

whatever could pass as a meal. Only after they had food in them were they able to face the chores of night, finding water, ~~would~~<sup>wood</sup> supply, putting up the sailcloth shelter, laying groundcloth and blankets, covering the canoe against possibility of storm finding their night's cove. And after those, face the loneliness which occupied where Braaf ought to have been.

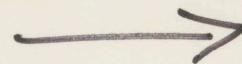
. . .It needs to be the pair of us against this coast<sup>now,</sup> blacksmith. Ironhead. Just that, no other load on our backs. You're five kinds of an ox but that much you can see, when your temper isn't in the way. If just Braaf. . . 'If' is fairy gold. Make it past, what happened. Ahead, we need to point. Wennberg, though: can I keep you damped down. . .

And again in the morning, nerved themselves and pushed the<sup>dark</sup> canoe into the surf of the North Pacific.

Then--

"Beach!" Wennberg was pointing. "Beach like heaven's own!"

# —



"What was that?" Night down over them now on this sand shore, Karlsson was at the fire boiling clams for supper when Wennberg came and tossed something into the flames.

"That Aleut calendar of Braaf's, found it in the bottom of the canoe." Wennberg picked up a drift branch to add to the fire. "Won't be needing it in eternity, him."

Karlsson reached, plucked the branch from Wennberg, with it flipped the little rectangle from the fire. Its edges were charred and the day-peg browned, but the wood was whole.

"What's that for, then?" demanded Wennberg. "Every damned day along here is every other damned day. It helps nothing to keep adding them up. Why count misery?"

"Maybe not. But this ought be kept." Karlsson shaved the char off the calendar with his dagger, then moved the peg ~~the~~<sup>three</sup> days since Braaf had gone into the tide trough. A cross-within-a circle, Russian holy day, Pure Monday or St. Someone's birthday of who knew what. . . Karlsson realized Wennberg still was staring at him. "It's all we have of Braaf."

"All we--? Of Braaf? That hive of fingers--?"

Karlsson stopped work on the char but held to the dagger. He took long inventory of Wennberg. Finally, as if not at all keen on the result:

"Braaf happened to be a thief, and he happened to be as high a man as any. I know there's little space in there for it, but try to get both those into mind."

"Karlsson, I'll never savvy you--" Wennberg's eyes slid from their lock with Karlsson's. The dagger had come up off the charred wood. It paused. Then the blade thrust under the bail of the kettle.

The slender man hoisted the mealware from the coals and set it to the ground.

"Food," said Karlsson.

The coast uncluttered itself for them for the next ~~four~~<sup>three</sup> days. The beaches stayed steadily sand, and ample, while the ocean and continent margined straighter here, as if this might be a careful boundary of truce. Waves arrived cream-colored, then thinned to milk as they spilled far up the barely-tilted shore. Once in a while rocks ganged themselves along tideline, but nothing of the dour constant throngs of the days just past. The dolloped rock islands quit off too, except the one early on Karlsson and Wennberg's second morning of this new coastscape, a long bench out a few miles in the ocean.

One last new reach of coast, then, and its visible population only these two kinned against their will, the one family of the kind in all creation, slim Swede and ~~wide~~<sup>broad</sup> Swede arked in a Tlingit canoe.

The beach at the end of their ~~fourth day~~<sup>the third of these days</sup> was widest yet. Wide as kingdom after the ledge-like weeks to the north, somehow a visit of desert here between timbered continent and cold ocean. Five stints of pushing, each a contest against an ever more reluctant sledge, it took the pair of men to skid the canoe in beyond the last mark of the tide.

Scoured shore, too. Between surf and high tideline nothing but a speckle of broken clam and sand dollar shells, suggesting that only seagulls prospered here.

Inland, the sand began to rumple. Over the line of dunes, like the spiking on a manor wall the top of forest showed.

"I ought go have a look," Karlsson offered.

"Look your eyes out, for what I care."

The dune grass poked nose-high to Karlsson and he climbed the crest of a sand wave for better view. Before him now, swale of more sand, a couple of hundred strides across. Then a second rumple of slope, scrub evergreens spotting this one. Tight beyond that, forest thick as bear hair.

Southeast, though; southeast, the magnetic direction of this voyage: southeast the spikeline of timber barbed higher. Two plateaus of forest spread into the horizon.

Karlsson hadn't the palest inkling of what would mark the river Columbia, whether some manner of Gibraltar attended it--from what Melander had told of the river's mightiness and to go by this coast's penchant for drama of rock, that seemed fitting--or whether sharp lower cliff, like at the Strait of Fuca, simply would skirt away and reveal Astoria. A broad opening in the coast ~~this mid-afternoon~~ earlier this afternoon had shown them ~~Swedes~~ Swedes disappointment only bay or sound, not vast river mouth. Wennberg still was in a grump from it.

And here, put as wishful an eye to this pair of bluffs as he could, Karlsson could not believe them into likelihood as river guardians. They rose inland from the shore a half-mile or so, and did not shear away as if a river was working at them. Greater chance that they were just two more of all such continental ribs he and Wennberg already had peered at on this coast. "

. . .Not there then, where to Hell is it? God's bones, how much

farther? . . .

Eyeing around, Karlsson found himself unexpectedly longing for the narrow northern beaches, the wild scatter of seastacks, the tucked coves where they had made camp. Even the clatter of gravel being shoved by the surf, he missed here. These milder beaches promised ease but nicked their prices out of a man. Mussels had vanished with the shore rocks, so desperation's larder here was clams, dug laboriously with Karlsson's axe. Pawing like twin badgers down into the tideline holes Karlsson and Wennberg were all agreement on one thing, desire for a spade. No, two things: the other, that the boiled horse clams were furnishing survival but they were tough dismal fare after a day of paddling.

. . . Maybe tomorrow. Day of Astoria, maybe it'll be. Some day or other will be. . .

Karlsson faced back toward the Pacific. There was this, too, in his lack of preference for this new run of coast. On the sand expanse where the canoe stretched at rest and Wennberg was propping the sailcloth shelter, there was nothing whatsoever they could do to put themselves from sight. This beach held the canoe and its two men prominently as three sprats on a platter.

The rough tongue of the wind started on their shelter early in the night.

Noise of the sailcloth bucking woke Wennberg a minute after Karlsson.

"Blowing solid, sounds like," the blacksmith <sup>imparted.</sup> ~~said.~~ And the next minute, was slumbering again.

Karlsson, though, still <sup>lay</sup> ~~was~~ awake when rain began to edge into the windsound.

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By morning, the storm was major. The tide was up so alarmingly that Karlsson at once went and drove a stake of driftwood into the sand with the flat of his axe, as a mark to watch the inflow against. Sails of spray flew in off the wavecrests, and the wind ~~came~~ <sup>struck</sup> so strong now that even its noise seemed to push into Wennberg and Karlsson. And all that day, as the two hunched under the shelter when they weren't having to foray out for firewood or to try to dig clams; all that day, downpour. At New Archangel they had known every manner of rain, but none of it anything to this. This was as if the sky was trying to step on <sup>them</sup> you.

# —

The Indian arrived at the Astoria customs house with an item and a tale. South from the village his people called Hosett he had gone to hunt seals but soon sighted instead a great tangle of kelp brought inshore by the tide, and the kelp had seined in with it the body of a white person. Now he had adventured downcoast aboard a lumber ~~schooner~~<sup>ship</sup> to report of this find. "Tole," the native said, the coastal jargon word for "boy." Not until he pantomimed and pidgined the description of a downy fluff of beard did the customs collector grasp that a grown man was being depicted.

With thought of the days of sloshing canoe travel it would take to reach the coastal spot and return, the customs collector prodded hopefully: And. . .?

And the Indian had done the disposition, rapidly buried the corpse in hope that the spirit had not yet ~~gone~~<sup>got</sup> out of it. But had thought first to clip proof for his report. He handed the customs collector a forelock of straw-colored hair.

That the weather since Christmas had been violent against vessels trying to cross the bar into the Columbia River was all too well known to the customs collector. Merrithew, Mindoro, Vandalia, Bordeaux--two barks and two brigs, they all had gone to grief along this rageful coast in these weeks.

Taking up his pen, the collector wrote the native his paper of reward: The bearer of this, Wha-laltl Asabuy, has assisted the duties of the Astoria District of Customs Collection by his report of. . .

He then turned to his daybook and began the official epitaph of Braaf: A body, supposed from one or another of the vessels wrecked north of Cape Disappointment during this fearful winter, has come ashore near the Makah village of Hosett.--It is that of an unknown young seaman, light hair, round faced. . .

By the end of the day, rain still blinded the coast.

Karlsson took out the Aleut calendar from the mapcase where he was keeping it now. Moved the peg rightward one hole. A moment, contemplated the little board.

. . . Might as well know as not. Pass time by counting time, that's one way. . .

It came out a few weeks worse even than Karlsson had thought. Since they had left New Archangel, sixty-four days.

Russian Christmas more than two months into the past. In the woods edging Sitka Sound, now buds of blueberry would be beginning to swell.

Karlsson looked across to Wennberg; decided the arithmetic of their situation would not be welcome news in that quarter; and put the calendar back into the mapcase.

"Småland," said Wennberg, startling <sup>him.</sup> ~~Karlsson.~~

Karlsson waited to see what venture this was.

"Småland. What sort of place's that? What I mean, what'd you do there?"

Karlsson eyed the burly man. There had been a palisade of silence between them, the only loopholes Wennberg's curses against the weather and Karlsson's setting of chores. All other conversation the storm's--low grumble of surf, whickers of wind, drone of rain on



the shelter cloth. Into the night now, Wennberg evidently was at desperation's edge for something other to hear than weather.

. . .Come off your tall horse, have you? . . .

"Farmed. My family did." Melander's description of farming arrived to mind. "Tickled rocks with a plow, more like."

"If stone were hardbread Sweden'd be heaven's bakery," Wennberg quoted.

"Yes. And the family of us, living at each other's elbows. Left the farmstead when I was thirteen, me."

Karlsson reached a stick, tidied coals in from the edge of the fire. These days and weeks of his mind always leaning ahead, aimed where the canoe was aimed, it had been a time since he thought back. But memory, always there in its bone house. What can it be for, remembering? To keep us from falling into the same ditch every day, certainly. But more, too. Memory we hold up and gaze into as proof of ourselves. Like thumbprint on a window, remembering is mindprint: this I made, ~~this~~, no one else has quite ~~this~~ <sup>the</sup> pattern, whorl here and sliver of scar there, they are me. Karlsson was in Smaland now, hills of pine forest, cottages roofed with sod and bark--and yes, stone in the fields and rye short as your ankles and a Karlsson tipped from the land to find what livelihood he could. . .

"On a forge by thirteen, I was," Wennberg was saying. "Apprenticed, so I had to hammer out plowshares. Thought my arms'd break off. Bad as this bedamned paddling."

Wennberg when young--he was the fifth son, the last and stubborn

and brawlsome and least schoolable one, of an inspector of mines in the Nordmark iron district--Wennberg when young already was a figure which might have been knocked together in one of the red-glowing forges of Värmland. Who can say how it is in such instances, whether the person simply has chanced into the body which best fits him or whether the body has grasped command of that mind: but Wennberg as boy looked just what he was, a blacksmith waiting to happen. A beam for shoulders, arms plump with strength. A neck wide as his head very nearly as thick, too, in all senses.

"At least there's an end to this paddling."

"Maybe. Could be wrong kind, though. Melander's had his end, and Braaf his."

"And chewing over their deaths doesn't undo them. Wennberg, each day we pull ourselves nearer to Astoria."

"Or to drowning or to ~~Kolosh~~ <sup>Koloshes</sup> or to Christ knows just whatever. I ought've taken my death and been done with it, the day somebody spoke 'Merica to me."

Of that continent which had begun to pull Swedes as the moon draws the tides, the young blacksmith knew only the glittering pun its word made against the Swedish tongue. America, 'Merica: mer rika, more rich. That there somehow was a Russian 'Merica besides the one that the Swedish farm families were flocking to mystified Wennberg only briefly. He imagined the 'Mericas must be side by side there the other ~~side~~ <sup>end</sup> of the ocean, that the ship made a turn like going down one road fork instead of the other. Then word arrived to the

Nordmark region, in the person of a merchant over from Karlstad, that the Russians were recruiting blacksmiths to work iron in their America. Wennberg's father, heartily weary of a son with temper enough in him to burn down Hell, managed to see to it that Wennberg was one across the Gulf of Bothnia of the three smiths chosen, and that Wennberg went off south with the meet the Russian ship at Sveaborg. others to ~~board ship at Stockholm.~~ They were joining the voyage of a naval man of Finnish-Swedish lineage an of the Tsar Arvid Adolf Etholen, ~~a Swede serving as a Russian naval officer~~ and now to become the new governor of Russian America. Wennberg never worked clear how it was that Etholen could be simultaneously Swede and Russian and captain and governor, but then Wennberg had ahead of him years of finding out that double-dabble of such sort was not rare where the Russians were concerned. A Russian system, at least as he found it practiced in Alaska, did not need make any too much sense, it simply needed be followed relentlessly and the effort pounded into eventually it would force result of some sort out the far end.

"You can't close your ears always," Karlsson said.

"Maybe not," concurred Wennberg. "The trouble is to know when the devil's doing the talking."

Finns predominated in the number that voyaged for Russian America during the term of Etholen; weavers, masons, tanners and tailors, sailmakers, carpenters. But for ironwork, a Wennberg was wanted the forge must have been the cradle of these Värmland Swedes. So Wennberg was shipboard with new governor Etholen's entourage those nine months from the Baltic to New Archangel Alaska in 1839-40. Etholen with his divided prim little mustache and those hooded eyes which seemed to see all

over the ship at once; he was said to know more of Alaska than any of the Tsar's men since Baranov. And Etholen's big-nosed young wife, pious as Deuteronomy ~~said~~ <sup>recited</sup> backwards; and Pastor Cygnaeus, and the governor's servants, and the naval officers; oh, it was high carriage and red wheels too, for a blacksmith to be journeying in company with such as these.

"Tell me truth, Karlsson," Wennberg blurted now. "How many more days d'you think it can be? To Astoria?"

Karlsson, carefully: "There's no count to what you can't see, Wennberg. I'd give much to put a finger a place on Braaf's counting-board and say, 'Here. Astoria day, this one.' But we can't know that. We can just know tomorrow will carry us closer to it."

Wennberg shook his head. "I've played cards against men like you, Karlsson. They count too much on the next flip from the deck."

"While your style won you the world?"

Wennberg's embarkation to Russian America carried him to a fresh corner of the ~~world~~ <sup>planet</sup>, a familiar livelihood and religion, and a doom. At first, curiosity was all there was to it, a way to ease hours-- watching the card players. Then he edged into the gaming, merely an evening now and again, which in a feet-first ~~man~~ <sup>fellow</sup> such as Wennberg truly shows how guardful he was being. Some money vanished from him in the first years, but not all so much, no amount to keep a man awake nights. Besides, Pastor Cygnaeus was one to inveigh against waywardness, the devil's trinity of drink and cards and the flesh; and as it is with those who have some of the bully in them, Wennberg by close-herding

could be bullied in the general direction of moderation. But came the spring of 1845, Pastor Cygnaeus departed New Archangel, sailed back for Europe with Etholen at his end of term as governor. Wennberg yet had two years of indenture, and during them his gaming, and all else, changed.

"Back there at the tide trough."

Karlsson waited, impassive.

"If I'd been to the right of you and Braaf to the left, I'd've gone into that millrace instead of him."

. . .If that'd been, my ears would get rest this night. . .

Aloud: "If the moon were window we could see up angels' nighties, too. Lay it away, Wennberg." Less than anything did Karlsson want to discuss the perishing of Braaf. "Tomorrow paddles will still fit our hands, and the canoe will still fit into the ocean. Live by that."

Wennberg moved his head from side to side. "You can wash your mind of such matters, Karlsson. I can't. Death this side of me and then that, I need think on it. See through to why I was let live."

"Maybe God's aim is bad."

"No, got to be more to it than that." Wennberg would not be swerved. "Maybe like sheep and goats. 'And He shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left--' No, Braaf was to the right--"

"Wennberg. Stow that."

Wennberg peered earnestly through the firelight to Karlsson.

"You know what the pastors'd say, about all this."

. . . No, and I damn well don't give a . . .

"They'd say I'm being put to test. All this, bedamned coast, you other three, Koloshes--" Just now a thought could be seen to surprise Wennberg: "Maybe even you, too, Karlsson! Being put to test!"

Proclamation of his eligibility did not noticeably enthuse Karlsson. "Wennberg, I know at least this. We're not playing whist with God along this coast. Either we paddle to the place Astoria or die in the try. One or other. Just that."

Wennberg shook his head. Not, as it turned out, against Karlsson; the pastors. "But they don't know a thumb's worth about it either. Found that out, I did, when it happened with--with her."

Karlsson looked the question to Wennberg.

"Katya," the blacksmith said.

"Katya?" Karlsson echoed.

"My wife." Wennberg wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, as if clearing away for the next words. "Think you're the only one ever looked at a woman, do you? You've fiddled your time, north there. You know what the creole women can be, the young ones. Black diamonds, the Russians call them. Katya was one, right enough-- But why'd she die?" Wennberg's look was beseeching, as if Karlsson might be withholding the answer. "If she hadn't, I'd not be in all this. God's will, the pastor said. God's swill, right enough, I told him back. What kind of thing is that to do, kill a man's wife with whooping cough? Didn't even seem ill at first, Katya. Just a cough. And then--'O satisfy us early with Thy mercy,' that clodhopper of a

Finn preaching when we buried her on the hill. Mercy? Late for mercy on Katya. And me. How's I to go through life with her grave up there on the hill from me all the while? If I could've bought my way out of that Russian shitpile, back to Sweden. If the gambling'd worked--"

Evenings, that spring of 1845, a particular plump Russian clerk sat into the barracks card games. Three times out of five now, when this clerk departed the table he took with him just a bit more of Wennberg's money than Wennberg ought to have let himself lose. Nor was Pastor Cygnaeus's successor any help as a vigilant; he too suffered from that same soul-sweat, New Archangel ague, the fever of cards at night and clammy remorse by day. Before Wennberg quite knew any of it, then, the fetters of debt, and of more years in Russian 'Merica were on him, and Wennberg had turned with fury against a God who let such chaining happen and a God's man who stood by mumbling while it did. Against, it might be said, life.

"--but no, oh no, and God's little Finnlander telling me, 'Steady yourself, Wennberg, keep from the cards,' and himself squatting at the table with the Russians half the night. Man of God. God doesn't have men, he has demons of some kind <sup>to</sup> ~~which~~ strangle women with the whooping cough and blast the back of the head off Melander and drown Braaf like a blind pup."

Wind flapped the shelter-cloth behind Karlsson's head, rain still was pelting. He and Wennberg in shared life those hundreds of days at New Archangel, now these dozens in the narrow canoe and beside the campfires, they had wrangled and come to blows, might ~~do so again,~~ <sup>yet come to worse,</sup> how was it you could ~~know~~ <sup>be wearily familiar with,</sup> every inch of a man and know not much of

him at all? Unexpected as winter thunder, something like this, and as hard to answer.

"Wennberg, I--"

"What you said, just then." Wennberg was looking harshly across at Karlsson. "That about the cards. More than style is in it. Luck. Luck I haven't had since Värmland, except the Goddamn black sort that ended me up with you."

It had quickened past them, the moment. They were plowshare and rock again. Karlsson heard himself saying as stone will answer iron--

". . .you've had some in plenty, recent days."

"What, dragging along this boil-and-goiter coast? You call that luck?"

"The two of us who are dead, neither of them is you. There's your luck, Wennberg. Now shut your gab and get some sleep."





At morning, sky and shore showed hard use by the storm. Both were smudged, vague. The rain had dwindled and the wind ceased, but no more than a quarter-mile in each direction from Wennberg and Karlsson and the canoe, fog grayed out the beach.

. . .Fog ought mean the wind is gone, we won't swamp. But this cloud on our necks, we won't see along the coast, either. Stays sand beach, that won't matter. Rocks, though. Rocks'd matter. Can't mend it before it happens. Rocks we'll face when they face us. . .

"Whyn't we go it afoot, here on?"

Say for Wennberg that in his tumbril way, he had come this far past Braaf's death, past the rock-spiked coast, past the end of regular food, before balking. Not that Karlsson could see any of the credit of that, just now. What he turned to face was an unsailorly man who did not want to set forth in a canoe into fog.

This new corner of reluctance on Wennberg took all of the early morning to be worked off. Karlsson's constant answer was question back: what when they hiked themselves to a river, or another sound, or headland cliff? Swim, Wennberg? Take a running jump at it? Fly?

"But Goddamn, out into that cloud--beach here like a street, maybe there won't be water in the way--"

"Wennberg. Ever since New Archangel, there has been. Wish won't change that. There'll be water."

When at last the jitter wore out of Wennberg, he looked spent. So much so that Karlsson came wary that the man's next notion would

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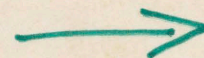
246A

be not to move at all. As wan as a man of his buik could be, Wennberg this day. Plainly, the clam ration and the dreariness of hunkering in from the storm had exacted much from him.

Wennberg cast Karlsson up a look, though, and fanned enough exasperation in himself to blurt:

"Karlsson, one more time I hear 'need to' out of you and--"

"You'll be that much closer to the place Astoria each time you hear it. Off your bottom now. This's as close a tide as we'll likely get."



By the time they pushed the canoe the distance across the sand to the tideline, both were panting and stumbling. Wennberg hesitated, looked back at the beach. Then surf surged in, swirled up his shins. Wennberg shoved the canoe ahead, half-clambered half-fell into the bow.

The most wobbly launch of the entire journey, this one, the canoe nearly broaching into a wave before Karlsson managed to steer it steady.

Straight out to ocean they paddled, until Wennberg stopped stroking and turned to demand: "Where to Hell're you taking us? Shore's almost out of sight."

"We need to stay out from those surf waves, or your belly will be visiting your mouth again. I'll head us by compass the way the coast ~~is~~<sup>has</sup> been pointing."

Wennberg could be seen to be choosing. Seasickness, or swallow Karlsson's notion of voyaging all-but-blind.

He said something Karlsson couldn't catch. And dipped his paddle.

Fog, gray dew on the air. During a rest pause Karlsson touched a hand to his face and found that his beard was wet as if washed.

Fog, the breath of--what, ocean, sky, the forest? Or some mingling of all as when breath smoked out of everyone at New Archangel the morning after the December snow?

Fog, and more of it as the canoemen labored southeast. Through this damp sea-smoke the shore was a dimmest margin of forest, now glimpsed, now gone.

This day, different eyes had been set in the heads of Karlsson and Wennberg. Nothing they saw except the beak of the canoe had sharpness, definite edge to it. This must have been what it would be like to drift across the sky amid mare's tail clouds.

. . .Got to be near, Astoria. All the miles we've come. Can't have gone past. River mouth would tell us, Melander said it's a river of the world, big as Sitka Sound. Can't have missed that. . .

In the slim space of the canoe the two of them now were the pared outlines of their New Archangel selves. The canoe, though, seemed to have grown; looked lengthened, disburdened, with a pair of men astride it rather than four.

As best they could, Karlsson and Wennberg settled to terms with the shadowless, unedged day. Their paddling was slow, with frequent need to rest. In what might have been the vicinity of noon they ate cold clams from the potfull Karlsson had cooked the night before. Then

Two-thirds of the total vanished into them, and each man could have immediately begun the meal over. But Wennberg said nothing to Karlsson's policy that they needed to save the remainder for mid-afternoon.

The close fog. Somewhere in it over there, the sand haunch of coast they were trying to trace along.

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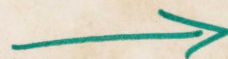
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Paddle swash and silence, silence and paddle swash. Untended, a mind let them take it over. Karlsson shook his head sharply.

Cold clams again, sips of water. Then two pairs of callused hands, resuming paddles.

End and beginning, land and water, endurance and task; the Pacific's fusions seemed to distill up endlessly, <sup>persist</sup> ~~come~~ into the mind as if the fog was the elixir of all such matters. Into a belowstairs corner of this ocean--



the year, 1770--another of Cook's vessels nosed. The inlet was about to be dubbed Botany Bay and the ~~arrival~~<sup>moment</sup> was history-turning, arrival of white exploration to an unknown coast of Australia. A hundred five feet long and thunderheads of canvas over her, Cook's Endeavour swept into Botany Bay, while the black people on the shore and in the bay registered--nothing. Past fishermen in dugout canoes the great ship hovered, and the fishermen did not even toss a second glance. A woman ashore looked to the Endeavour, expressed neither surprise nor concern, and squatted to light her meal fire. Too strange for comprehension, Cook's spectral ship to the aborigines; in the dreaming, they accepted it to be an apparition, a waft of the mind. Just so, here on their own gable-end of the Pacific, was the fog taking Karlsson and Wennberg into a dreaming of their own. Through the hours it shifted, and diluted, then came potent again: the vast hover of coastline north behind them, Alaska to Kaigani to Vancouver to wherever this was, the join of timber to ocean, islands beneath peaks, Tsarmen beside seven-year men, Koloshes beside whales; it curled and sought, then to now: Melander's vision of how they would run on the sea, and Braaf's single stride wrong on this ~~inexorable~~<sup>inexorable</sup> ~~forgiveless~~ shore, and Karlsson day by day finding dimension he never knew of, and Wennberg in over his head as he always would be in life; it gathered, touched its way here in the mind of one paddling man and there in the mind of the other: all a dreaming, and not.

Somehow the two canoemen stretched what was left of their strength, did not give way until the day at last did. Dusk and fog together now,

shore as well as canoe clasped into their cloud.

Watching how sluggish Wennberg had become, Karlsson was not ~~sure~~ <sup>certain</sup> he was any better himself. Thirty more, he vaguely heard himself decide. Aloud, to Wennberg? He wasn't sure.

Those thirty strokes numbly done, Karlsson turned the craft toward where the compass said shore ought to be.

"How to Hell far out'd you take us?"

"Ought be almost in now."

"Where's shore, then?"

"Just ahead."

"Maybe that compass's gone wrong, maybe you've steered us to sea--"

"We're with the tide, Wennberg. Can't be taking us anywhere but in."

"This Goddamn fog."

"Wennberg, listen."

"So? You think you can say anything that'll bring shore, fetch it out--"

"Not to me, Goddamn it. Listen for rocks."

"Rocks? What, you--?"

Karlsson and Wennberg both had stopped paddling, the canoe being carried by the tide, the slosh of surf now near in the fog. Both listening, listening until it seemed each ear must narrow as a squinting eye would.

But the slosh around them stayed steady, no underdrum of tidal rock anywhere behind it, and the canoe continued to be carried in.

The sightlessness seemed to extend time, the ride through slosh went on and on. Still no beach, no dark bank of forest.

They were onto shore before they ever saw it. The canoe simply stopped, as if reined up short.

Karlsson and Wennberg lurched out of the canoe and sank ankle-deep into tideflat. "Muck," said Wennberg as if it was exactly what he had expected. And then they pushed, the canoe asking shove and shove.

Amid one, Wennberg slipped. He fell from view, splatted somewhere below the wooden wall of the canoe.

Karlsson labored around the craft.

Wennberg was elbowing himself from the mire, like a person trying to rise out of a deep soft bed. Karlsson got him up. Mud coated Wennberg's legs and his left side to the shoulder.

They went back to shoving. Finally the canoe was beyond water and mud. Only then could the leaden men beside it see the forest, a tangle at the edge of the fog and near-dark.

Something of the landfall nudged at Karlsson. But couldn't surface through his weariness. It was as much as he could manage to grasp that the fog had not fed Wennberg and him to the coast's rocks, that they had fumbled the sailcloth shelter and blankets out, that Wennberg already had sagged off under them, that he now was being let to sink from the day.

# —————

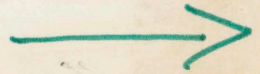
P. 251A  
follows →



It shot clear to Karlsson as he woke in the morning.

. . .Wrong side. Sweet sweat of Christ, water's to the wrong side of us, how. . .

Water east rather than water west, and water that was not ocean, but a broadsheet of bay, miles of it.



Through the hills across the bay a silvery haze hung, but Karlsson could make out that those hills and the shore forest all around were like the Alaska coastline pressed down and spread: rumpled and green but low.

Karlsson clambered across the beach toward the treeline for higher view, turned, scanned fervently. Beyond the canoe, across the broad brown tideflat, into all the blue of water, his search: and nowhere in it, any steady move of current which would mark a great river flowing out.

. . . Drifted us in, blind as kittens. But in to where? . . .

# ——— Its scatter of water across greatly more geography than it had depth for gave name to the bay: Shoalwater. A startling washout in the southern Washington coast, Shoalwater Bay pooled across nearly ten miles at its widest and managed to stretch itself southward another twenty-five. A kind of evergreen fen country, Shoalwater, taking some eons to decide whether to remain tideflat and marsh or to danken into forested swamp. Tide, current, channel, seep, all were steadily at work on the decision, sometimes almost within splash of each other. Shoalwater's <sup>modest</sup> rivers, though, along the eastern bayside, seemed ambivalent. During the sleep of Karlsson and Wennberg, those streams had been flowing into themselves, turned backwards by the Pacific-sent tide advancing between their banks; for some hundreds of yards at each mouth, the Willapa, the Querquelin, the Palux, the Naselle were slowly creeping

p. 252A follows →

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back toward their origins, like bolts of drab cloth surreptitiously trying to roll themselves up.

Karlsson's eyes ~~had been~~ <sup>were</sup> correct. Shoalwater Bay was not the mouth of the great river of the west of America, Astoria's river. No, it still was beyond the southern squishy extent of Shoalwater that the Columbia shoved forth into the Pacific. Four miles beyond.

# —

Something in Wennberg had slowed. Karlsson's rouse of him took minutes and when at last he was upright, he looked pale and bleary. Caked mud from last night's tumble covered his britches like scales.

Wennberg shivered and sat with slow heaviness onto the gunwale of the canoe. "Caught a chill, must've."

"Here." Karlsson teetered a bit himself as he shawled a blanket over the blacksmith's shoulders. He noticed there even was a clot of mud in the man's sidewhiskers. "Wennberg, get awake. We need to make a fire and try this tideflat for clams."

Wennberg sat staring along the <sup>rippled</sup> mud and tidewater. "Where to Hell are we?"

"In a bay, looks like."

Wennberg hugged the blanket more snug around him. "Are we there?"

"In a bay, yes. Get up now, we'll fetch firewood."

"Astoria. Are we at Astoria?"

"Not yet. Get up."

P. 252B follows →

252B

Wennberg still was staring out along the tideline. "Karlsson," he intoned. "Karlsson, what're those?"

Karlsson turned for a look.

"Is it? Got to be--" Wennberg was haggard, hung between hope and alarm. "Karlsson, is it?"

Karlsson still studied into the bay. He and Wennberg had slogged a few hundred yards north for a closer gaze. "I--don't think so."

"Got to be! What the Hell are those, if there aren't whites here to put them up? Karlsson, this's got to be the Columbia mouth, people here--"

Karlsson tried to make his mind work past Wennberg's insistences, figure what the thin shapes rising from the water could signify. Four wards of them, like long, peeled willows implanted out in the tidewater, their small bare branches forking to the sky. Standing like four corners of a plot of--water? Tidal muck? Wennberg had the point that they'd never seen anything of the sort done by Koloshes. But if whites had, why? and where was sign of anyone, except these skinny cornerposts of nothing?

. . . Still no river current. Can't be the Columbia, this. We need go on. But why four sticks, middle of nowhere. . .

All the desperation in Wennberg seemed to be coming out at once. He swayed around wildly scanning the bay. "Whites've got to've done those marking off some Goddamn thing or other. Around here somewhere--"

. . . Wennberg, easy with this. There's no. . . Karlsson realized he was not saying aloud, began to: "Wennberg. . ."

"Karlsson! Give a look!"

. . .Oh Christ, he's moonstruck about this, how'll I. . .

"No, there!" Wennberg was pointing <sup>farther</sup> north along the low shore.

"There, there!"

The cabin sat in the <sup>mid-</sup>distance, on the far side <sup>of</sup> where the tideflat made a thrust into the beach.

Not since New Archangel had they set eye on such a dwelling, a spell of ~~houselessness~~ <sup>houselessness</sup> which asked some moments of blink to cure itself, to allow in the news of peaked green roof, weathered gray walls, hearth, warmth--

"Those markers out there!" Wennberg, all over himself with excitement. "Told you there had to be whites here! Fishermen of planted those sticks! some sort, must be, Christ-of-mercy, let's get ourselves across there!"

Into the muck the pair of men plunged.

Impetus of all the voyage moved their legs now. The distance down the precipice of coast since New Archangel, the pieces of ocean like an endless series of waterfalls, the cold burn of <sup>North Pacific</sup> ~~the~~ wind and current, all now pushed these two grimy men like pebbles in a torrent.

Wherever he had breath Wennberg hallooed, his calls hoarse and lonely in the stillness.

The prospect ahead lensed everything around Karlsson. The cabin yet held back within the dim tones of mudflat and seagrass around it, but spatters of muck flying up from his boots, the motions of his own arms and hands as he lunged forward and forward, the mud man who was Wennberg

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253A

beside him; Karlsson was aware of the crystal memory of each as they arrived into him.

Twice more Wennberg hallooed. "Got to be someone about, got to," he insisted.

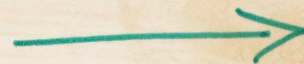
They labored two-thirds of the distance to the cabin before Karlsson could make himself bring out what was wisping in his mind.

"Doesn't look right."

"We don't give a fly's shit how it looks," Wennberg panted.

"Just so it's roof and walls."

"Wennberg. Wennberg, it's not."



"Not? Skin your Goddamn eyes, Karlsson, it's right there, it's—"

But a further twenty yards dissolved the cabin ~~profile~~ <sup>details</sup> entirely.

All the Wennbergs and Karlssons of the world could have put wish to it at once and still the ~~shape~~ <sup>profile</sup> would have been only what it was emerging as ~~the~~ <sup>curve</sup> green roof roughening into growth of bush ~~the~~ weather-silvered ~~side~~ of wood, high as the men, dropping pretence of gray cabin wall. ~~A~~ <sup>#</sup> huge butt of cedar driftlog, nursery of salal atop it. Mammoth chip from this coast of wood, undercut by some patient stream or other and carried in here, years since, by the tide.

Karlsson swallowed, felt an ache sharpen ~~behind~~ <sup>itself</sup> his eyes.

Wennberg stood and shook his head like an ox discouraging flies.

"Why couldn't it've been--"

The way one plods the distances of a dream, both of them slogged on to the huge log. Wennberg slumped against it, sagged until he sat with his back to the silvered wood. His knees came up and his head went down to them.

Karlsson leaned against the inland edge of the log, propped his weariness there. A rust was spreading in him. Judgment, movement, both now seemed so tedious that he had to force his mind to them.

. . . Done it all this far. Done the work of the world. Can't end here. Oughtn't. Need to see how. . .

Karlsson made his feet turn until he was ~~looking~~ <sup>viewing</sup> north along the bay edge.

. . . Bay and bay and more ~~More~~ of it. Got to be a mouth there somewhere. Over those dunes. Find it, figure. . .

"Wennberg. Wennberg, we need go for a look. Just over there. Find how to get the canoe out of here."

"No use to it." The blacksmith's tone was muffled, head still to his knees. "No use," he droned. "Just more muck."

"The bay mouth. Need to see what it's like."

"No."

"It's our only way out of here."

Wennberg did not answer.

"You'll stay here to the log, then." Karlsson tried to focus instruction. "Just where you are."

. . . ~~If~~ he goes off into the mire and tide catches him, there'll be his end. Ironhead he is, but not that. Doesn't deserve that. . .

"Wennberg! Wennberg, hear me! You'll stay to the log. Aye?"

"Stay--" agreed the muffled voice.

Karlsson aimed inland, off the mud of the tideflat. When he reached sand and made his turn north, now he was wallowing through dune grass high as his waist.

. . . Maps, we'd know. Could see to the place Astoria, on them. But we'd still be in here. . .

He pushed the grass aside as he trudged, until he felt its sharpnesses biting at his hands. To stop the stabs he brought his hands up and in, put his elbows out, woodsman's habit against brush.

. . . Step it off. Like pacing where the tree'll fall. . .

The whetted grass was on all sides of him now, color of a faded ryefield, lines of these sown dunes rolling parallel with the bay.



. . .Guts are out of Wennberg. Someway get him on his feet, get us out. . .

Whiteness stroked up into the sky, in a slow strong swim passed before Karlsson. Two yellow eyes estimated him harshly. <sup>A</sup> The snowy owl flapped far into the dunes before perching again.

Karlsson tramped <sup>on</sup> north until it came through to him that the footing was wavering, creeping in front of him. A slow crawl like tan snakes: sand blowing in ropey slinking patterns. He was out of the dune grass, <sup>water</sup> lay a meadow's width in front of him.

Now at water edge. Beautiful blue.

Peering out into the bay entrance which the fog had poured them through.

Squinted to be sure <sup>of</sup> what he was seeing.

Instead of surf stacking against the shore three and four and five deep as had been happening all along this coast, here the waves flowed and flowed, breaking into the bay as if in stampede. They flashed, right, left and before, across the entire neck of entrance. A mile-<sup>breadth</sup> of whitecaps.

Karlsson <sup>stared</sup> looked long at the breakers, willing against what he knew to be the truth written white in them. Even could he persuade Wennberg back to the canoe and they someway summoned muscle to launch into the mud bay, against such flow as this the two of them were too weary to paddle through to ocean. Never in this lifetime. Whatever candle-end of it was left to them.

# —

. . .Melander. Then Braaf. Oughtn't happened, either time.  
They were keeping in life, bending themselves to our voyage. So why. . .

The dune grass was attacking the backs of Karlsson's hands again.

. . .Hada't been for the last storm and the fog we'd maybe done  
it. Be at Astoria now, <sup>wherever</sup> ~~whatever~~ place it is. Wherever. . .

Whatever figure it took in his mind at any moment, one constant  
mood was <sup>within</sup> ~~in~~ Karlsson now. Anger at <sup>how</sup> ~~the way~~ it was all turning out.

The way their lives had been, these vast weeks of dare since New Archangel; and tall clever Melander gone, and deft skylark Braaf; and Wennberg, even Wennberg had earned survival, broken that Kolosh canoe and provided more than his share of paddle strokes, paid out what endurance he had. Not right, that it all dwindled to this. This terrible day. Karlsson despised the injustice of it. Whetted his resentment on its minutes. Aimed his aggrievedness to the sand defying his feet.

After long, the surface under him changed. Slogging on the tidal mud again now. The gray log with its wig of green was ahead.

Wennberg was against the log as he had left him. <sup>H</sup> Karlsson reached down, gripped a wide shoulder. Wennberg was shivering again and when he lifted his head, his eyes were indifferent.

Karlsson sought anything to say. Everything now seemed too major for words.

Wennberg mumbled something, and lapsed off again.

. . .Finish me, Wennberg made me the promise once. At least we've jumped that. No need, coast'll do it for him. . .

The cost of air is mortality. That principle Karlsson now knew in every inch of himself.

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. . .Not yet though. Not just damn yet. Takes God and his brother to kill a Smalander. . .

Karlsson put his back against the high driftlog, could feel the cedar grain beneath his fingers. Against every urge of the fatigue all through him, did not let himself sit but stayed propped there, looking across the tideflat to the shore forest. To the <sup>blue</sup> spread of bay. To the four marking sticks, tall and thin, and stark, striking their reflections crooked across the tidewater. To a lone dark stretched form between the mud and the timber which, his mind slowly managed to register, was the canoe.

# —



chapter break

The dark-bearded man carried a lamp to the table, trimmed the wick, lent flame to it from a kindling splinter lit at the fireplace; established the lamp at the farthest side from the draft seeping in under the cabin door, then sat to the pool of yellow light.

Across the next minute or so he fussed at the materials which awaited on the table. Unusual, but he was a trifle uneasy with himself. It being Sunday night, he was going to need to trim scruple next. Keeping the Sabbath ought be like a second backbone in any New England man, even one away here as far west from Vermont as you could venture and not fall off America. But in the morning Winant's schooner Mary Taylor would sail from the bay and packet the mail out with it, possibly three weeks, a month, intervening before the next postal opportunity. Too, there was the consideration that Waterman paid coin for worthwhile report, and the clink of specie was rare sound at this back corner of frontier. . .

He slid the paper to him, dipped the goosefeather pen to the ink, and began.

Shoalwater Bay March 20<sup>th</sup> 1853 #

Mr. John Orvis Waterman

Editor, Oregon Weekly Times

D<sup>r</sup> Sir--On Monday last, as I was riding with my son Jared to examine our at a tideflat oyster bed ~~at the~~ north of our land claim, our attention was taken

by a column of smoke. Knowing that no settler dwelt in that vicinity, we thought to investigate, a vessel perhaps having run aground near the bay mouth there.

Much was our astonishment to find, beside a big tidal log, two men, much emaciated and looking the perfect pictures of misery and hardship. One of the poor fellows could only utter again and again 'merica, 'merica, so fixed was his mind on their arrival to this portion of America. The other man, a slender sort worn thin to the extreme by their ordeal, we could speak with, but could not make ourselves understood. Astoria was his oftenest word, and by trying our utmost, we at last conveyed to him that that locality lay just beyond the southern reach of the bay, on the opposite bank of the Columbia river.

We cooked a rough stew of some venison jerky we had with us, the pair eating as though they never could be sated. We then contrived to lift them onto our horses and after taking them

to our house, summoned some of the other settlers from around. Among us since the grounding of the Willimantic in Gray's Harbor has been a Dane, dwelling at Chinook, who was steward of that vessel, and through his endeavors we succeeded in conversing with the hard-used pair. Their history is as follows:

In 1850 they engaged to work for the Russian Fur Company seven years, and accordingly embarked, in company with 18 others, for the northwestern coast, bound for New Archangel. After a residence of nearly two years, they found they could not bear the ill-usage which they were receiving, and determined to make their escape. They were four, who determined on that leave-taking. At a place beyond Vancouver

Island, one of their number was slain by the Indians. A second unfortunate was drowned in the descent of the coast between the Strait of Fuca and here.

When found, the two who have survived had been in this bay for a span of time they did not know. They mistook the large drift stump for a cabin and were very nearly done up by their exertions to reach it. The more slight of the pair, and thus better fitted to tread his way atop the tideflat, returned to their canoe--a craft about twenty feet in length by three in width, sprightly built; and with this they have made a winter voyage of over 1,000 miles on one of the worst parts of the coast!--and from there fetched a cylinder of maps enwrapped in waterproofing. With these large sheets, and flint and steel, and branches and driftwood got from around, he was able to construct atop the log the smudge fire which signaled us to their aid.

They are well cared for by the citizens here, and at present are comfortably situated at Chinook, whence they will be taken across the river to Astoria when their strength is sufficient.

Their names are Nils Karlsson and Anders Wennberg, and they are of Sweden.

Yours &c

Jonathan E. Cotter

###

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the words of an admired friend, the novelist Mildred Walker, my sea runners "have lived only in the world of this book." But their life in these pages does draw breath from actuality. According to a contemporary letter-to-the-editor in the Oregon Weekly Times, during the winter of 1852-53, oystermen at Shoalwater Bay (modernly renamed Willapa Bay) north of the mouth of the Columbia River came upon three men, "the perfect pictures of misery and despair," who had achieved a canoe voyage down the Northwest coast from indenturement at New Archangel. Their names were reported as Karl Gronland, Andreas Lyndfast, and Karl Wasterholm; a fourth man, whose name was not reported, was killed by Indians along the way. Their great and terrible journey is not known in detail. I would hope that Melander, Karlsson, Wennberg and Braaf are in the spirit of those actual voyagers.

Naval Captain of Second Rank Nikolai Yakovlevich Rosenberg and the Lutheran pastor, and Wha-laltl Asabuy and the Astoria collector of customs, did exist but their conversations herein are imaginary.

To cut down on complication, I've employed present-day usages in the following instances: Alaska as synonymous with Russian America; Baranof as the name of the island which in 1853 was still called Sitka Island; and governor for the personage whose title in Russian is more accurately "chief manager."

The term "pood" is a Russian unit of weight equivalent to 36.11 pounds.

Arisankhana Island is a composite of the Northwest coastal islands from whose names I made it up.

Acknowledgments I/A follows →

## acknowledgments/1A

Of the many <sup>persons</sup> who helped me achieve this novel, none were more forebearing and generous than the crew of <sup>the</sup> University of Alaska's oceanographic ~~research~~ ship, R/V Alpha Helix: Captain Roy Robeck, Mate Mike Demchenko, Carol Baker, Walter Betz, Jerry King, Mike Miller, Ed Mooney, Mary Saindon and Mike Stirts. And for arranging my passage downcoast aboard the Alpha Helix, my deepest thanks to Vera Alexander,





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Seattle-Juneau-Sitka-Dungeness, 1980-1982

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