"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 calendar of Braaf's, found it in the bottom of the canoe." Wennberg picked up a branch to add to the fire. "He won't need it in eternity, him."

Karlsson reached, plucked the branch from Wennberg, with it flipped the hand-sized rectangle of wood from the fire. Its edges were charred slightly at the edges and the day-peg partially burned away, but could be salvaged. "What's that for, then?" demanded Wennberg. "Every day along here is every other day, it helps nothing to keep adding up them up."

"Maybe not. But this ought be kept." Karlsson moved the peg the two days since Braaf had gone into the tide trough, then shaved the char off the calendar with his dagger. He 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 his goods and looked long at Wennberg. Finally Karlsson said:

"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 get both those into mind."

"Karlsson, I'll never savvy you--" Wennberg's eyes slid from their lock with Karlsson's. The dagger blade had come up from the charred wood. It paused, then 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 days.

The beaches were steadily sand, and ample, 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 throngs to the north. The dolloped rock islands quit off too, except the one early on Karlsson and Wennberg's second day of this new coastscapes, a long bench out 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 Swede arked in a Tlingit canoe.
The beach at the end of their fourth day 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.

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 the 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 higher. Two headlands,
plateaus of forest, spread into the horizon.
Karlsson hadn't an 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 had shown them disappointment; only bay or sound, not vast rivermouth. Wennberg still was in a grump from it.

And here, put as wishful an eye to this pair of cliffs 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, just two more of all such continental ribs he and Wennberg already had seen 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. On the sand expanse where the canoe
stretched at rest and Wennberg was propping the sailcloth shelter,
whatev er there was nothing at all 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, it sounds like," the blacksmith said. And the
next minute, was slumbering again.

Karlsson, though, still was awake when rain began to edge into
the windsound.
By morning, the storm was major. Sails of spray flew in off wind came so strong now the wavecrests, and the hiss of wind around that even its noise seemed to push at 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 dig clams; all that day, downpour.

At New Archangel they had known every manner of rain, but none of it was anything to this. This was as if the sky was trying to step on 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 come downcoast aboard a lumber schooner 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.

Thinking of the week 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 had buried the corpse in hope that the spirit had not yet got 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 that 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 Puget Sound 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 rightwards one hole. A moment, contemplated the little board.

...Might as well know as not. Pass time by counting time,

that's one way. ...

came out

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

He 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.

"Smaland," said Wennberg, startling Karlsson.
The next day again, rain blinded the coast.

"Småland," ventured Wennberg at last.

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 afternoon now, Wennberg evidently was at desperation's edge for something other to hear than storm.

...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: I made this, no one else has quite this pattern, whorl here and sliver of scar there, yes, 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, and the last and most stubborn and brawsome of an inspector of mines in the Nordmark iron district of Värmland—Wennberg when young a

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 chanced has happened into the body which best fit 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 bunched 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 are stride closer to Astoria."
"Or to drowning or to Kolosh or to Christ knows just whatever...

I ought've taken death and been done with it, the day somebody spoke 'Merica
America to me."

Of that continent which had begun to pull Swedes as the moon draws the tides, the young blacksmith had known only the glittering pun the word made against the Swedish tongue. '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 of the ocean, that the ship made road-fork a turn like going down one instead of the other.

Then word arrived to Långbansbyttan, in the person of a Karlstad merchant, 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 of the three smiths chosen, and that Wennberg went off with the others to board ship at Stockholm. They were joining the voyage of 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 Etholin could be both Swede and

Russian and captain and governor, but then Wennberg had ahead of

him years of finding out that double-daddle of such sort was not unusual

where the Russians were concerned. A Russian system, at least as he found it

practiced in Alaska, did not need to make any too much sense, it simply

had to be followed and the effort pounded into it would produce 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 Etholin; weavers, masons, tanners and tailors, sailmakers, carpenters. But for ironwork, a Wennberg was wanted;

must have been these Varmland Swedes. the forge was the cradle of a -Langbenschyttan Swede. So Wennberg with new governor Etholin's entourage was shipboard those nine months from the Baltic to Alaska in 1839-40.

Etholin with his 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 Etholin's big-nosed young wife, pious as Deuteronomy said backwards; and Pastor Cygnarus, and the governor's servants, and the naval officers; and red wheels too, journeying oh, it was a high carriage for a blacksmith, to be in company with such as these.

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

Karlsson, carefully: "There's no count to it, 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, a familiar livelihood and religion, and a doom. At first, curiosity was all there was to it, a way to pass hours—watching the card-players. Then he edged into the gaming, merely an occasional evening, which in a feet-first man such as truly guardful he was being. Wennberg shows how wary he truly was. Some money vanished from him in the first years, but not all so much, no amount to keep a man against awake nights. Besides, Pastor Cygnæus was one to weigh waywardness, and the devil's trinity of drink and cards and the flesh: as it is with those who have some of the bully in them, Wennberg could be bullied into the general direction of moderation. But came the spring of 1815, Pastor Cygnæus 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 these nights...

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.

Karlsson moved his head from side to side. He was a boulder with a beard now. "You can wash your mind of such matters, Karlsson. I can't. Death this side of me and then that, I have to 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. Stay it."
Wennberg peered earnestly through the firelight to Karlsson.

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

"No, and I don't give a . . ."

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

**his proclamation of 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.

"By wife!"
"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 among the Sitka Kolsch, 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 have the answer. "If she hadn't, I'd not be in all this. God's will, the pastor said. God's will, 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 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 which strangler women with the gromp and blast the back of their 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, every inch how was it you could know so much of a man and know not much 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 Varmland, except the black sort that ended..."
It had gone 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 not 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...

"Why'n't we go it afoot, here on?"

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 be not to move at all. Wennberg cast him up a look, though, and fanned enough exasperation in himself to say:

"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 has been pointing."

Wennberg could be seen to be choosing seasickness, or Karlsson's notion of voyaging near-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 in thought, and was surprised that his beard was wet as if washed; maybe the fog was coming into them.

Fog, the breath of—what, ocean, sky, the forest? Or some mingling evaporation of seven feet of snow? I feel like I'm standing on a ship in the fog. What is everyone at New Archangel the morning after the December snow?

Fog, and more of it as they labored southeast. The shore was a thin margin of forest, now glimpsed, now gone. Of Karlsson and Wennberg this day, different eyes had been set in their heads. 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 amid...
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 were the pared outlines of their New Archangel selves. The lengthened, disburdened, canoe, though, seemed to have grown; looked enlarged with two men astride it rather than four.

As best they could, Karlsson and Wennberg came to terms with the shadowless, unended day. Their paddling was slower now, 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 resumed stroking.
endurance and task;
End and beginning, land and water, the Pacific's fusions seemed
to distill up endlessly, come into the mind as if the fog was the
elixir of 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 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 give a second glance. A woman
ashore looked to the Endeavour, expressed neither surprise nor concern,
for comprehension,
and squatted to light her meal fire. Too strange to be comprehended,
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 sifted, and diluted,
then came potent again: the vast hover of coastline behind them, Alaska
to Kaigani to Vancouver to wherever this way, the join of timber to
ocean, islands beneath peaks, Tsarmen beside seven-year men, Koloshes
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 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.

Someday, the two canoe men stretched their strength, did not give way until the day at last. Dusk and fog together now hid all, shore as well as canoe clasped into their cloud.

Watching how sluggish Wennberg had become, Karlsson was not sure he was any better himself. Ten more, he vaguely heard himself decide. *Karlsson: Aloud, to Wennberg? He wasn't sure.*

Those ten strokes were 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. Enormous

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

Karlsson still studied into the bay. "I--don't think so."

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

Karlsson tried to make his mind work past Wennberg's insistences, figure what the thin shapes rising from the water could signify. Four wands of them, like long, peeled willows implanted out in the tidewater north of the canoe. Standing like four corners of a plot of--water?

Wennberg had the point that they'd never seen anything of the sort done by Koloshes. But if whites had, why? and where was any sign of anyone, except those skinny cornerposts of nothing?

"Karlsson! Give a look!"

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

"No, there!" Wennberg was pointing north along the low shore.

"There, there!"
The cabin sat in the distance, on the far side of mudflats where the tideflat made a thrust into the beach.

Not since New Archangel had they set eyes on such a dwelling, a spell of hauslessness 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 some sort, must be. Christ-of-mercy, let's get ourselves across there!"

Into the muck the pair of men plunged, veering inland rapidly as they could to make a slogging arc toward the cabin. Whenever he had breath, Wennberg hallowed, his calls hoarse and lonely in the stillness.

"Got to be someone about, got to," insisted Wennberg.

They labored two-thirds of the distance to the cabin before Karlsson could make himself bring out what was whispering 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."

"Wen... Wennberg. Wennberg, it's not."

"Not? Shit your eyes, Karlsson, it's right there, it's..."

But a further twenty yards dissolved the cabin profile entirely. All the Wennbergs and Karlssons of the world could have put wish to it at once and still the shape would have been only what it was emerging as, the green roof roughening into growth of bush, the weather-silvered side of wood, high as the men, dropping pretence of gray cabin wall. A huge butt of cedar driftdlog, nursery of atop it. a 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 the ache sharpen behind his eyes.

Wennberg for once was too disheartened for temper. He 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 was against the inland edge of the log, propped for weariness there.

rest as he looked north along the bay edge.

... More of it. Got to be a mouth there somewhere. Over those dunes. Find it, figure...

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

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

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

"No."

"You'll stay to the log, then." Karlsson tried to focus...
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.

A light shone from the smoking edge of a bar of iron on a rifle butt.

"Agreement as we are, the last make the mighty's lesser crest.

When the whale attains all the ocean, the great watertop and battling

creet to life as if its life it's those somewhere. All to it,

as creature as creet to spread through the part of the pelagic, and

every part of on Cephalo and I mutter in incommunicably sport the

intimation. It crease of mind and without your part, that

creet right be a respect of the pit undersand. Somehow it got

catching that it crete me of the weathert burnt like getting

in mind, as during the they go on and people, and in their

boil as many lose the race of sticking to to the eat the rest

of the right.

More frequently as not attaining me limbared the mighty help

but unexpectedly borne, then began the give some sprigged compass,

later against motion solely on both it at night at
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, the fog...

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 rye field, lines of these sown dunes rolling parallel with the bay.

...The heart's out of Wennberg. Somehow get him on his feet, get us out...

Karlsson tramped north until it came through to him that the footing was wavering, meandering creeping, in front of him. A slow crawl like tan snakes: sand blowing in ropey slinking patterns. He was out of the dune grass, water lay a field's width in front of him.
... Kept in life this long, I can keep longer. Takes God and His Brother to kill a Smalander...

Beautiful blue.
Now at water edge, Peering out into the bay entrance which the fog had carried in.

Karlsson squinted to be sure of what he was seeing now.

He was seeing. Instead of surf stacking against the shore three and four and five waves deep as had been happening all along this coast, here the whitecaps flowed and flowed past Karlsson into the bay, as if breaking into stampede. They flashed white for what across the entire neck of entrance. A mile-breath of whitecaps.

Karlsson 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 somehow 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. Shouldn't have 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.

...Hadn't been for the last storm and the fog, we'd done it. Be at Astoria now, wherever place it is. If wishes were colts beggars would ride...

The surface under him changed Karlsson's slog once more; on the tidal mud again now, the gray stumps with its wig of green was ahead.

Wennberg was against the log as Karlsson had left him. He lifted his head, 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. Not yet, though.
Not just damn yet... the face of green.

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 tidal flat to the shore forest. To the spread of bay. To the four marking sticks, tall and thin, 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.
The Sea Runners

by Ivan Doig
A high-nosed cedar canoe, poised and buoyant as a seabird, atop a sharp white ridge of ocean.

Carried up and up by the water's determined sweep at the sky, the nimble craft now, in this first necessary picture in your mind, sleds across the curled crest of wave and begins to glide the surf toward the dark frame of your scene, a shore of black spruce forest. On modern charts of the long, crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska this particular landfall is inscribed as Aristazabal Island. But three of the four voyagers bobbing to its shore here in a January dusk of the year 1853 know nothing of this name, nor would it matter to them if they did.

Now the canoeman as they alight. Karlsson and Melander and Wennberg and Braaf. Nineteen days they have been together in the slender canoe, dodging from one of this coast's constant humps of forest-and-rock to the next. Each man of them has been afraid many times in those days; brave almost as often. Here at Aristazabal they land wetly, heft their
slim but laden ark across the gravel beach into hiding within the salal and salmonberry, then turn away to the abrupt timber.

As the trees sieve them from sight, another white wave replaces the rolling hill of water by which the four were borne to this shore where they are selecting their night's shelter, and where one of them is to die.

Their escape from New Archangel had been of Melander's making. You would have spied Melander early in any day's comings and goings at that far-north shoreside assemblage of hewn logs and Russian tenacity. Tall man with lanks of arms and high hips, so that he seemed to be all long sections and hinges. His line of jaw ran lengthy as well, and so too his forehead; in all the extent of him, only the bright blue eyes and stub nose and short mouth were closely set, a sudden alert center of face amid the jaw-and-forehead expanse as if peering in wily surprise out of the hole of a tree trunk at you.

Even Melander's manner of talking was prominently jointed into lengths, the habit he had of every so often interrupting himself with a querulous "aye?" as if affirming whether he really dared continue with so mesmerizing a line of conversation.

"A strong right arm is the lever of life, these Russians say. You'd think by chance the Castle Russians might once put the lever to something other than hoisting a glass of vodka. Aye?"
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Born on the isle of Gotland and thinking of himself as a Swede, Melander actually numbered in the landless
nationality, that of the sea. On Gotland his people had been fisher-folk beyond memory, generation upon generation automatically capable with herring nets as if born with hands shaped only for that task, and it had been a startling flex of independence when Melander, himself beginning to resemble a sizable height of pine spar, went off from his village of Slite to tall-masted vessels. He proved apt aboard ship, this young Gotlander of alert eyes and adroit tongue, and in a dozen years of sailing the Baltic and the North Atlantic seaboard of Europe bettered his position voyage by voyage. It was as first mate of a schooner bringing twenty fresh seven-year men from Stockholm in the spring of 1851 that Melander arrived to Alaska-Russian America, as it would be until the passed from Russian hands to American by sale in 1867 and this vital speck of port-and-capital called New Archangel would be rechristened to what the coast's natives knew it as, Sitka.

Although he had no thought of it at the onset of that voyage, a pair of matters swerved Melander into staying on at New Archangel. The prospect of an eleven-month return voyage under the schooner's captain, a fidgety little circle-faced Finn who was veteran in the Baltic trade had proved to be but quite literally out of his depth on the ocean; and the sight of the steamship Emperor Nicholas I berthed against the backdrop of endless Alaskan forest.

Far from having a wind sailor's usual contempt for steam vessels, Melander was more than a little intrigued with the
contraptions. Pointing course and achieving it by sheer power of mechanism—this was just the sort of thing to appeal to him. In earlier times and places, Melander would have been the man you wanted to set a spire on a cathedral; in a later, to oversee a fleet of mail planes. But on an April day in 1851, at one of the rim-ends of the known world, what was at hand was this squatty wonder of self-propulsion and a proclaimed shortage of gifted seamen in these northern Pacific waters navigated, in what had historically been a lurching and uncertain style, by the Russians.

"If the wind were clever enough," Melander told the baffled Finnish skipper upon taking leave of him, "it would snuff out these steam-snorters before they get a start. Aye?"

Melander maybe, under different policy, would have earned his way up the ranks of the Russian-American Company where like a lithe boy up a schooner's rigging; become a valued promyshlennik, harvester of pelts, of the Tsar's Alaskan enterprise in the manner, let us say, that elsewhere along the fur frontiers of northmost North America occasional young Scotsmen of promise were let to fashion themselves into field captains of the Hudson's Bay Company by learning to lead brigades of trappers and traders, keep the native tribes cowed or in collaboration, deliver a reliable 15 per cent profit season upon season to London and, not incidentally, to hold those far spans of map not only in the name of their corporate employers but for the British crown which underlay the company's charter terms like an ornate watermark. Finlayson, McLoughlin, Simpson, Mackenzie, Fraser, others: Caledonians who whittled system into the wilderness, names we know even yet as this continent's northern roster of enterprise and empire.

But maybe is only maybe, and the facts enough are that on the
broad map of midnineteenth-century empires Alaska lies apart from
the Hudson's Bay span of dominion across most of what has come to
be Canada. That, indeed, this colossal crude crown of northwestmost
territory is tipped sharply, as if in deliberate spurn, away from
London to the direction of Siberia and Moscow. And that Melander
rapidly came to hold contempt for the life he and the other Swedes
found themselves in as indentured laborers of the Russian-American
Company's fur-gathering enterprise, the Tsar's particular system
Melander more than once grumbled it.

For as will happen, Melander after signing on with the Russian-
American Company did find his life altered by the alluring new nautical
machinery, right enough, but not as hoped. Only seldom did the
Russians fire up the Nicholas, which was of a vintage requiring
approximately two days of chopping by the wood crew to feed the
boilers for each day of voyage—a visiting Hudson's Bay officer
once amended the name of the vessel to Old Nick, on the ground
that it consumed fuel at about the rate you might expect of
Hell—and on the occasions when its paddlewheels were set into
ponderous thwacking motion, positions aboard were snatched by
bored officers of the small Russian navy contingent stationed at
New Archangel. In his first Alaskan year Melander was permitted to steam out with the Nicholas whenever Rosenberg, the Russian governor, took his official retinue on an outing to the hot spring at an outpost called Ozherskoï, a little distance south along the coast from Sitka Sound. This happened precisely twice, and Melander's sea-time-under-steam totaled six days. The rest of the workspan was an assignment conferred upon him by a Russian overseer as promptly as the supply schooner vanished over the horizon on its voyage back to Stockholm and Kronstadt.

"Friend sailor, we are going to give you a chance to dry out your bones a bit," the overseer began, and Melander knew the rest was not going to be good because of his ability of handling men and, from his time on Baltic voyages, his tongue's capability with Russian as well as Swedish and Finnish, and his Gotland knowledge of fish. 

Melander was put in charge of the salting of catches of herring and halibut for New Archangel's winter larder. Melander at