transmission. How long will it take to put it in?" I asked.

"Well, that's the problem. I don't have one. It's already Wednesday after-

noon. I can order one right away, but it might not get here until Saturday, and I don't work on Sundays, so I might not be able to get to it until Monday."

Every day seemed to be bringing a new adventure. Frank and Patricia didn't seem too worried by this news, though, and we all looked forward, with genuine eagerness, to another few nights at Irene's bed & breakfast. Besides, this would give us time to explore the town of Peace River, an agreeable community of approximately 6,000 people.

"Can we drive the van to Irene's, to unload all our luggage, and then come back in the morning, or should we leave the van here?"

"You can drive. You will just be stuck in first gear."

By now we all felt pretty relaxed. Patricia had already confirmed with Irene that our rooms were available. We motored on over, almost stately, to find Irene and her daughter preparing a backyard BBQ for us.

The next morning we slept late, and straggled downstairs, more or less one at a time, for breakfast. While I sat sipping my third cup of coffee, a knock came at the back porch. Irene swung the door open to reveal a man with a very broad smile on his face.

"Irene, I was walking down the alley, and smelled fresh-baked muffins through your open window. Do you have any left?"

"Come on in, there's plenty for everyone. I'd like you to meet my guests."

It was just like being in Aunt Bee's kitchen on the old *Andy Griffith of Mayberry* television show. The down-home charm continued as we strolled down the street for lunch later that afternoon. I kid you not when I say that three people – strangers to us – actually crossed the street to say hello, knowing that we were visitors in town. Yes, spending a few days in Peace River was going to be very enjoyable.

After lunch we headed home to relax in Irene's backyard. We decided to cross the street, to walk in the shade on the other side. Kathleen stepped off the uneven curb awkwardly, and slipped to the pavement. She stood up, hands on hip, arching her back.

"Are you all right?"

"I think so. I've wrenched my back just a little. But I'll be fine."

We continued slowly back toward our *Kozy Quarters*. All the while, Kathleen's face showed signs of increasing pain. By the time we reached

home she could barely walk. She struggled upstairs and lay down on the bed. “I should be OK after I rest, but it hurts just lying down.”

While cooking another BBQ for us that evening, Irene fretted over Kathleen, who sat stretched out on the lawn chair, barely moving. Later that night, in bed, Kathleen lay wide awake, stiff with pain, staring up at the ceiling. She tried to get up, to go to the bathroom, one flight down from our bedroom. She could barely move, so I carried her down, and then back up the stairs. Here we were – the pair of us – leaning up against the wall for support. Me with one good leg, only recently able to walk without a limp. Kathleen with a very bad back, unable to walk at all. Our gear was on the barge, headed down to Inuvik for our winter escape only four months away. Four months is a long time, and we would certainly be better by then. Nevertheless, as we struggled, somewhat heroically, I might say, just to reach an indoor toilet, our current weakness contrasted ironically with our future life of physical challenges at Colville Lake.

I’m an early riser, and went downstairs at 6:30, to chat with Irene as she prepared breakfast.

“How’s Kathleen this morning?” she asked.

“She’s getting worse,” I said. “I don’t think she’ll be coming down for breakfast.”

“Does she have any medication?”

“No,” I replied. “She’s never had this kind of problem before. I don’t really know what she should do.”

“Well, I do,” Irene said. “Robaxacet is what she should get. The pharmacy doesn’t open until 9:30, but I know the pharmacist is there at 8:00 am, working in the back. I’ll call him then, and tell him that you’ll be coming down right away to pick up your medicine. I’ll write down what you need. Just give him my instructions.”

At 7:50 am, Frank and I drove to the drugstore in Irene’s car. At 8:05 the pharmacist handed us a small bag of the requested medicine. Almost like making a clandestine drug deal. Almost, but not quite. Or so I assume.

On Friday afternoon the mechanic called to say that, “the rebuilt transmission arrived yesterday afternoon, and your van is ready. You can pick it up anytime.”

We decided to wait until Saturday morning, when we could get a full day’s travel behind us.

Frank and I were up early. At the breakfast table, Irene insisted that we take her car to the transmission shop to pick up our van: “It’ll be easier for me than driving you myself.” You gotta love Irene.

Two hours later we were packed, and had lifted Kathleen into her seat.

Irene wished us well, and handed Kathleen a soft but firm back support. “You’ll need this for the ride home,” she said.

We thanked Irene for taking such good care of us, and then headed south toward Vancouver. We stopped in Mackenzie, a small logging town, to inspect a vacant rental apartment owned by Frank and Patricia.

Kathleen spent the night stretched out on the hard, bare floor. “I feel more comfortable than lying on a mattress or a couch,” she said. You gotta admire Kathleen’s stoic determination and perseverance.

We reached our Vancouver home the following night, a little tired, a little broken, but content that our gear and supplies were heading north to Inuvik. Only four months now before we head north ourselves.

CHAPTER 4



And Now We Wait

We spent the time before Christmas dealing with a few remaining and important items. In a letter of September 5, Bern wrote that he:

flew three local natives down to the Outpost [which is what Bern called our cabin] this week, and spent two days there getting your two cords of dry wood, which I will cut up into stove-lengths when I am there over freeze-up.... Yesterday, I had Margaret buy you ten, 1-gallon tins of naphtha for use in Coleman lamps & stove, both of which will be available... I want to send you by mail the duplicate front door key so you can get another made. The bill for the naphtha is enclosed = \$48.79. Being there for six weeks this fall will give me a chance to do routine maintenance work.

On September 16, I sent Bern five post-dated cheques in the amount of \$1,000 each for rental of the cabin for the months of February, March, April, May and June of 1999. In the covering letter I reported that our supplies barged to Inuvik “already include naphtha for Coleman lamps and stoves. I appreciate, however, your additional supplies of naphtha left at the cabin. We will certainly reimburse you for all of your naphtha that we may use.”

The next day I received another letter from Bern, dated September 12, in which he indicated that he and Margaret were leaving by boat for the ‘outpost’ in a day or two, and would be staying there until the new lake ice could support their sled, dogs and ski-doo. His letter also stated that he had enclosed:

one of our two keys for the front door of the outpost cabin. Kindly have it duplicated and return (the) original. I will also screw plywood over the front door of the cabin so you will have to carry a Phillips screwdriver with you. I'll cut up all the firewood while there.

Bern was certainly efficient and business-like. This was good, and another reason why I was happy to pay \$1,000 per month. We took the key down to the mall and into the small store that made duplicates. We handed the key to the man behind the counter, who studied it rather intently. A little too intently for my liking. His interest made me feel a tad uncomfortable.

The man rotated the key in his hand and said, "This is an unusual size – very short. I haven't seen anything like this for quite a while. Don't know if I have any blanks that can duplicate this."

I wasn't feeling any better. But at least I had the original. That was something.

"I'll see what I can do," the man said. He searched through his rows of blank keys and finally selected one to place on the grinder. A few minutes later he handed the original and a pair of duplicate keys back to me. "Here. I made two. I'm not sure that either will work. If they don't, just bring them all back, and I'll try again."

"OK," I replied.

I didn't bother trying to explain that it would be impossible to bring the keys back from the north end of Colville Lake. I wasn't too worried, though. As I said, I had the original key.

On September 24 I sent a letter to Bern that included the two new duplicate keys. I also explained why I had kept the original key, and thanked him for his advice about the Phillips screwdriver. I concluded by saying, "Whenever I travel in the bush I always carry a variety of tools, including a Phillips screwdriver, a Robertson screwdriver and a slot screwdriver. You never know when you will need one." I intended this factual statement to help convince Bern that we knew what we were doing, and that he didn't need to worry about us.

We heard from Marilyn Fehr on October 1 that she had picked up our supplies in Inuvik. She and Alan stored the 25 plastic bins in an unheated shed at a Parks Canada compound, and took the sled and canoe back to their

house. All goods looked to be in good order, except that they “seemed to be missing number 9, 18 and 26.”

On the phone, I told Alan that number 26 was the sled, and that number 9 was a green plastic bin. Number 18 was a large plastic container, about twice as large as the others. “I hope it’s there, Alan, as it had our axe, saws, sacks of flour, and other larger items. It was on pallet number two, probably near the bottom.”

“We’ll look again, Mike.”

On October 23 we ordered two muskrat RCMP-style hats from the Winnipeg Fur Exchange. That day we also went shopping for Sorel boots, looking particularly for the *Glacier* model rated to minus 73 degrees. Not as cold as it gets on earth, but pretty close. Kathleen and I both tried on a pair of the black versions. Very bulky at nearly 2.5 kg per pair.

“I don’t like these,” Kathleen said. “I look like Frankenstein’s monster.”

“So what? Who will see?”

“I will, and I don’t like them.”

We trundled over to the next outdoor store on our list, where Kathleen tried on a pair of white *Glacier* Sorels. She grinned, obviously pleased. Now she looked like the wife of Frankenstein’s monster. Much better, apparently. We bought them.

On December 2, Bern called to say that, “We need to have daily contact when you’re at the cabin, Mike, and the SSBx radio isn’t working. I need to get it fixed.”

“Don’t worry about it, Bern. I don’t feel that we need to have daily contact. I think we’ll be fine without the radio. Kathleen and I have often spent 4 to 6 weeks on isolated northern canoe trips. We are used to living on our own.”

“No, Mike. We need to have daily contact. I need to know that everything is all right. I have checked, and there is a place in Victoria that can fix the radio. I will send it down to them. You can pick it up when it’s ready. Since the radio is for your safety, you can pay half the cost, which should be about \$500.00. What do you think?”

I didn’t really think I had a choice. Bern demanded that we have a radio, essentially as a condition for renting the cabin. He also thought that I should pay half. So be it. Because I wanted to start out on a good footing with Bern, I should obviously pay my share of the repair bill.

“Sure, Bern, that sounds fair to me. Send the radio down. We’ll see that it gets fixed.”

On December 3, Bern wrote the following letter:

Dear Michael;

Following our telephone conversation today, I phoned RACAL CANADA INC., and they will try to make all the repairs I’ve indicated, but will not accept VISA. Therefore, if you will kindly pay them, I could reimburse you. Let me know when the SSB radio is repaired and if not hold it until I locate an alternate radio repair shop.

Best Regards,

Bern

Kathleen and I took the ferry to Victoria on December 15 and picked up the radio. The guy behind the counter said, “I’m sure it’s working, but you will need to get it tested.”

“Can’t you test it?”

“No. We’re not licensed or set up to use the frequencies that your radio sends and receives. You have to get it tested by someone in the region where you will be using the radio.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. Thanks.” The radio continued to be a nuisance, despite its new \$500.00 clean bill of health.

Our health had also improved substantially since returning from Hay River. Kathleen’s back seemed completely cured, while my leg continued to make progress. My wound no longer bled, and I could step up into the driver’s seat without lifting my leg with my hands. It was good that Dr. Masri didn’t live next door, however. I walked with a distinct limp, with some pain and obvious weakness.

We now had only one more major item to address before leaving – how to avoid driving up the Dempster Highway. We quickly learned that no buses went to Inuvik, so that left finding a trucker as the only possibility remaining to us. I called a casual acquaintance, a member of our canoe club, who ran a trucking business. I think he had two small trucks that operated in southern British Columbia and Alberta. He gave us his opinion that most truckers normally don’t go up the Dempster in the week or two after Christmas. Moreover, no truck goes up empty.

“What would be the point of that?” he asked.

I had to agree. There would be no point in going up empty. No buses. No trucks. It looks like Kathleen and I would be driving ourselves up the Dempster Highway to Inuvik.

When we had ordered our new van in 1990, I requested that it be shipped with a block heater. The salesman said that he never brings vehicles to Vancouver with block heaters. “You won’t need a block heater, here. Why do you want one?”

Even then I knew that someday I would be going north for the winter. I knew that I would need a block heater. Now was my first opportunity to use it. The next day I took our van in for snow tires, servicing and general maintenance.

“Please check all the fluids and hoses. We’re going to Inuvik on January First. The antifreeze should be good to minus 40 degrees, and I need winter oil.”

I also asked the mechanic to confirm that the block heater actually worked. His answer of, “I don’t know how,” surprised me. I guess he doesn’t come across many block heaters. Problem was, I didn’t know how either.

I called Alan, who said, “Just plug it in. You can usually hear it. Or, you can place your hand on the block and feel some warmth.”

Alan says he shares that story with his northern friends to this very day. Apparently he was amused about how little his Southern friends actually knew about winter.

We were about to find out. On December 31 we packed the van with axe, wall tent, sleeping bags, candles, wood stove, winter clothing, food, snow shovel, chains and other survival equipment that we might need should we break down on the Dempster Highway. For additional weight over the rear axle I also added two large bags of cat litter for Alan’s friend in Inuvik. I was not looking forward to the drive.

CHAPTER 5



To the End of the Road

We left Vancouver, heading north, into the first dawn of 1999. Kathleen and I drove silently, beneath clear skies. The Trans-Canada Highway through the Fraser Canyon was bare and only slightly wet from last night's rain – a good start for us. The first snow patches on the road appeared just north of Quesnel. From there we travelled on packed snow all the way to Prince George, which we reached just as night fell. We're doing very well. In fact, even in summer, we usually do not travel as far as Prince George on the first day.

We stayed that night at the *Chalet Sans Souci* Bed & Breakfast – a very cute residence, known locally as 'The Gingerbread House,' built and operated by our very hospitable hosts, Jacqueline and Lutz Klaar. After settling in, we drove a few kilometres north into town for dinner at *Earl's Restaurant*. Snow began to fall halfway through our meal. As Vancouverites, Kathleen and I began to fret. Everyone else in the restaurant, however, seemed oblivious to the impending disaster outside. As calmly as we could, we finished both our entrée and dessert and drove back to our B&B without incident.

At breakfast the next morning I talked with Lutz about the recent servicing of our vehicle. "Say, Lutz, maybe you can answer a question for me. When picking up our van, I noticed on the invoice that 10–30 oil had been put in, the same oil weight that we always use in summer. This didn't seem right to me. What kind of oil do people use here in the winter?"

Lutz replied that "Where you're going, with very cold temperatures, you should have a lighter winter oil. If I were you, I would stop at a service station and change the oil."

We took his advice before heading up the road in mid-morning. We

expected to reach Fort St. John by early evening. First though, we would need to cross the Rocky Mountains through the Pine Pass, at an elevation of 935 m. Later on, just west of Fort St. John, we would climb up and out of the Peace River Valley on a narrow, steep and winding road. Both of these obstacles were much less fearsome than the ominous Dempster Highway. Nevertheless, I began to worry.

We travelled on packed snow with more snow falling until mid-afternoon. Pine Pass had been plowed and cleared. Very nice. The rise up to the pass was much shorter than I had remembered. Certainly much shorter than I had visualized all morning. The climb out of the Peace River proved equally uneventful. The van performed very well, with no fishtailing. All that worry for nothing. Maybe winter driving isn't all that bad after all.

We stayed in an old, somewhat tired motel right along the highway in Fort St. John. The evening temperature had dipped to -19 degrees, and we decided to wear our new mukluks for our short walk to the adjacent fast-food restaurant. Although Kathleen and I both felt very self-conscious, no one stared or even seemed to notice our traditional, northern footwear.

We left Fort St. John on January 3 at 7:15 am beneath a lightly overcast sky. Still dark, and -18 degrees. The sky soon cleared to reveal a full moon. The pre-dawn twilight bathed the snow-covered trees in a slightly golden luminescence. As the sun rose, the entire horizon glowed pink. A very enchanting start to our third day of travel.

We had covered 1,320 km on our first two days of travel, which put us on the Alaska Highway. We would now be driving through a much more isolated, often mountainous landscape, but expected to reach Toad River, 565 km away, in northern British Columbia, before nightfall.

Unfortunately, we drove all day in snowstorms – and on roads covered in snow. If there had been any elderly women drivers on the highways, they would certainly have whizzed right on by me. Mostly, though, we encountered 18-wheelers, travelling fast, creating whiteout conditions for us whenever they passed. Our first hard day of winter driving.

Finally, more than an hour after dark, we approached the bridge leading into Toad River, which consisted primarily of a rustic motel/restaurant/gas station, plus a few scattered outbuildings. From previous trips I knew that the road made a sharp right turn as it climbed up onto the metal-surfaced bridge. I suddenly had those old visions. Those recurring visions of our van

fishtailing out of control. Just like in Vancouver, I slowed way down. To this day, Kathleen said that at times it seemed like we were standing still or actually going backwards. What can I say? I was tired. It had been a difficult day for me.

We eventually crossed the bridge and drove up to the lodge, where we booked a tiny, clean and comfortable room. We rested a bit, and then walked out in our stocking feet to the small dining area. In the booth next to us sat a mother and her two young children. It was Sunday, the end of the weekend. They were on their way to the Liard River Hot Springs, for an evening soak, after which they would return home. What makes this anecdote interesting is that they lived in Fort Nelson. What makes this story even more interesting is that the Liard River Hot Springs lie slightly more than 300 km west of Fort Nelson.

So I think you get the picture. I had struggled mightily all day to cover 565 km. I am beat. This family beside us, though, would travel more than 600 km round trip, in the middle of winter, just for an hour's soak. Probably laughing, joking and singing all along the way. Snow doesn't bother this young woman. At least she's not pregnant, though. That would be even more humbling for me.

Just as our dinner arrived, a young couple, also staying at the Toad River Lodge, sat down at the booth recently vacated by the Fort Nelson family. They were restless, agitated, and immediately began telling their story. The United States military had transferred him from his base in Florida to a new assignment in Anchorage, Alaska. As an adventure they decided to drive, rather than to fly. Before leaving they had been told, by Floridians (probably by people who didn't know how to tell whether or not a block heater worked), that snow tires weren't necessary. "The roads will be fine," they were told. [I don't know how Floridians would know about winter road conditions in northern British Columbia. I'm just telling you this story as it was told to me.]

Just about an hour ago, 24 km south of Toad River, the young couple were passing an 18-wheeler on a narrow, uphill climb above a river. They hit a patch of ice and tumbled over the side, apparently severely damaging the passenger side of their vehicle. Tomorrow they would return with their towed vehicle to Fort Nelson. Tonight they were blaming everyone but themselves.

"The government shouldn't have let us drive here in the winter. Those

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael D. Pitt

Born and raised in California, Michael D. Pitt emigrated to Canada in 1975 to accept a position at the University of British Columbia as a professor of grassland ecology in the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, where he eventually served as associate dean for eight years. In 1981 he married his wife Kathleen, who worked at the university as an administrator in Information Technology Services.

The lure of a rural lifestyle, however, with golden sun reflecting on winter snow, inevitably proved irresistible. Kathleen said goodbye to commute traffic, deadlines, memos and office walls in 2000. Michael escaped 18 months later. They now live on 565 acres in the Aspen Parkland near Preeceville, Saskatchewan, where sled dogs Brownie, Grey, Sailor and Slick help them operate *Meadow's Edge Bed & Breakfast*.

Kathleen and Michael Pitt are authors of *Three Seasons in the Wind: 950 km by Canoe Down Northern Canada's Thelon River*, published in 1999.