Make a picture in your mind of a cedar canoe atop a sharp white
hill of ocean, carried up and up by the water's eager surge toward
the sky. The high-nosed craft, buoyant as a seabird, at last slides
across the wave's curled crest and begins to glide across the surf toward
the dark frame of your scene, a shore of fir forest. Kunghit Island,
this particular landfall is inscribed on modern charts of the long
crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska, but the voyagers
bobbing to its shore here in mid-February of 1853 do not know this
name, and it would not matter to them if they did.

Now the canoemen as they alight. Karlsson and Melander and
Wennberg and Braaf. For nineteen days they have been together in
the slim-ark canoe, dodging from one of this coast's constant humps
of fir- and rock to the next. They have been afraid many times in
those days, brace almost as often. Here at Kunghit they land wetly,
heft their ark across the gravel beach into hiding within the salal
and sword ferns, then turn away into the timber. As the trees swallow
them from sight, another white wave replaces the rolling hill of water
by which the four men were borne to this shore where they are selecting
their night's shelter, and where one of them is to die.
Make a picture in your mind of four canoemen borne atop a wave, a sharp white hill of ocean which carries them up and up as it laps toward the sky. Their high-nosed craft, buoyant as a seabird, at last sleds across the water's curled crest and begins to ride the surf to the dark frame of your scene, a shore of fir forest. Kunghit Island, this particular landfall is inscribed on modern charts of the long crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska, but as these four voyagers are bobbing to its shore in mid-February of 1853 they do not know this name, and it would not matter to them if they did.

Now the men as they alight. Karlsson and Melander and Wennberg and Braaf. For nineteen days they have been together in the slim cedar canoe, dodging from one of this coast's constant humps of fir-and-rock to the next. They have been afraid many times in those days, brave almost as often. Here at Kunghit they land wetly, heft the canoe across the gravel beach into hiding within the salal and swordfrogs, then turn away into the timber. As they move from sight, another white wave replaces the rolling hill of water which brought the four men to this shore where they are selecting their night's shelter, and where one of them is to die.
Make a picture in your mind of a cedar canoe atop a sharp white ridge of ocean. Carried up and up by the water's eager surge toward the sky, the high-nosed craft, buoyant as a seabird, at last slides across the wave's curled crest and begins to glide the surf toward the dark frame of your scene, a shore of fir forest. Kunghit Island, this particular landfall is inscribed on modern charts of the long crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska, but the voyagers bobbing to its shore here in late January of 1853 do not know this name, nor would it matter to them if they did.

Now the canoeman as they alight. Karlsson and Melander and Wernberg and Braaf. For nineteen days they have been together in the slender canoe, dodging from one of this coast's constant humps of fir-and-rock to the next. They have been afraid many times in those days, brave almost as often. Here at Kunghit they land wetly, heft their ark across the gravel beach into hiding within the salal and swordferrns, then turn away into the timber. As the trees sieve them from sight, another white wave replaces the rolling hill of water by which the four men were borne to this shore where they are selecting their night's shelter, and where one of them is to die.
but Melander had seen him paddle a canoe steadily hour upon hour.

He had observed too that Karlsson visited more often to the native women outside the fort than did the merchants of wind who perpetually bragged in the barracks about their lust. What made Melander's decision in favor of Karlsson, however, was a tinier bit of evidence of the man's depth. Karlsson had come to Alaska on the same ship as Melander, twenty of them altogether going aboard at Stockholm in the spring of 1850. Melander remembered that when others of the group had talked of the success ahead, the excitement of the fur-hunting and how rapidly their seven years of contract would pass, Karlsson had listened, given a small slow smile and one shake of his head, and moved away. Whatever had brought Karlsson to Sitka, it had not been self-delusion.

Melander chose a bright June day, the sun striking off OA Strait and the mountains around Sitka, to approach Karlsson. If he would consider escape in accept the plan in weather of that sort, Karlsson was truly ready.
as seven-year men: indentured workers in the Russian system of empire.

"The Russians' oxen," Melander could be heard grumbling of their situation soon after his arrival, and within the first year of his seven he had begun to turn his considerable mind toward any route outside of Alaska.

Since he could not rise at Sitka, Melander took care to stay carefully level.
as seven-year men: indentured workers in the Russian system of empire.

"The Russians' oxen," Melander could be heard grumbling of their situation soon after his arrival, and within the first year of his seven he had begun to turn his considerable mind toward finding some route out of Alaska.

You would have seen Melander at once in the daily comings and goings at Sitka. A tall man with long arms and high hips, so that he somehow seemed to be sectioned, hinged. Even his way of talking had a hinge to it. For he had the habit of ending sentences with "Eh?" as if questioning his listener whether he really ought to continue.

As if needless to say of such a habit, nineteen times out of thirty he did continue. Fortunately Melander was noted to talk to:

his line of jaw was lengthy, as was his forehead, but his eyes and nose and mouth were closely set, as a sudden center of face peering from amid the jaw-and-forehead expanse as if looking out the hole in a tree trunk at you.

You would have spied Melander at once in the daily comings and goings at Sitka. A tall man with long arms and high hips, so that he somehow seemed to be sectioned, hinged. Even his manner of talking was prominently jointed this way, for he had the habit of ending "Aye?" frequent affirming to occasional sentences with "Er?" as if questioning his listener whether the line of conversation was really ought to continue. As is needless to say of such a habit, twenty-nine times out of thirty he did, with great promptness, continue. Fortunately Melander was notable to talk to: midst line of jaw was lengthy, as was his forehead, but his bright blue eyes and stub nose and short mouth were closely set, a sudden alert center of face peering amid the jaw-and-forehead expanse as if peering out the hole in a tree trunk at you, and what he had to say, ayed and circled though it might be, ended up with more weight to it than most men's mouthing.
Although born on the isle of Gotland and thinking of himself as a Swede, Melander was actually of that landless nationality, a seaman. Fisher-folk his people always had been, 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 went off from the village of Slite to tall-masted ships. He was apt aboard ship, this man of sharp eyes and clever tongue, and in a dozen years of the sea he bettered his position voyage after voyage. He had arrived to Alaska as first mate of a brig which brought twenty fresh Swedish seven-year men from Stockholm to Sitka late in the autumn of 1850. Once there, two matters decided him to stay: the prospect of the return voyage under the brig’s captain, a finicky little Danziger who was veteran in the Baltic trade but quite literally out of his depth on the ocean; and the sight of the steamship *Nikola I* berthed against the backdrop of the Alaskan forest.

Far from having a wind sailor’s contempt for steam vessels, Melander was intrigued with them, the capability of setting a course and achieving it by sheer power of mechanism was just the sort of thing to appeal to him.
As will happen, Melander after signing on with the Russian-American Company found his life veered by the attractive machinery, but not as expected or hoped. The Russians seldom fired up the steamship, which was of a vintage which required two days of hand-cutting for each day of voyage, and when they did bored officers of the Russian navy contingent which governed Sitka took the positions aboard. Melander in his first year went out with the Nikolai I exactly twice, for a total of six days. The rest of the time, because of his experience of handling men and stowing cargo and his capability of both Swedish and Russian, he worked as a warehouse foreman.

Melander at Sitka was, then, a man away from three homes: his birthland, the sea, and his chosen livelihood. Which, had the Russian-American Company officialdom thought it through, made him a triply restless and dangerous exile.
the prospect for the next six years was warehouse work, he began to turn his considerable mind toward finding some route out of Alaska.

By the start of the summer of 1852 he had his plan, and moved next to the question, the pivotal question, of who could be got to go with him.
Melander was a tall man who somehow seemed to be sectioned, hinged. for his heft,
Not heavy, he had unusual width, like a playing card. His line of jaw was long, as was his forehead, but his eyes and nose and mouth were closely set, a face peering out of the midst of jaw-forehead expanse.

Although born on Gotland and thinking of himself as a Swede, he was of that homelandless nationality, a seaman. He had come to Alaska as second mate...and stayed because of the curiosity of the Russian steamship, the VO. As will happen, his life was veered by the machine, but not as expected or hoped: the Russians seldom fired up the steamship, and when they did, bored Russian navy men did the crewing. M became a warehouse foreman, because of his experience of handling men and his understanding of Russian.

He was, then, at Sitka a man away from three homes: his birthland, the sea, and his profession. Which, had the officialdom of Sitka known it, made him triply as dangerous as they ever could have guessed.
"Those canoes are longer than they look," Melander began, motioning to the cedar shells in a row on the beach. "We could step into one and get out at Stockholm." Karlsson looked at him quizzically, and Melander recited the plan, that if they escaped by night they could work their way south along the coast, that beyond the Russian territory the Americans had a fur-trading post at Astoria, from there ships would come and go, ships to Europe. A month's canoe journey, Melander estimated it would be to Astoria; three weeks if they were fortunate.

Karlsson was quiet for a minute, looking around the bay; Melander thought his glance lingered at the native huts. Then he said, "Two of us are not enough strength for so much paddling."

"No," Melander agreed. "Our other man is Braaf."

"Braaf? That puppy?"

Melander gave a slow, mocking smile. "We need a thief," he said.
Braaf would have given the fingers of one hand to be transported from Sitka. He had, after all, the surety that he one way or another would be able to pilfer them back. Stealing was in him like blood and breath. Braaf had been a Stockholm street boy, son of a prostitute and on his own in life by the age of seven; Alaska he had chosen because, after a steady growth of skill to picking pockets to thievery, the other site beckoning to him was 00 jail. He arrived at Sitka the year after Melander and Karlsson, and at once, loaves of bread and flesh knives and other unattached items began to vanish, the Russians venting fury on the harborfront natives for the outbreak, but The Swedes guessed differently, for Braaf became a kind of human commissary in the barracks. Because he was reasonable in his prices—Braaf was less interested in money than in breaking the monotony of Sitka life, which he found hellish—and was diplomatic enough not to steal anything important from his countrymen, nothing was said against him.
That is how they became three. Disquieted shipman, bored hunter, amiable thief, now plotters all. Against them, and not yet knowing it, although habitually suspicious and guardful as governing powers have to be, stood Sitka and its system of life. The system of all empires, when you come to think of it. Empires are on the principle of constellations—pattern imposed across expanse—and the Sitka, the Santa Fes, the Hong Kongs and Johannesburgs, are their specific points outlining of light. The \textcolor{red}{xx}xx dots the tracing is done to. Here in 1853 the tracing was still the wakes of \textcolor{red}{mf} ships, sealanes from
That is how they became three. Disquieted shipman, honed hunter, agreeable thief, now plotters all. Against them, and not yet knowing it, although habitually guardful as governing authorities have to be, stood Sitka and its system of life. The system of all empires, when you come to think of it. For empires exist on the principle of constellations--pattern imposed across expanse--and the Sitkas of the planet, whether named Sitka or Santa Fe or Hong Kong or Leopoldville or Algeciras or Sydney, are their specific points of outline. The significant pinheads representing vastly more than they themselves are.

Here in the middle of the 19th century the imperial tracing still was read, on the globe, along which rose by In wakes of ships, sealanes pulsing imperial energies pulsed back and forth, capital to colony and colony to capital. It takes acceptance to make constellations real, and what any imperial configuration had to be wary of was men who were not stellar loyalty.
Braaf proved so adept a provisioner that Melander was forced
to ration out his stealing assignments, lest the Russians become
suspicious about the blizzard of thievery. By the end of July, the
planners' cache held a compass, two tins of gunpowder, a long-barelled
musket and 30 balls for it, several fishing lines and hooks, and a
drawn fire flint apiece. In August Braaf added a coil of rope, three
knives and a hatchet. September's haul was a second compass—Melander
wanted to be as certain as possible about navigation—a small iron
kettle and a water cask. Early in October, the plotters met to talk
about canoe equipment. Karlsson, who rarely asserted himself, insisted
on Clyoquot paddles, a deft thin-bladed type carved by a tribe far
south along the coast and occasionally traded north. Braaf frowned.
It took him all of the next week to accumulate a trio of Clyoquot
paddles from the Sitka natives along the harbor.

"Three?" said Karlsson when they met again. "What if we lose one?"
Braaf cursed in his sweet voice, and went off to start the thief's
siege of watching and waiting which would produce a fourth paddle.
Karlsson's task was the watchman above the gate. "You have
the wedge which can open that gate for us," Melander had said.

"It's between your legs."

Since then, Karlsson's visits to the native huts had become
more frequent and extended farther into the nights, until he
regularly nudged at the fort's curfew. Then he began to stretch
and pliable he was looking for
across curfew, finding the sentry they needed: Bilibin, one
of the oldest of the soldiers in the New Archangel garrison. The
first few times Karlsson came late, Bilibin grumbled at him. The
next time, Karlsson staggered up to the gate, singing--Ou--and
carrying a bottle of the native liquor called hootch, which he
persuaded Bilibin to swig from. The hootch worked: Bilibin was
a man parched under the allotment of fifty cups of rum per year.

Soon Karlsson, on the nights when Bilibin stood watch, was
slipping out of the fort after curfew--"Come have one yourself;"
Karlsson would say; "No, no, I'm limber as a goose's neck, no
more women for me," Bilibin would bray back at him--and returning
in the middle of the night.
At one meeting, Melander told Braaf the time had come to steal the coastline map they would navigate south by. Better to do it early, and let suspicions fade by the time they were ready to escape, than to risk a last-minute snatch. This would be tricky, Melander cautioned, because Braaf would need to sneak aboard the steamship, sort quickly among the maps in the chart room and—Melander stopped as Braaf shook his head. "I can't read," Braaf said.

Melander did not like the unforeseen, and this he had not thought of at all. His dismay deepened when he realized that Karlsson, who spent each day on the work crew at a sawmill the Russians were building, could not manage the theft either.

"Have to become a common pilferer, do I?" he grumbled. Braaf tried to look as if he hadn't heard, but before long coughed atop what could have been a smile.

(Melander returns with map)

Karlsson quizzed him with a look. "I have it, I have it," Melander said grumpily. "Let's get on with..."
Braaf had made off with the canvas, the folded length of it beneath an armload of skins he was pretending to carry across the fort toward the tannery, when a voice—at least it was Swedish instead of Russian—suggested into his ear, "Let's talk about what you have under those hides."

Braaf turned his head a fraction enough to recognize the face of a trapper named Wennberg.

"No, don't walk away and don't put them down," Wennberg ordered.

"We'll have a visit until we see which interesting thing happens first. Whether you spill that load in front of these Russians, or your friend Melander comes over here."

Melander arrived with a smooth swiftness which, to any onlooker, would seem as if he had been called over to consult with the pair. His dark look met Wennberg's calm like a cloud against a snowpeak.

"Braaf and I were just talking about how much heavier hides have gotten this year," Wennberg said. "It seems a man can hardly carry a pood of them these days."
"A man can carry as much as he has to, I'm told. It depends whether it's dead weight or not."

"You always were a thinker, Melander. Isn't he, Braaf?" Wennberg nudged Braaf's right bicep with his elbow, drawing a gasp.

"Let's give Braaf a rest, shall we?" Melander said. "You obviously want to talk about matters of weight." The two men strolled across the fort while Braaf lurched his way out of sight to hide the canvas.

"So?" Melander asked.

"You have plans to get away from this Russian bear pit, and I'm coming with you."

"Are you?"

"I am. Or you and Braaf and Karlsson will be hung up by the Russians for the magpies to eat."

Melander held Wennberg's gaze in a lock with his own, then gave his serious smile. "First you talk of weight, then of height. Wennberg, I'm beginning to think you underestimate a man's limits. How far a man can stretch himself if he has to. Can you handle a Clyoquot paddle?"
"I can always show the Russians the hidey-hole where Braaf has been stashing things."

"But Wennberg, there's nothing there. Unless you count mouse turds. And the Russians might not believe we're stockpiling mouse turds. Eh? No, Wennberg, we thought we'd get ourselves a new hidey-hole. You'll know about it when we load the canoe, and not before. So, go to the Russians whenever you feel like it, but you'll have nothing to show them."

"Except mouse turds." This from Braaf, who still was studying the air above the other three.

"Yes, the mouse turds," Melander chuckled. "Otherwise, it's you against the three of us, and we'll see who the Russians choose to believe. You wouldn't be the first one here to be thought out of his mind."

Wennberg scowled around the trio, opened his mouth to say something, but Karlsson beat him to it. "There is this, too. If you try to turn us in, You will never take a safe step again in your life."
The four of them met. Karlsson looked with curiosity at
steadily
Wennberg. Braaf's gaze now floated along three foreheads instead
of two.

Wennberg, "Why all this fuss with Bilibin? Why not just cut
his throat and co?" Wennberg asked, as if wondering whether tomorrow
might bring rain.

"Because if we kill one of his men, Chirikov"--the Russian
commander--"will come after us. If we leave Bilibin alive, Chirikov
will take it out on him."

Melander told Braaf they would need five more muskets the night

Braaf blinked, and
of the escape. Even Karlsson was surprised at this, but again Wennberg
said

"Good Christ, Melander, nine rifles altogether?

We're going in a canoe, not a man-of-war."

"Can you think of a better cargo, Wennberg? Do you think the crows

are going to feed us, and the wolves guard us with their shiny teeth?

We don't know what we'll face, but I want ball and powder to face it

with. If you want to come along naked, so be it."
Wennberg dropped the topic of muskets. "And you know for certain, Melander, that we'll find this American fort at Astoria?"

"The Russians talk of it. It is there. We may not have to go that far, if we meet trapping teams along the way. English, Spanish, Americans or the devil. So long as they're not Russians."

"And the natives?" Karlsson put in.

"I already said the devil."

The questioning done, even Wennberg quiet, Melander told them when the escape date. "Christmas." The Russians would be holding dances, and it would be natural for Karlsson to offer Bilibin extra swigs of hootzina. Nor would the Russians be eager to leave their warm festivities to chase them. Reluctance, confusion, alcohol, all would work for the escape.

Sitka marked Christmas by the Russian calendar, the sixth of January.
The waiting was a kind of doubling of their lives, as if some new being had moved in with each of them; the outsides of their bodies had to perform normally—jobs, eating, sleeping—while beneath the skin the new second being went through the days rehearsing what might be ahead. Melander had memorized the chain of islands and could have recited them like Old Testament genealogy, Sitka would beget Kulu Island, Kulu would beget Kosciusko, Kosciusko Heceta and Heceta Suenos, south and south through geography and explorers' mother tongues until...

Wernberg too spent much of his time in long spells of calculation, but his effort was to find advantage in betraying the escape rather than joining it. If the Russians could be relied on to return him to Sweden in reward for his information, he would have done so. But they could not be trusted, and if they did not transport him, he would not be safe afterward in Sitka as a betrayer. He was not certain about the prospects of the escape, and neither did he see, now, any way out of it. What he had thought would be power over Melander and the others somehow was turning out to be some power by them over him.
The waiting became a kind of doubling of their lives, as if some new being had moved in with each of the four. The outsides of their bodies had to perform as ever—do their jobs, eat, sleep, carry on this sudden talk—while inside, the new creature, the one in wait, prowled through the days in thought only of what was ahead.

As he waited, Melander studied the map into his mind. He could have south-pointing recited the coastal chain of islands like Old Testament genealogy, Sitka's Baranof Island to beget Kuiu Island for them, Kuiu to beget Kosciusko, Kosciusko Heceta and Heceta Suemez, south and south through watery geography and explorers' mother tongues until the rivermouth port called Astoria. Perhaps because he had learned the seaman's way of letting the days take care of distance, simply accept that because there is more time than there is expanse of the world any journey at last will end, Melander thought of the escape in this step-by-step manner, hardly ever by the totality of what he and the other three were intending. This was a loss, for Melander alone of them had traveled greatly enough in the world to understand the scope of their escape. The distance was as far as from Stockholm to Venice, or from
along all the
gibraltar the length of the top of africa, to sicily. all of it
cold northern
grievously
along a brink of ocean which, in winter, is misnamed: not pacific at
all, but malign.
Karlsson's quarrel with the world was obscure, even to himself, but at heart it had to do with system. K knew his capabilities, knew he lived up to them pretty well, and had indifference for people who didn't. There was a calm about K which bordered on coldness. Unlike Wennberg who was continually flexing himself, K was a man in wait. nearly all
The patience was not

unnecessary virtue. It kept him in situations when a Wennberg would have bullied out or a Braaf weaseled out, and indeed had brought him to Sitka. K, like Melander a few years before him, was part of the Swedish diaspora of the 1840s and 1850s, uncoupled from his family's farm by absence of opportunity and surplus of brothers.

in the immigrant stream The two of them just younger than Karlsson had taken ship for America, aimed to the prairies beyond the Great Lakes. Karlsson had given his serious smile at their suggestion he come along: "I am no farm maker." His liking for hunting, for time in the woods, bent him toward Alaska, and the signing-on with the Russian-American Company. He minded Sitka life less than the other Swedes; what interested him about the escape was the plan itself, whether Melander's idea could be made real, could transport men a thousand miles along unknown coast.
As for Karlsson, he discovered in himself in this time of waiting a deep curiosity, almost peaceful. 

Musing about how he would perform—for one thing, he wondered whether he would kill Wennberg sometime during the escape, and for a second, whether he could kill him—

Bmaaf had the hardest wait of all, for Melander had forbidden him from stealing until the final flurry of muskets and hardtack on the date of the escape. To keep his hands busy he had taken up carving, and after his first effort, a copying of a madonna who looked both mourning and sly, it had been Karlsson who said, "Carve us a figurehead, Braak."

"A lady," Karlsson had suggested.

"Who were ours?"

"Better make her a mermaid," Karlsson had suggested.

"For luck."

Braak had, not simply nothing.
Melander had started along the beach to gather firewood when Braaf said, "I'll come with you."

When they were out of earshot of the others and had begun their armloads, Braaf asked, "Melander, will you tell me something?"

"If I can."

Braaf gave him his upcast look and began. "You were a sailor, weren't you?"

"Yes. A second mate."

"I had a brother. Or at least people said he was my brother, and we looked alike. He was older and he was a sailor like you, a second mate too. I would see him on the docks at Stockholm when his ship was in port. The Alfredus, a schooner, it was. Then one day I heard the Alfredus had sunk. They said it had followed false lights onto the rocks somewhere, England or Spain, one of those places, and everyone killed, and the people there took its cargo from the wreck."

Do they do that? Set false lights so that a ship will come onto the rocks?"

With great slowness Melander said: "Yes, I have heard of that."

Braaf nodded. "I thought they did."
Karlsson staggered against the gate. "(hymn)², he bawled. "(more)".

Christ save us, man,
"Shush, guzzler, you'll have the sergeant down here," Bilibin
called and hurriedly cracked the gate. "Quick, up here," Melander
watched until the two shapes bobbed into the shadow of the guardhouse.

When he heard Bilibin and guffaw and the pale shape of the jug move
from Karlsson to the guard, he rapidly crossed the fort.

"Now," Braaf heard Melander's voice say as his tall figure
moved past. Braaf (begins to gather final thefts, muskets and hardtack).

inside
stomped his feet at the door of, muttered as if having forgot something, and
Melander stepped into the barracks. Seeing him, Wemberg finished turned
back into the dark.

the hand of cards he was playing with two skinners, said he was off
to the toilet—if the Russians allowed such a matter on such a holy
laughter
night—and to the guffaw of the card players pulled on his parka
and stepped into the dark beside Melander.

Snow made a dry noise beneath their feet. Melander looked back
to see how sharply their footprints stood out in the moonlight, then
dismissed the worry. Footprints shortly would be the least of their
worries.
Beneath the guardhouse the third shadow, Braaf, joined them, and Melander called up, "Karlsson." A figure came out in soldier cap and bearing a musket. Wennberg cursed and reached for his knife. The figure looked down at him and said in Karlsson's voice, "I thought I should look the part. If you don't find the hat becoming, Wennberg?"

"It's time," Melander said. "Open the gate and we'll load the canoe." Karlsson opened the gate, and the three men below him began to carry supplies to the canoe. It took two trips, the three of them carrying the first time, then Braaf and Wennberg back for a second while Melander stowed, then Melander back alone to say, "Ready. Come when you can."

Karlsson waited the unmoving amount of time until at last the call came out of the dark to his right. "Oo."

"Oo" Karlsson said back, as close as he could come to Bilibin's bray. Then on impulse he called again: "Merry Christmas." There was a moment of silence at the other guardpost, as of surprise, then:

"Merry Christmas to you, Peter Ivanovich."
At dawn, they saw the canoe behind them.

"You bastard, Melander." It was Wennberg. "'The Russians

won't follow us,' say?"

"They haven't," Melander said. "Those are Kolosh. We'll see

how eager they are to die. Braaf, load the rest of the rifles, then

hand me the seal gun."

The Kolosh chieftain in the stern of the canoe counted carefully,
as Braaf worked at the loading, and did not like the numbers. The

whitehairs had at least two muskets apiece and without doubt some

pistols, and this one doing the loading was fast at his task. Against

the four and their armory he had his six paddlers and himself, and

only five muskets. A half-drunk Russian officer had promised them 00,

but was it worth the battle the whitehaird could put up?

As the Kolosh thought it though, the canoe in front abruptly swung

broadside, and the tall figure in its stern leveled a seal gun. The

Kolosh paddlers ducked and grasped for their muskets, but the chieftain

watched as the tall man took careful aim, fired, and blow splinters
from the thwart just in front of the lead paddler.

As his crew pulled their rifles into place, the canoe rocking with their confusion, the chieftain watched the tall man swiftly reload—the other three steadily holding their rifles, but not firing—and then swing the long seal gun until it aimed at him. Along the path the bullet would take, the issue hung.

The chieftain decided. His paddlers put their muskets into the bottom of the canoe, and they watched as the man at the bow of the canoe strongly paddled the craft while the other three kept their rifles aimed.

The chieftain said, "The sea will eat them,"
Braaf was standing had successfully stolen the canvas, the
pretending to folded length of it beneath an armload of skins he was carry-

suggested into toward the tannery, when a voice said in his ear, "Let's talk
about what you have under those hides." Braaf turned his head

enough to recognize a trapper named Wennberg. "No, don't walk away
and don't put them down," Wennberg said. "Just stand there, and we'll
have a visit until we

see which happens first, whether you spill that load in front of

the Russians, or your friend Melander comes over here."
W: Braaf and I were just talking about how much heavier hides
have gotten this year.

M: A matter which you seem to think interests you. We'll give
Braaf a rest, shall we?

W: You have plans to get away from this hellhole, and I'm coming
with you.

M: Are you?

W: I am. Or
FIREWORKER

by Ivan Doig

Bending heat
pushes at my yearling stare.
The fireworker nods,
tongs the metal
to the glow's heart
and I hold slow
the bellows handle.

Outside, rain strews
quick lakes.
No haying today
nor mending fence
nor riding the sorrel mare.
So we come,
fireworker and boy,
to our private sun.

The forge edges us
in hotter light.
My hands tense the bellows
to a softening breath.
The fireworker flexes sinew
to mend
a tractor's metal bone.

Now fire flakes
from his measured clamor.
The anvil doubles all blows,
sends his hammer
stroking high again.
The fireworker,
huge over me,
joins heat and force
in their heavy dance.

###
Russian had promised 00, but was it worth the battle the whitehairs
could put up?

As the chieftain considered and his canoe steadily gained, the
canoe in front abruptly swung broadside, and the figure in its bow
levied a seal gun. The Kolosh paddlers ducked and grappled for the
muskets, but the chieftain sat steady and watched—if it was his time
to die, the process was of interest—as the slender man took careful
aim, fired, and blew splinters from the stern thwart just behind the
chieftain.

As his crew pulled their rifles into place, the canoe rocking
with their confusion, the chieftain watched the slender man swiftly
reload—the other three whitehairs steadily pointing their rifles but
not firing—and then swing the long seal gun until it aimed at him.
Across the path the bullet would take to his body, the issue of combat
hung.

The chieftain sharply said his decision to his crew. His paddlers
put their muskets into the bottom of the canoe, the slender man
set aside his seal gun; the Kolosh watched as the man then powerfully
paddled the craft away while the other three kept their rifles aimed.

"Let the sea eat them," the chieftain said.

Then coming over to check inquired of me. "Why come over here?"

And the questioner of a face of me, "Why are you here?"

A savage native to hear it looked good, and gracias — what have we known our clergymen and in the Indian..."
The four of them set off on their vast voyage southward by paddling west. Melander on Karlsson's advice. It was Melander's choice, with Karlsson's few words of advice, among the trio of routes through the islands of Sitka Sound: veer around the western shore of big Japonski.

Their vast voyage southward began with a sidestep to the west. Melander, on Karlsson's sentence or so of advice, had decided against either of the channels which thread among the islands of Sitka Sound. At night, in rain, those routes would be tricky as unlit stairs.

Their vast voyage southward began with a sidestep to the west. Melander had shown Karlsson on the first of the Tehenkov maps the pair of channels threaded elegantly among the islands of Sitka Sound, and Karlsson had said: "At night? Likely in rain?" That sum of words set them on the third route, a veer around large Japonski Island and then outside the shoal of Sound islands. Such a loop was longer than the others, and less sheltered from the ocean currents, but at least it was not a blindfolded plunge into the island labyrinth.
It was, however, their initiation into paddling in untame waters. The canoe bucked, slid down nose first, bucked again, slid again, a rhythm new to Wennberg and Braaf, and a terrifying one. Their paddling efforts were stabs at the sloshing turmoil under them until Karlsson, in the bow of the canoe and feeling the ragged effort happening behind him, called mmmmmmm back: "Spread your hands wide on the paddle and stroke when I say. Now--now--now--now--now--"

The contrived tick and tock, Karlsson's nows and the breath-space between, advanced them through the darkness until Melander spoke from the stern of the canoe. "Wait, pull broadside a moment. We've earned a last look."

As the canoe swayed around, the other three saw what he meant. Through one of the channel-canyons amid the every window lit for this night of celebration, islands, Baranov's Castle could be seen, a box of lights in the air which mmmmmmmmmmm was the last their eyes saw of New Archangel.
Steam whiffed around Karlsson as he stepped into the workmen's bathhouse. It was late. Every seventh day the steam-rocks were heated on a slow fire of charcoal, and by this late in the evening, dozens of the New Archangels workforce having scoured weariness from their muscles by feeding water to rock, the steam level became a nearly solid cube.

Karlsson, in the heavy warmth, stood for a moment, slender and very white in his nakedness, before small breathing there within bringing the woven reed mask to his mouth and holding it in his cupped right hand.

"At least this cloud is a hot one. New Archangel could use a few such outside, aye?" Melander's voice came from across the room, and in three steps Karlsson could see the man, its long angles of his body on the bathing bench. In the respirator mask all but disappeared in Melander's hand palmed around it, so that he simply seemed to be covering a chuckle as he talked into cupping hand.

"Where's our pickpurse?"

"He will come. The hours of Braaf's day aren't like any other man's."

"How far do you trust him?"

Only a street's width. But he wants to be gone from New Archangel as badly as we do. He'll do much to achieve that. Much that we can't do, just as he can't canoe himself out of here."

The three of us are like a sheaf of rye in your Småland fields, Karlsson. Together we support one another. Take any one away and we fall."

"And are trampled by the Russians."

"Aye, well. The answer to that is not to fall, nor to let each other fall."

"I need to know one matter about you, Melander. Why didn't you stay on with the schooner?"

"I can see Melander's long face drew itself even farther. "Yes, that is a matter to know. Promise me not to laugh. But it was a pretty sight. The Nicholas, these islands and mountains; I could see myself on her, going places of the world here I could not have dreamed of. What I forgot to look at was the wormy souls of these Russians."
"And wasn't that a fall, of a sort?"

"A stumble, my friend, a stumble. The strides we will take together along this coast shall make up for it."

"A stumble, that's nothing," said a third voice. "Unless a noose is around your neck at the time."

The steam thinned as the open doorway sucked it away, and into view appeared Braaf. With his clothes off, he looked more than ever like a large boy rather than a man. Melander noticed that the cloud of heat Braaf did not even pause to accustom himself to the before crossing the room to them, nor bother to put the steam-sieving mask to his mouth until he sat down. Braaf seemed never to let the world get a fix on him, always easing, eluding. Melander had known his type on shipboard a time or two, men with the knack of vanishing just before a topsail needed setting, and the armies of all history have known him as well, the scrummer, the dog-robber: the figure who can drift like steam.

"Our commissary man. Welcome, Braaf. Let's have no more thought than necessary of nooses and the like, however." Melander was, for him, singularly businesslike now that all three of them were at hand. "What we need to talk of is our divvy of tasks. Braaf, we are going to need—"and here Melander recited a 00's list of supplies for the escape. "Is there anything you can't lay your hands on?"

"No. Some harder, some easier, but no."
"Good. Tomorrow, your harvest."

"A thing more, Melander." Karlsson now. "How is it we are to get out of this stockade, when the time comes?"

"Oh, aye."

"Did I not tell you? Through the gate."

"Through the gate?"

"The gate?"

"Well that you asked," Melander went on in high good-humor, "for you are the one with the wedge to open that gate for us."

He instructed Karlsson jovially, now. "It's there between your legs."
Make a picture in your mind of a cedar canoe atop a sharp white ridge of ocean. Carried up and up by the water's eager surge, the determined sweep at the sky, the high-nosed craft, buoyant as a seabird, at last slides across the curl crested wave and begins to glide the surf toward the dark frame of your scene, a shore of black spruce forest. From Island, this particular landfall is inscribed on modern charts of the long crumbled coastline south from the Gulf of Alaska, but the voyagers bobbing to its shore here in late January of 1853 do not know this name, nor would it matter to them if they did.

Now the canoe man as they alight. Karlsson and Melander and Wennberg and Braaf. For 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. They have been afraid many times in those days, brave almost as often. Here at Kungst it they land wetly, heft their ark across the gravel beach into hiding within the salal and sword ferns, then turn away to the timber. As the trees sieve them from sight, another white wave replaces the rolling hill of water by which the four men were borne to this shore where they are selecting their
night's shelter. And where one of them is to die.

Their escape from Sitka had been Melander's plan. Maybe Melander might have earned his way up the ranks of the Russian-American Company like a lithe boy up a schooner's rigging; become a valued apparatchik of the Tsar's Alaskan enterprise in the manner, let us say, that elsewhere along the fur frontiers of northwest North America occasional young Scotsmen of promise were let to fashion themselves into field captains of the Hudson's Bay Company, 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 a watermark. But maybe is only maybe, and on the broad map of midnineteenth-century empires, Alaska is apart from the Hudson's Bay dominion across all of Canada—sharply, is in fact a great crude crown tipped as if deliberately, in the direction of Moscow rather than London. The fact enough is that Melander despised the life he and the other Swedes found themselves in at Sitka...
as seven-year men: indentured workers of the Russian-American Company,
in the Tsar's particular system of empire-by-proxy. "The Russians' more than once oxen," as Melander grumbled it.

You would have spied Melander at once in any day's comings and goings across the parade ground at Sitka. Tall man with lanks of long
arms and high hips, so that he seemed to be all sections and hinges.

Even his manner of talking was prominently jointed into lengths this way, a habit he had of ending frequent sentences with "aye?" as if affirming to his listener whether he really dared continue with the mesmerizing line of conversation. Needless to say of such a quiz, thirty times out of thirty Melander could be counted on, with exceeding reluctance, to continue. Fortunately Melander was notable to stand

listen
and talk to: his line of jaw was lengthy, as was his forehead, but

his 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 interestingly out the hole in a tree trunk at you, and at any given opportunity, whatever Melander's tongue dealt with, aye and roundabout though the route it might be, ended up with more weight to it than most men's mouthings.
Although 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 an astounding flex of independence when Melander, himself beginning to resemble a sizable height of spar, went off from the village of Slite to tall-masted vessels. He was apt aboard ship, this man of alert eyes and adroit tongue, and in a dozen years of the sea he bettered his position voyage after voyage. It was as first mate of a brig bringing twenty fresh seven-year men from Stockholm to Sitka late in the summer of 1850 that Melander arrived to Alaska. Once there, a pair of matters decided him to stay. The prospect of an eight-month return voyage under the brig's captain, a fidgety little circle-faced Danziger who was veteran in the Baltic trade but quite literally out of his depth on the ocean, and the sight of the steamship Emperor Nicholas I berthed against the backdrop of dark Alaskan forest.

Far from having a wind sailor's contempt for steam vessels, Melander was intrigued with the contraptions. The capability of setting a
As will happen, Melander after signing on with the Russian-American
Company found his life veered by the attractive new machinery,
but not as expected or hoped. The Russians seldom fired up
the steamship, which was of a vintage requiring approximately two days
of chipping by the wood crew to feed the boilers for each day of
voyage—a visiting Hudson's Bay officer amended the vessel's name
to Old Nick, on the grounds that it consumed fuel at about the same
rate you'd expect of Hell—and on the occasions
whenever its paddlewheels were set into ponderous motion, positions
aboard were taken by bored officers of the Russian navy contingent
stationed at Sitka. In his first Alaskan year Melander went out with
the Emperor Nicholas I exactly twice, for a total of nine days. The
rest of the time, because of his experience of handling men and storing
cargo and his capability with both Swedish and Russian, he was assigned
as a warehouse foreman.

Melander at Sitka was, then, a man away from three homes: his
birthland; the sea; and his chosen livelihood. Which, had the
Russian-American Company officialdom taken the trouble to think it
through, made the tale men a triply restless and dangerous exile.
voyages, Melander in his measuring manner gave Sitka life what he considered a fair try. When it became ever more clear that the prospect for the next six years still was going to be warehouse work, he at once turned his considerable mind toward finding some route out of Alaska. By the start of the summer of 1852 Melander, in entire detail, had the details of his plan, and moved next to the question, that scale point of question on which all else had to revolve, of who could be got to escape with him down a thousand miles of unknown coastline.
Karlsson he thought of at once. Karlsson was slender and withdrawn, with a thin bland face like that of a village parson, but Melander once had noticed him canoeing back from a day's seal-hunting—Karlsson was one of the few Sitka Swedes who was a trapper during the fur season; other times of year, the Russians had him hunt game to help provision the fort—by coming across Sitka

...Watching him... hearing sound with steady stopless strokes. Melander had been reminded of the regularity of a millwheel. Another impression, of a very different sort, he also had stored away: the observation that Karlsson visited more often to the native women in the huts outside the fort than did any of the merchants of wind who perpetually bragged in the barracks about their lust. What brought down Melander's decision in favor of Karlsson, however, was a tinier thing, a moment remembered from shipboard.

Karlsson had come to Alaska on that same brig as Melander, and Melander recalled that just before sailing, when others of the indentured group—the torque of the journey-to-come tremendous in them at the moment—talked large of the certain success ahead, the excitement the fur-hunting would furnish and how rapidly and with what staggering profit their seven years of contract would...
pass, Karlsson had listened, given a small mirthless smile and a single shake of his head, and moved off along the quarterdeck by himself. Whatever had brought Karlsson to Sitka, it had not been self-delusion.

Melandre chose a bright July day, the sun striking off Sitka Sound and giving great clarity to the harbor's islands of black spruce and the sharp mountains behind the fort, to approach Karlsson. If Karlsson would consider escape on such a day, he was truly ready.

"Those canoes are longer than they look, eh?" Melander began, motioning to the natives' cedar shells in a row on the beach before them. "We could step into one here and step out at Stockholm."

Quickly Melander recited the plan, that if they chose their time well and escaped by night they could work their way south along the coast, that beyond the Russian territory the Americans had a fur-trading post at Astoria, from there ships would come and go, ships to Europe.
Karlsson at once put questions to Melander about the canoe route. Melander folded himself down to rest one knee on the dirt and with a stick began to draw a diagram. A

**first south-pointing stroke of island--Baranof, on the oceanward side of which they squatted now--like a knife blade.** A scatter of much smaller islands, then the large Queen Charlottes group, south-pointing too, like the seaward scabbard Baranof had been pulled from. Another broken isle-chain of coast, then long Vancouver Island. At last, the fourth and biggest solidity in the succession Melander was drawing, the American coastline leading to the Columbia River, and Astoria.

A month's canoe journey, Melander estimated it would be to Astoria. If they had luck, three weeks.

Karlsson was silent for a minute, looking off around the bay. Melander noticed his glance linger in the direction of the native huts.

On such a day sound carried like light, and from the fort's blacksmith shop came the measured clamor of hammer against anvil.

Then Karlsson turned back to Melander and said: "Two of us are not enough strength for that much paddling."

"No," Melander agreed. "Our other man is Braaf."

"Braaf? That puppy?"
Melander gave a serious smile which was a replica of Karlsson's
own aboard the schooner in Stockholm harbor. "We need a thief," he
explained.

Braaf would have given the fingers of one hand to be gone from
Sitka. He had, after all, the thief's attitude that in this
great world of opportunity he would somehow be able to pilfer them
back. Stealing was in Braaf like blood and breath. He had been a
Stockholm street boy, some of a prostitute and the captain of a Danish
fishing ketch, and on his own in life by the age of seven. Alaska
he had chosen because, after a steady growth of skill from begging
to picking pockets to thievery, the other destination beckoning to
him was prison. Braaf arrived to Sitka the year after Karlsson and
Melander, and at once, skinning knives and twists of tobacco and other
unattached items began to vanish from the fort as if having grown wings
in the night. The Russians vented fury on the harborfront natives
for the outbreak of vanishment, but the Swedes rapidly made a different
guess, for Braaf was becoming a kind of human commissary in the barracks.
Because he was reasonable in his prices—interested less in making
money than in breaking the monotony of Sitka life, which he found to
be a kind of rain-soaked hell—and was diplomatic enough not to steal
anything major from his countryman, nothing was said against him.

It would have been hard anyway to make a case against Braaf.

At twenty, he had the round ruddy face of a farmboy—an apple of a
face—and a gaze which lofted innocently just above the eyes of
whomever he was talking to: as if he were considerately measuring
you for a hat. He looked back and forth from Melander's forehead
to Karlsson's as Melander outlined the plan. His eyes came
level with theirs only for an instant, just before he agreed to join
them.
That is how they became three. Disquieted shipman, musing hunter, agreeable thief, now plotters all. Against them, and not yet knowing it, although habitually guardful as governing apparatuses have to be, stood Sitka and its system of life. The system of all empires, when you come to think of it, for empires exist on the principle of constellations—pattern imposed across expanse—and the Sitkas of the planet at the time, whether named Sitka or Santa Fe or Hong Kong or Algeciras or Astoria or Leopoldville or Algeciras or Sydney, were their specific scintillations of outline. The far pinspots representing vastly more than they themselves were. There in the middle of the nineteenth century, the work of putting out lines across the planet in a star-web this way was being done with the white wakes of sailing ships; sealanes along which the imperial energies resolutely pulsed back and forth, capital to colony and colony to capital. The maritime tracework succeeded greatly: the Queen of England gained an Empress's crown, Moscow dandies wore Alaskan sables, the United States added a second oceanfront. But all this atlas of order rests on the fact that it requires acceptance, a faith of seeing
and saying, "Oh yes, that is the Southern Cross, and here Pegasus, and there Andromeda, exactly so," to make constellations real; so that what the makers of any imperial configuration always had to be most wary of was minds which happened not to be of stellar allegiance.
Braaf proved so adept a provisioner that Melander was forced to ration out his stealing assignments, lest the Russians become suspicious about the fresh blizzard of thievery. By the end of July, the planners' cache held a compass, two tins of gunpowder, a long-barreled Kuprilov musket used for seal hunting, and thirty balls for it, several fishing lines and hooks, and a fire flint apiece. During August Braaf added a coil of rope, three knives, two ordinary muskets, and a hatchet. September's harvest was a second compass—Melander wanted to be as certain as possible about navigation—a small iron kettle, another musket and a water cask.

Early in October, the plotters met to talk about the canoe.

Karlsson had eyed out one to recommend, an eighteen-foot shell of unusual delicacy with a prow carved in the figure of a bear's head.

(Had any of them had the imagination, it would have occurred to them that they were to set forth in a craft not unlike the dragonships of their ancestors.) The canoe was smaller than Melander preferred—asked his opinion, Braaf only mumbled, than any canoe was smaller than he preferred—but Karlsson vouched for its seaworthiness. Next Karlsson, who rarely asserted
was displaying himself but seemed downright passionate about these canoe matters, insisted on Clyoquot paddles, a broad-headed type carved by a tribe far south along the coast and occasionally bartered north as prized items of trade. Braaf frowned. He had reason; it took him all of the next week to accumulate a trio of Clyoquot paddles from the Sitka natives along the harbor.

"Three?" said Karlsson when they met again. "What if we lose one?" Braaf cursed in his sweet voice, and went off to start the thief's siege of watching and waiting which would glean a fourth paddle.
Karlsson's assigned task, in these months of preparation, was
the watchman above the gate of the fort.

"You have the wedge which can open that gate for us," Melander
told him jovially. "It's between your legs."

Karlsson now made his visits to the native huts even more
frequently, and extended them farther into the night, until he began
regularly to nudge against the fort's curfew. Before long, the tactic
found him the sentry he was looking for: Bilbin, one of the oldest
of the soldiers in the Sitka garrison, something of a scapegrace who
stood almost perpetual guard duty. The first few times Karlsson came
late, Bilbin blustered a threat to march him to the guardhouse. But
did nothing. The next time, Karlsson staggered up to the gate, singing--

Karlsson was surprised with himself by becoming
"Oo"; it was a revelation to Karlsson how adept he was at being an
actor; "Oo"--and carrying a jug of the native liquor called butzina,
which without great difficulty he persuaded Bilbin to swig from.

The butzina worked; under the Sitka garrison allotment of fifty cups
of rum per man per year, Bilbin was a man parched. Soon Karlsson,
on the nights when Bilbin stood watch, was slipping out of the fort
after curfew--"Come have a tumble yourself," Karlsson would invite;
"No, no, I'm limber as a goose's neck, no more women for me, you can have mine too," Bilibin would invariably splutter back at him—and returning in the middle of the night with one to proffer the hutzina jug.

By first snowfall of that autumn of 1852, Karlsson was well on his way to legendary status among the native women along Sitka habbor, and Bilibin had been readied to topple into the escape plan.
In early November when the three met, Melander told Braaf the time had come to steal the coastline map they would navigate south by. Better to do it early and let suspicions fade by the time the escape was ready, than to risk a last-minute filch. This would be tricky, Melander cautioned, because Braaf would need to sneak aboard the steamship, sort quickly among the maps in the chart room and—

Melander stopped short as Braaf shook his head. "Oh?" Melander demanded. "What is it?"

"I can't read," Braaf said.

Melander never liked the unforeseen, and this he had not thought of at all. His displeasure increased monumentally when he realized that Karlsson, who was due to go out for several days of hunting, could not manage the theft either.

"Jesu Maria. Have to become even a common sneakthief, do I?"

Melander grumbled. Braaf tried to look as if he hadn't heard, but coughed atop what could have been a sudden grin.
At their next session, Braaf and Karlsson quizzed Melander with their looks. "I have it, I have it," Melander said edgily. "It was a near thing. For some damnable reason a couple of the Russian officers decided to come aboard just then, but I was able to dodge them. Let's get on with the list. We'll need new canvas for the canoe sail, can't trust the rotten stuff the natives've been using. You can recognize canvas, Braaf, can't you?"
Braaf was making off with the canvas, the folded length of it beneath an armload of skins he was pretending to carry across the fort toward the tannery, when a voice—in his fright it registered that the voice at least was Swedish instead of Russian—suggested huskily into his ear, "Let's talk about what you have under those hides."

Braaf turned his head the fraction enough to recognize the flat wide face of a blacksmith named Wennberg.

"No, don't walk away and don't put them down," Wennberg ordered. "We'll have a visit until we see which interesting thing happens first. Whether you spill that load in front of these Russians, or your friend Melander trots himself over here."

Melander arrived with a lanky swiftness which to any onlooker would seem as if he had been beckoned over to consult with the pair in the center of the fort's open space. His dark look met Wennberg's calm like a cloud against a snowpeak.

"Well, Melander," Wennberg said. "Braaf and I were just talking about how much heavier hides have gotten this year. It seems a man can hardly hold a pood of them in his arms these days."
"A man can carry as much as the world puts on him, it is said."

Melander responded crisply, still glowering at Wennberg.

"You always were a thinker, Melander. Isn't he, Braaf?"

nudged his broad elbow into Braaf's right bicep, drawing a gasp. "A thinker, mum?"

"Let's give Braaf a rest, shall we?" Melander offered. "You obviously have much to say about matters of weight."

The two men, Melander more angular than ever beside the wide Wennberg, strolled across the fort while Braaf lurched his way out of sight. Inside the smithing shop, its broad doors open to let the forge heat escape,

Melander looked out into the fort from where Wennberg stood by the hour at his work, nodded thoughtfully and asked: "So?"

"You have plans to get away from this Russian bearpit, and I'm coming with you."

"Are you?"

"I am. Or you and Braaf and Karlsson will be hung from the top of the fort for the magpies to feast on."
Melander held Wennberg's gaze in a lock with his own, then gave the serious smile. "First you speak of too much weight, then of too much height. Wennberg, I think you maybe underestimate how far a man can stretch himself if he has to. Can you handle a Clyoquot paddle?"

Melander spent some talking to convince Braaf and Karlsson that the best choice was to bring Wennberg into the plan. Braaf volunteered to kill the blacksmith, if someone would tell him how it might be done. Melander shook his head. He had thought it through, and the death of a valued smith such as Wennberg—especially when the killing would have to be done here within the fort—would raise more questions than it was worth. "Besides, he is a bull for strength. We can use him."

Karlsson squinted in thought, then said that what galled him was to be at Wennberg's mercy. What if he took it into his narrow bull mind to betray them to the Russians for a reward?

Aye, Melander agreed, that was the very problem to be grappled.

"We'll have to set a snare for Mister Wennberg."
The four of them met. Karlsson openly studied Wennberg. Wennberg gave back as much scrutiny as he got. Braaf's gaze now floated steadily along three foreheads instead of two.

"We have a thing to tell you, Wennberg," Melander began. "Since you're new to our midst, we can't really know whether your fondest wish is to go with us from Sitka or to sell us to the Russians as waverings, conspirators. If you've had any, it'll be a relief to you to know we've made up your mind for you. There's no profit whatsoever for you to go to the Russians."

Wennberg had a temper hot and fast as the fire of his forge. "Your tongue is bigger than your brain, Melander. It's not for you to tell me who stands where. Don't forget that I can always show the Russians the hidey-hole where you've had Braaf stashing things."

"But Wennberg, heart's friend, there's nothing there. Unless you're interested in mouse turds, and even the Russians might find it hard to believe that we've been busy storing away mouse turds. Aye? No, Wennberg, since you've invited yourself along with us we thought we'd get ourselves a new hidey-hole.
This is a large fort, and Braaf is good at finding his way around in it. You'll know where the cache is when we load the canoe, and not a minute before. So go to the Russians whenever you feel like it, but you'll have nothing to show them."

"Except mouse turds." This unexpectedly from Braaf, who still was studying the air above the other three. Wennberg shot him a blaring look.

"Yes, the incriminating mouse turds," Melander chuckled. "Otherwise, it's you against the three of us, Wennberg, and we'll see who the Russians choose to believe. You wouldn't be the first one here to be thought out of his mind."

Wennberg scowled around the trio, opened his mouth to say something, but Karlsson beat him to it. "Be careful of your words, Wennberg. If you're coming with us, we have much time ahead together and don't need the ghost of bad feelings. If you're going to the Russians, you don't want your last words to weigh wrongly on your soul."

Wennberg stared at Karlsson as if the hunter had just changed
skin color before his eyes. Then he swung the heavy look to Braaf, and

and length

at last to Melander. "You set of squareheads may be better at this

than I thought," Wennberg said. "Now you can tell me how we are to

run on the sea."

Into

Wännberg's ears, as months before the words had sought their way

into Karlsson and Braaf, the plan went. Wennberg would not have

been Wennberg if he had not begun an immediate barrage of questions.

"Why all this fuss with Bilibin? Why not just cut his stupid

throat when we're ready?" he asked first, as if wondering whether

rain wasn't the likeliest prospect for

"Because if we kill one of his men, Chirikov"--the Russian garrison

officer--"will have to come after us. If we leave Bilibin alive,

Chirikov will take it out on him."

has Braaf laid his dainty

"How many muskets may have you laid hands on?" Melander told him

three muskets and the seal rifle,

the total so far was four, and they would need five more by the night

of the escape. Braaf blinked rapidly, and even Karlsson was surprised,

but again it was Wennberg who blurted: "Great good God, Melander, nine
rifles altogether? We're going in a canoe, not a man-of-war."

"Can you name me a better cargo, Wennberg? Do you think the crows are going to feed us on this journey, and the wolves will guard us with their keen teeth? We don't know what we'll face, but I want ball and powder to face it with. If you wish to come along naked, so be it."

Wennberg grumbled, then said that if Melander was so fixed on the topic of muskets, he was willing to help out. When the time was ready, he could hold back muskets which came to the smith shop by saying he hadn't got around to repairing them yet. Melander congratulated him, entering the spirit of their enterprise, Braaf and Karlsson said nothing. Wennberg bulled on from the topic of muskets: "And you know for heaven-certain, Melander, that we'll find this American fort at—what is it, Asturia?"

"Astoria, named for the rich man Astor. It is there, I have known sailors whose ships have called there. Perhaps we will not even have to go that far, if we meet a merchantman or supply ship along the way. English, Spanish, Americans or the devil, it won't matter, long as they're not Russians."
"And the natives?" Karlsson put in.

"I already said the devil."

Even Wennberg silenced by that, Melander now told them the escape date. Christmas. The Russians would be celebrating and carousing and dancing their boots off as they did on the holiday, and it would be natural for Karlsson to offer Bilibin a few extra swigs of hootzina, Melander explained. Nor, when their escape had been discovered, would the Russians be eager to leave their warm festivities to chase them through the cold of night. Confusion, alcohol, reluctance, all would be their allies for the escape, the tall leader said; the best possible guests for Sitka Christmas.
The waiting became a kind of never attached to each of their lives, a man now cast two shadows and one of them fell into their bodies instead of away. The outer man had to perform as ever—do their jobs, eat, sleep, carry on barracks gabble—while inside, this sudden new shadow-creature, the one in wait, bided the days only in thought of what was ahead.

Melandier as he waited studied the map firmly into his mind. Before long, the south-descending coastal chain of islands could have been recited out of him like Old Testament genealogy: Sitka's Baranof Island to beget Kului Island for the escapers, Kului to beget Kosciusko, Kosciusko Heceta and Heceta Suemes, south and south and south through watery geography and explorers' mother tongues until the eventual rivermouth port called Astoria. Perhaps because he had in mind the seamen's way of letting the days take care of distance, simply accepting that because there is more time than there is expanse of the world any journey at last will end, Melander tended to think of the escape only in this stepping-stone manner, rarely by the totality of what he and the other three were intending. This made a loss to them all, for Melander alone of the four had traveled greatly enough on the planet to entirely understand
the scope of their escape. To grasp that their intended distance stretched—wove, rather, down the island-thick coast—as far as the distance from Stockholm to Venice, or from Gibraltar across all the top of Africa to Sicily. Each mile of the thousand along a cold northern brink of ocean which in winter is misnamed entirely: not pacific at all, but malignant. Melander could have used this knowledge to put a tempered edge on the plan; yet even he seemed not able to face all the miles at once, only those from island to island. In his waiting, Wennberg too spent much of his time in long spells of calculation: in the slow forge of his mind he turned and turned the question of whether to betray the escape rather than join it. If the Russians could be relied on to reward him, say grant an early return to Sweden, there would be reason; but it did not seem to him the Russians would yield the loss of a blacksmith, whatever they promised. If they did not transport him, Wennberg would not be safe afterward in Sitka as a betrayer. Karlsson and perhaps even the sneakthief Braaf would be a threat to his life ever after. Wennberg was not certain about the prospects of Melander's plan, but neither did he see, now, anyway.
out of it. What Wennberg imagined was going to be his power over Melander and the other two somehow, by some coil of the escape plan, was turning out to be their power over him as well.

Karlsson waited with less edginess than the others. There always was a calm about Karlsson which verged on coldness. He knew his own capabilities, could gauge himself accurately as to whether he was living up to them, and had indifference for people who lacked either capability or gauge. Unlike Wennberg who was continually flexing himself, Karlsson went through life as a man in wait. This patience of his was not nearly all virtue; it kept him in situations when a Wennberg would have bailed out or a Braaf wrestled out, and indeed had deposited him at Sitka. Like Melander a few years before him, Karlsson was a part of the Swedish diaspora which began in the 1840's, a man uncoupled from his family's farm by a surplus of brothers and absence of opportunity. The two brothers younger than Karlsson caught America fever, put themselves into the emigrant stream aimed to the prairies beyond the Great Lakes. At their suggestion that he come along, Karlsson gave his serious smile and said only: "I am no farm maker." His liking for hunting and trapping,
for time in the forest, bent him toward Alaska. He minded Sitka

life less than any of the other Swedes. What held Karlsson into the

pattern of the escape was the plan itself: the question of capacity,

whether "Melander's idea could be made real, could transport men along

the wild coast. There was also the musing to be done about how he

himself would perform for one thing, Karlsson wondered whether sometime

during the escape he would have to kill Wennberg; and for another,

whether he could manage to kill him.

The hardest wait of all was Braaf's, for Melander had forbidden

him from stealing until the final flurry of muskets and hardtack on

the date of the escape. To keep his hands busy Braaf had taken up

carving, and after his first effort, a copying of a madonna in the

Russians' cathedral of St. Michael who emerged from Braaf's

fingers somehow looking simultaneously mournful and sly, it had been

little

Melander who suggested, "Carve us a small figurehead for the journey,

Braaf. A lady for luck." It had been Wennberg who added, "Where we're

going, better make her a mermaid," and so Braaf did.
The night of the sixth of January, 1853, by the Russian calendar, the night of Christmas. Karlsson staggered against the fort gate. "Be GREATed joyful Morning HOURER," he bawled. "Christ the SAVior is COME... BORNNN..."

"Shush! Christ save us, man, you'll have the sergeant down here," Bilibin called urgently and hurriedly cracked the gate. "Quick, up here."

From the dark beside the warehouse, Melander watched until the two shapes bobbed into the shadow of the guardhouse. When he heard Bilibin guffaw and saw the pale shape of the jug move from Karlsson to the guard, he rapidly crossed the fort.

"Now," Braaf heard Melander's voice say as his tall figure moved past. (Braaf begins to gather final thefts, muskets and hardtack.)

Inside the door of the barracks, Melander loudly stomped the snow from his feet, muttered something about having forgot his gloves, and turned back into the dark. Wennberg, who had been stropping a knife as he watched two skinners play cards, said he was off to the toilet--if the Russians allowed such a matter on such a holy night--and to the laughter of the card players pulled on his parka and stepped into the
dark beside Melander.

Snow made a dry noise beneath their feet as they crossed the fort. Melander looked back to see how sharply their footprints stood out in the moonlight, then dismissed the thought. Shortly, footprints would be the least of their concerns.

Beneath the guardhouse the third shadow, Braaf, joined them, and Melander called up huskily: "Karlsson." A figure loomed out in soldier cap and with a musket at quarter arms. Wennberg cursed and grabbed for the knife inside his parka. The figure looked down at him and chided in Karlsson's voice: "I thought I had better look the part. You don't find Bilibin's hat becoming on me, Wennberg?"

"It's time," Melander said. Karlsson eased the gate open enough for them to slip through, and the men below him began to carry supplies to the canoe. It took two trips, the three of them carrying the first time, then Braaf and Wennberg back for a second load while Melander stowed, then Melander back beneath the gate alone to say, "Ready. Come when you can."
Karlsson waited the unmoving span of time until at last the call came out of the dark to his right. "Eleventh hour, all quiet, God save our father the Tsar."

Having been rehearsed by Melander, whose Russian was better than his own, Karlsson said back the watch call, as close as he could come to Bilibin's bray. Then on impulse he brayed again, again in Russian:

"Merry Christmas!"

There was a moment of deep silence at the other guardpost, as of surprise. Then: "Merry Christmas to you, Peter Ivanovich!"
Even in the motley gallery of frontier posts, New Archangel was a place like no other. Baranov’s Castle squatted in the air at one end of the settlement; at another rose the onion dome and carrot spire of the Cathedral of St. Michael. The Russians put up buildings of massive squared logs, then painted them a delicate yellow ochre as if they were seaside cottages. Old ship hulks were hauled ashore for their capacity: one had been used as a gun emplacement, another as a church, which must have made the Kolosh think deeply about their new landlords. A promenade extended along a headland pretty point, but the streets were a mire. Backwater and capital

New Archangel ran on of more than half a million square miles, the Russian capacities and was kept from running any better than it did by for hard labor and doggedness, 

The population picture of New Archangel was as complicated as its architecture and weather. In the three decades since Baranov’s a naval officer time the Russian Navy was in charge of New Archangel, but as 00 of the Russian-American Company.
Even in the array of bizarre frontier enclaves sparked into creation by imperialism, New Archangel was a place not much like any other.

Simultaneously a far-north backwater and capital of more than half a million square miles, for half a century the settlement had run on the Russian capacities for hard labor and doggedness, and was kept from running any better than it did by the Russian penchant for muddle and infighting. New Archangel in 1852 still was in the image of its founder, the stumpy and tenacious Baranov, the first governor of Russian America and chief administrator of the Russian-American Company's fur-gathering operations. It was said of Baranov, like Napoleon, that he was a little great man, and he it was who in 1791 began to push it was who pushed Russian power from the Aleutians down the great arc of Alaska's coast, bending or breaking the native cultures one after another: the Aleuts chastened into becoming the Russians' seasonal seal hunters, the people of the Kenai cajoled into alliance by Baranov's mating with the daughter of the foremost chief, the stubbornly combative 'Sis, in 1804,
Tlingits at last dislodged from Sitka Sound by the cannonades of a gunship.
Sitka Sound, the one sizable and well-sheltered bay along the islanded shoreline of southeastern Alaska, was the coastal ringhold Baranov needed to knot the Russian power to. Mountains drop sheer to the water along nearly all of that coast, but at Sitka the long notch of bay is sided by ledge of shore, and at the shore's southmost hook a helmet-like knoll rises to an elevation of sixty or so feet.

The Tlingits, whom the Russians called Kolosh, held the mound as a stronghold and Baranov took the site for his own thick-logged bastion. Here in the spring of 1852, Baranov three decades dead, the governor's double-storied house still called Baranov's Castle squatted there in the air at one extent of New Archangel's single street, at the opposite end rose the onion dome and carrot spire of the little Orthodox Cathedral of St. Michael. (The morning after Braaf joined the escape plan, Karlsson emerges from around a corner of the cathedral, having come from the workmen's barracks a short way to its north, and walks this street between God's domain and Governor's. He is to spend this day at the shipyard, so skilled with an ax that he is sometimes lent to help shape a mainmast. Before reaching the shipyard, however, he veers west toward the stockade gate and the Kolosh village beyond, steps
outside and stands for a minute studying the Kolosh canoes lined
along the beach. All the town, cathedral and Castle and the other
squared-log buildings painted a delicate yellow ochre as if they
were seaside cottages, was dwarfed by the nearby mountains. The
peaks were those a child would draw, simple high pyramids of
lesser forest, occasionally a smaller mountain with a top round as a
cannonball. (As Karlsson begins hewing at the shipyard, Braaf
appears at the wooded slope north of New Archangel. Almost
every day Braaf manages to manufacture free time for himself. When
he arrived to New Archangel and it immediately became evident that
he was not, as listed on one manifest, a shipwright, nor, as
listed on another item of record, a candlemaker, and Braaf with shy
innocence denied knowing how such misunderstandings had come about,
the perplexed clerk assigned him to an unskilled
job, as a cook's helper. Much of his free time he spent at this
rise of land, which held New Archangel's four graveyards: Kolosh,
Russian Orthodox, Lutheran, and unconsecrated. This morning he walks
past, as usual, a particularly handsome headstone of a Russian officer
named Gavrilo. Braaf cannot comprehend the Russian words, which read:
"Peace be to your dust.")
The mountains perpetually were at war with the weather, for New Archangel lived two days of three in rain, and oftener than that in cloud. Yet it was a place of queer clarity as well, with a cast of blue light which made things stand out: the branches of trees on the mountain slopes, the timbered islands of the harbor. Voices and the barking of dogs carried extraordinarily. (At mid-morning work-break, Braaf reluctantly coming from the cemetery slope to begin chores for the noon meal, Melander appears from the saltery on the point fully in of shoreline southeast of the cathedral. Sitka Sound shares the twenty-foot tides of that region of Alaska, and on the broad exposed tideland, a pig is rooting up clams while ravens seize his find one after another. Melander watches for a moment, then laughs. Other workmen look over at him. Melander points to the ravens: "The Castle at one of their banquets," he says.)

The population of New Archangel was as complicated as its architecture and geography and its weather.
night's shelter, and where one of them is to die.

The escape from Sitka had been Melander's plan. He despised the life he and the other Swedes found themselves in there: "The Russians' oxen," he grumbled of their situation. Under different policy, Melander would have earned his way up the ranks of the Russian-American Company like a little boy up a schooner's rigging; would have become a valued fur-trading apparatchik in the manner, let us say, that certain young Scots were singled out to fashion themselves into the field commanders of the Hudson's Bay Company elsewhere along the fur frontiers of northern North America. Men who led brigades of trappers and traders, kept the native tribes collaborative or cowed, delivered a reliable profit season upon season to London and, not incidentally, held those far spans of map not only in the name of their corporate employers but for the crown whose symbol was imprinted on the company charter. But in the farthest north and west of the continent, where Alaska thrusts toward Siberia, the Tsar's corporate men took their profits from the wilderness by fist rather than thoughtful plucking.
So they were three. Sailor, hunter, thief. Against them, and not yet knowing it, though systematically suspicious as governing powers have to be, was Sitka and its system of life.
By autumn, Karlsson was well on his way to legendary status among the native women, and Bilibin was set up for the escape.
Karlsson's first question to Melander was whether Wennberg ought not to be killed. Melander shook his head. He had thought it through, and the death of a valued trapper such as Wennberg—especially when it would have to be a killing within the fort, rather than anything which could be made to seem a trapline accident—would raise more questions than it was worth. "Besides, he is a canoeman. We can use him."

All three of the others were surprised at Wennberg's smooth fit into the escape. He listened, said little, even volunteered for CO, a task they had been dreading. Known around the fort as something of a blusterer, W became so serious that M had to caution him about changing himself too noticeably.
So they became three. Sailor, hunter, thief, now plotters all.

Against them, and not yet knowing it, although habitually suspicious and guardful as governing powers have to be, was Sitka and its system of life. More than that, when you come to think of it.