

Into The Great Solitude

An Arctic Journey

by *Robert Perkins*

To Nick Shields
1950-1971

*If only we arrange our life according to that
principle which counsels us that we must
always hold to the difficult, then that which
now still seems to us the most alien will
become what we most trust and find faithful.*

Rainer Maria Rilke,
Letters to a Young Poet

True wisdom is only found far away from people, out in the great solitude, and it is not found in play but only through suffering. Solitude and suffering open the human mind, and therefore a shaman must seek his wisdom there.

**—Recorded by Greenland ethnographer
Knud Rasmussen during his Fifth Thule
Expedition from Greenland to Siberia,
1921–1924**

I.

SURELY THE LOON IS A CURIOUS CREATURE

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To *travel alone* is risky business, especially into a wilderness; equally risky is to have dreams and not follow them. The risks I perceive, standing on the dock in Yellowknife, are palpable: during the next ten weeks, canoeing on a remote Arctic river, I might throw my back out, break a leg, lose my canoe, get lost, or simply drown. Although these thoughts scare me, I remind myself that far to the south exists another world, equally hazardous but harder to visualize. There are many kinds of wilderness, not just this indifferent treeless tundra north of me. Facing the summer and all its unknowns, I consider myself lucky compared to some people back home.

White fluffy clouds are sailing over Yellowknife from the northwest: a perfect day for flying. My planning is over. The fundraising and the packing are behind me. I have driven three thousand miles, not across America, but northwest from Boston, along the Trans-Canada Highway, north to Edmonton, Alberta, then due north from there to the end of the road in Yellowknife.

Open an atlas to the map of North America or, better yet, to northern Canada, and let your eye find the landmass between Alaska and Hudson Bay called the Northwest Territories. Toward the center of this space you'll see a large lake in the shape of a swan in flight, Great Slave Lake. North of the northeast corner of the lake are a chain of smaller lakes: Artillery, Clinton-Colden, and Aylmer. These lakes lead to the headwaters of the Back River, a river that flows across the top of the Territories in a northeasterly direction until it reaches the Arctic Ocean at the foot of the Chantrey Inlet. The Back is the king and queen

of Arctic rivers: long, tough, beautiful, dangerous, and magnificent to canoe. The wildness, the romance, the history, and the adventure of this river—the longest North American river entirely embraced by the tundra—have drawn me here. I don't expect to see anyone. There are no settlements between where I will be dropped off and the place where I will be picked up on the Arctic coast. At the mouth of the river is a sport fishing camp, but by the time I arrive there in late August, the camp will be closed, winter will have begun. No Eskimos, or, as they prefer to be called, Inuit, live in the interior. The government moved the last families out in the 1950s because they were starving. Never mind that for centuries they had managed to live off this land and called it their home. My world, the world of commerce and progress and soul saving, corrupted the Inuit and undermined their culture. Now this vast land supports nothing but itself, its animals, its flora, fish, birds, and weather.

I stand on the dock watching the clouds as the pilot and base manager run the last checks on the float plane after loading my few pieces of equipment. The canoe is lashed tight to the struts of the starboard float. A shiver of excitement—or fear—flows through me. I stand on the edge of a great adventure, the realization of a dream only one person thought would ever occur.

A piece of dream became my touchstone all winter. It had to do with loons, a bad night's sleep, and snow. "Surely the loon is a curious creature," I scribbled while half asleep. I named my canoe after the dream, after the loon. There she is in the sunlight: slim, small, and handsome, painted black and white, yin

and yang, like the colors of her namesake, the oldest bird listed in the field guide. During the spring, few people who saw Loon appreciated the unusual canoe my friend Denny Alsop was building. She doesn't resemble a traditional canoe. Remarks were made about whether she would float. To many she seemed to be an ugly duckling and not the wonderful canoe Denny and I knew her to be. Her sides curve in toward the centerline; there is no rise in the bow or the stern. She looks delicate, but isn't. "Surely the loon is a curious creature." Like any dream, mine seemed to have arrived from nowhere, but it stuck, acting as an interior lightning rod for something equally implausible: this trip.

Watching the flight crew prepare the small plane, I think of my father in a Boston hospital room. Earlier this spring, a standard operation on his seventy-two-year-old heart created unusual complications. Two days after my departure for Yellowknife, he collapsed. He didn't realize that while he was recuperating, he was bleeding internally. My mother told me on the phone this morning that if the doctors can find the leak and make his blood clot, they give him a fifty-fifty chance. This is harder on her than on him. He has only to fight for his life. She has to watch and worry. "He might die" wasn't on anyone's lips during the spring, but it was on our minds.

As the operation approached, he sent his five children an article from a medical journal describing the upcoming surgery. It did not mention complications. In my hectic rush to complete my preparations I ignored it, and the operation, choosing instead to believe, as he said, that this was no big deal.

Between us exists a host of sparring, competitive feelings. If a healthy relationship includes adversity, ours is robust.

My father has never shown much enthusiasm for the direction my life has taken. He worries about my risk-taking, my questions, my interest in art—all of which have never earned a penny. His world revolves around finances and dividends, annual reports and newspapers. I find community in wilderness; he finds his in wife, friends, sailing, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He's interested in order; I'm not—not that kind, anyway.

Five minutes before the plane takes off. Five minutes to think of what I've forgotten, what else I need. I can't shake the thought of my father lying in that white room. This morning on the phone my mother sounded tired; her voice said there was no change in his condition. That's it for the summer: no change. That's all I'll know until I come out: a fifty-fifty chance, and no change.

Our family grew up by the sea, and we spent the time my father had for us on the sea. We've learned to accept, as has our mother, that the sea is the object of his deepest affection. He is a Columbus, though not one venturing forth to discover New Worlds. He likes gunkholing downeast, poking in and out of known and unknown anchorages. He's owned two boats: *Puffin* and, for the last twenty-seven years, *Goldeneye*, a Concordia yawl, by modern standards an old-fashioned wooden yacht, graceful but definitely old-fashioned. This suits him fine. He couldn't care less about modern designs.

During the summer he'd as soon sit on *Goldeneye* tied up to the dock as be anywhere. Winters he'd stay put by his fire,

enjoy his family, and putter on boat-related tasks, read navigation books, and dream about next summer's cruising. Even by Boston standards, he's considered old-fashioned.

He came home from work one night, years ago, and announced to my mother that they would go on a winter vacation. They never took winter vacations. That was time taken away from summer sailing.

She didn't believe him. She had never been to Europe, let alone to the tropics in winter. But while she prepared dinner and he went to change clothes, her suspicion warmed to enthusiasm. She imagined them walking on endless stretches of white beach, with palm trees, heat, a turquoise sea, more heat, and moonlit dinners. As a native Californian, she easily saw herself out of the slush, the cold, and the depressing gray skies of Massachusetts. She was imagining what she'd pack when he reappeared, ready to make them cocktails. She asked him which island they were going to.

"Island?" he said quizzically. "I've reserved a room at the Ritz in town, an island of sorts. I thought it would be fun to spend a week there." Mistaking my mother's look of disappointment for one of disapproval, he said apologetically, "We could go to a less expensive hotel, but look at it this way: I can go to the office every day; you'll be near your friends, and besides, why would anyone want to go to someplace where they didn't know your name?"

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