

Out in the Great Alone

by Brian Phillips

Prologue: A Lot of Ways to Die

In the summer of 1977, a fire swept across the wilderness of interior Alaska, west of Mount McKinley. Tundra burned to rock; 345,000 acres of forest – more than 530 square miles – disappeared in flames. When the smoke cleared, it left behind a weird scar on the map, a vast, charred crater littered with deadfall. In the winter, when temperatures in the interior dive to 40 below, the skeletons of burned trees snapped in the cold or were ripped out by powerful winds. The tussocks of tundra grass froze as hard as bowling balls.

Every year in early March, the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race sets out from Anchorage, in the south-central part of the state, and runs northwest toward the finish line in Nome, on the coast of the Bering Sea. In its early stages, the trail runs upward, into the mountains of the Alaska Range, then plunges down, into the interior, where it enters the fire's scorched country.

For the mushers of the Iditarod, the Farewell Burn, as the region became known, was a nightmare. The race had been founded only four years earlier, as a way to commemorate the importance of sled dogs to Alaska. Large expanses of the state had, for much of its history, been unreachable by other forms of transportation. Now dog teams were forced to navigate through blackened stumps and fallen limbs, along a trail that was often impossible to follow. Many years, the Burn accumulated little precipitation. Sleds intended for snow and ice had to be dragged across hardened mud and gravel. Runners broke; tree shards snagged tug lines; speeds dropped to 3 or 4 miles per hour.

In 1984, the Alaska Bureau of Land Management cut a swath for a better trail. But even then, a seasoned musher could need 12 hours or more to cross from Rohn to Nikolai, the checkpoints on either side of the Burn – a passage that would frequently be made in darkness, through heavy wind and extreme, subzero cold. The novelist Gary Paulsen, who ran the Iditarod twice in the 1980s, describes the Burn as a place where mushers literally go mad. "It was beyond all reason," Paulsen writes in his Iditarod memoir *Winterdance*. "I entered a world of mixed reality and dreams, peopled with the most bizarre souls and creatures..." At one point he thinks he's on a beach in California; at another he pulls out a real ax to fend off an attack from an imaginary moose. When he comes to, his dogs have vanished; he's alone in the landscape. He stumbles across them 100 yards away. He has built a fire and bedded them down without knowing it.

The Iditarod Trail runs across the Burn for around 35 miles of its total length. The total length of the Iditarod Trail is more than 1,000 miles. The Burn is not the most difficult section.

In late February, I flew to Alaska with the intention of following the 2013 Iditarod all the way from Anchorage to Nome. This was a plan of – I think I might be quoting my editors on this – questionable sanity, even before you consider the logistical complexity of chasing several dozen sled-dog teams across a subarctic wilderness the size of the Eastern Seaboard. That's not an exaggeration, by the way: There's disagreement over how long the Iditarod Trail really is, but the best estimates peg it at right around the distance from Carnegie Hall to Epcot. The fastest mushers take around nine days to reach the finish line, and that's assuming ideal conditions, say 15 below, with blue skies and hard-packed, ice-slick snow.

I was staring at a week and a half of bone-deep cold, probable-verging-on-inevitable blizzards, baneful travel conditions, and total isolation from the civilized (read: broadband-having) world. I hate snow, do not play winter sports, keep the thermostat at 65 on a good day, and haven't logged out of Spotify since 2011. I'm not even a dog person.

I called a pilot.

“Do you have experience in winter-survival-type situations?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “I survive them by staying indoors. It’s a technique that’s worked well for me so far.”

“Have you spent any time in small aircraft?”

“I’ve, uh...I’ve watched movies where people spent time in small aircraft.”

“How about winter camping, backpacking, anything along those lines?”

“Day hikes,” I said miserably.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Well,” he said, “I’ll be straight with you. There are a lot of ways to die in Alaska.”

That was in September. Over the next four months, the phrase “please don’t die” started cropping up with maybe slightly more frequency than you’d like to see in your work e-mails.

Why was I so keen to do this? To make this trip for which I was patently unprepared? It had something to do with Alaska itself, its sheer hugeness and emptiness – 731,449 people spread out over 570,640 square miles, a territory larger than Spain, France, and Germany combined holding slightly fewer people than the metro area of Dayton, Ohio. I mean, the density stats are a joke. The U.S. average is 87.4 inhabitants per square mile. The 45th-most-dense state, New Mexico, thins that down to 17. Alaska has 1.28. And more than 40 percent of Alaskans live in one city! Factor out metropolitan Anchorage and you’re looking at about three quarters of one person per square mile, in a land area 10 times the size of Wisconsin.

I don’t know how you roll, emotionally, with respect to population-density tables. Personally, I find this *haunting*.

I’ve always been fascinated by the cold places at the end of the world. Back when I used to spend a lot of time in libraries, I wasted stacks of hours going through polar-exploration narratives, tracking the adventurers who froze to death, the expeditions that vanished. The generation of Scott and Shackleton was probably the last one to live with the old intuitive belief that the world went on beyond the part of it that their civilization had discovered. That there were meaningful blanks on the map, *terra incognita*. It’s riveting to watch these practical-minded emissaries of high European culture hurl themselves into an unknown that they’re not equipped to handle. Robert Falcon Scott, who died in Antarctica in 1912, tried to take ponies to the South Pole because he didn’t trust sled dogs. Apsley Cherry-Garrard, who wrote, with no exaggeration, a memoir called *The Worst Journey in the World*, nearly died several unimaginably horrifying early-20th-century deaths while trying to retrieve an emperor penguin egg, for Science. I know the genealogies of their ships. *HMS Terror* and *Erebus*, the vessels in which James Clark Ross charted the coast of Antarctica in the 1840s – you’ll find a Mount Terror and Mount Erebus there still, volcanoes on Ross Island – and how they disappeared, along with Sir John Franklin’s entire expedition, in 1845. *Fram*, the ship from which Roald Amundsen set out for the South Pole in 1910, and how it was first designed for Fridtjof Nansen’s mad, brilliant scheme to embed himself in Arctic sea ice.

I’m not saying this is right, but there’s something magical to me, something literally enchanted, about a place that can inhale a clutch of Victorian sailing ships and leave behind a handful of brass buttons and a copy of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Terrifying, but enchanted. That high white vanishing fog – doesn’t it call to you, too?

No one’s sure what the word Iditarod means. The best guess is that it comes from the Ingalik and Holikachuk word *hidedhod*, meaning “faraway place.” It’s the name of a river; in 1908, a couple of prospectors found gold on one of the tributaries, Otter Creek. A boom town, named for the river, sprang up. Now it’s a ghost city, an empty bank vault and an abandoned brothel. This year’s race goes right through it. People

who'd been there told me about camping out under the northern lights, watching the dogs' green eyes come gliding out of the dark.

At some point during all this, I copied down a line from Melville. He's talking about being lost at sea here; it's the same thing.

The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity...

"Come a week early," my pilot said, "so you can learn how to fly the airplane."

Chapter 1: City of Dogs

I landed in Anchorage in the middle of the night. The next morning, I drove an hour north to Wolf Lake Airport, a private airfield near Wasilla. You know those old photo-backdrop screens that little kids in department stores used to have their portraits taken in front of? It was like driving into one of those. National-monument mountains framing a sky that was chemical blue. Highway as straight as a rifle sight. Until you actually get to Alaska, it's hard to prepare yourself for the scale of it, the sheer felt immensity. The numbers barely do it justice. Sixty percent of the nation's parkland is in Alaska. Four of the parks – four – are bigger than Connecticut. If you stood Mount McKinley, which Alaskans call "Denali," next to Mount Everest on level ground, McKinley would tower over it, thousands of feet higher; Everest is taller only because it rests on an elevated plateau.

The majority of this extreme vastness can't be reached by road. Juneau, the state capital, isn't on a highway network. Head north, into the semipopulated reaches, and you'll find nothing connecting the villages at all. Alaskans depend on bush pilots, fliers who take small planes into remote and dangerous places, for transportation, mail — almost every type of contact with the outside world. I had come to watch what might be the least spectator-friendly sporting event on earth: To follow the Iditarod requires not only a bush plane, but a bush plane equipped with skis, capable of landing on frozen rivers and lakes.

Jay Baldwin met me at the hangar. He'd flown F-16s back in the day and put in a couple of decades with Delta and Northwest before moving to Alaska to be a bush pilot. He was retired, in some theoretical sense, but he had a flight school, Alaska Cub Training Specialists, at Wolf Lake Airport, near Wasilla, and from what I saw still knocked out around 19 high-intensity daily hours running that, tinkering with airplanes, and educating anyone within earshot (children, small animals, whatever stray Iditarod reporters happened to stroll past) about the perils of bush flying. Jay was 60 years old and tall and he had white hair and a smile so enthusiastic it hinted at actual anarchy.

His best friend was a musher, Linwood Fiedler, who'd been the Iditarod's runner-up in 2001. They'd grown up together in the Lower 48, then lost touch before reconnecting as adults in Alaska, having in the meantime become a bush aviator and a professional dog musher, respectively, because obviously that is life. Every year, Jay led an expedition to follow the Iditarod from the air, partly for the flying and partly as a show of support. This was what I'd signed up for.

"You're not a pilot in Alaska," Jay said, fixing me with a blue-eyed and somehow vaguely piratical stare, "until you've crashed an airplane. You go up in one of these stinkin' tin cans in the Arctic? Sooner or later you're gonna lose a motor, meet the wrong gust of wind, you name it. And OH BY THE WAY" (leaning in closer, stare magnifying in significance) "that doesn't have to be the last word."

Having lost more friends than he could count to wrecks in the remote Alaskan wilderness, he was obsessed with crash reports, fatality statistics, replaying weird scenarios. One wall of the ACTS hangar was plastered with newspaper clippings from accounts of gruesome accidents: "5 killed as small planes collide," "Sisters among dead in plane crash," "Flying to die." My favorite clip was titled simply: "Pilots: Grief." I

pictured tiny mosquitoes of flame blooming against the side of a mountain, torn hulls rolling in black water. “This is the junk that keeps me up at night,” Jay said, smoothing his hair under his ACTS baseball cap. “I’ve flown just about every dangerous kinda bird you can fly. Why are they gone and I’m still here?” One of his mentors had vanished without a trace while transporting a couple of bear-watchers over the Shelikof Strait from Hallo Bay to Homer; the authorities didn’t know for sure that the plane had gone down until the body of a passenger washed up in a fishing net about 10 days later. And yet Jay wholly, truly loved flying, the way some people can love it. I have a brother-in-law who’s like that. When he’s not in the air, it’s like he’s seeing fewer colors.

This was the paradox of Jay Baldwin: One of the most infectiously happy guys I’ve ever been around, his every waking moment was a kind of prolonged existential debrief. He was never not working on how to outwit the horrific eventualities he was forever expecting to befall him, and he was never not just extremely cheerful about this. Jay was a Vermont kid, raised in a small town, and there was a mordant New England pluck in the way he gazed into the abyss and said: “I see what you’re trying to do there, abyss.”

The plan was for me to spend a few nights in the apartment connected to the hangar – live with the planes, get the feel of them. I’d read that some Iditarod mushers slept with their dogs, to make themselves one with the pack. I needed flying lessons because the little Piper Super Cubs that would carry us to Nome were two-seaters, one in front, one behind. Jay wanted me prepared in case he had a fatal brain aneurysm (his words), or a heart attack (his words 10 seconds later), or keeled over of massive unspecified organ failure (“Hey, I’m gettin’ up there – but don’t worry!”) at 2,200 feet.

Choosing an airplane – that was the first step. Jay had four, and as the first ACTS client to arrive, I got first pick.

They were so small. Airplanes aren’t supposed to be so small. How can I tell you what it was like, standing there under the trillion-mile blue of the Alaska sky, ringed in by white mountains, resolving to take to the air in one of these winged lozenges? Each cockpit was exactly the size of a coffin. A desk fan could have blown the things off course. A desk fan on medium. Possibly without being plugged in.

“God love ‘em,” Jay said. “Cubs are slower’n heck, they’ll get beat all to hell by the wind, and there’s not much under the hood. But bush pilots adore ‘em, because you can mod ‘em to death. And OH BY THE WAY...put ‘em on skis and come winter, the suckers’ll land you anywhere.”

Two of the Cubs were painted bright yellow. I took an immediate liking to the one with longer windows in the back. *Better visibility*, I told myself, nodding. Jay said it had the smallest engine of any of the Cubs in our squadron. *Less momentum when I go shearing into the treeline*, I told myself, nodding.

The name painted in black on her yellow door read: *NUGGET*. She had a single propeller, which sat inquisitively on the end of her nose, like whiskers. Jay told me – I heard him as if from a great distance – that she’d had to be rebuilt not long ago, after being destroyed on a previous trip north. Was I hearing things, or did he say *destroyed by polar bears*?

I patted *Nugget’s* side. Her fuselage was made of stretched fabric. It flexed like a beach ball, disconcertingly.

Into the cockpit. Flight helmet strapped, restraints active. Mic check. Then Jay’s voice in my headset: “Are you ready!” It wasn’t exactly a question.

And this, ground-dweller, is Alaska from 900 feet. White-flecked spruce forest. Snow-smothered lakes. Mountains all around. There’s Denali, clear and far away. Right here, in the Mat-Su Valley, the southern part of the state, you can see power lines, the sketch of a highway system. A little farther north and all that will vanish.

People out here can sound mystical when they talk about the bush pilots, about how they knit Alaska together. From 900 feet, it makes sense.

We'd done some practice turns and picked out a lake; now all I had to do was get the plane on it. Jay explained to me about landing on snow, how the scatter of light tends to mask the true height of the ground. You can go kamikaze into the ice, thinking the earth is still 30 feet below you. To gauge your real altitude re: the whiteout, you have to use "references" – sticks poking through the snow, a line of trees on the bank. These supply you with vital cues, like "might want to ease down a touch" or "gracious, I'm about to fireball."

I won't bore you with the details of how to steer a Super Cub – where the stick was, how to bank, what the rudder pedals felt like. Suffice it to say that in theory, it was ridiculously simple. In practice...

"You have the aircraft." Jay's voice in my ear. "Just bring us down in a nice straight line."

I felt the weight in my right hand as Jay released the stick. The lake was straight ahead, maybe three miles off, a white thumbnail in an evergreen-spammed distance. The plane was under my control.

Nugget – I'm not sure how to put this – began to sashay.

"Just a niice straight line," Jay reminded me. "And OH BY THE WAY...your pilot's dead." He slumped over in his seat.

Little lesson I picked up someplace: Once your pilot gives up the ghost, it is not so easy to see where you are headed from the backseat of a Super Cub. I mean at the "what direction is the plane even pointing right now" level. You will find that your deceased pilot, looming up against the windshield, blocks almost your entire forward view. To mitigate this, the savvy backseater will bank the wings one way while stepping on the opposite rudder pedal, causing the plane to twist 30 degrees or so to one side while continuing to travel in a straight line, like a runner sliding into base. That way, said enterprising backseater can see forward through the plane's presumably non-corpse-occluded side window.

Yeah. Well. A thing about me as a pilot is that I do not, ever, want to see forward out of the side window. Especially not while plummeting toward a frozen lake. It's like, bro, why create the hurricane? I figured that, as an alternative technique, I would just basically try to guess where we were going.

"How's your speed?" my pilot('s lifeless form) inquired.

The ground seemed to be making an actual screaming noise as it rushed up toward us. *Hmm – maybe a little fast.* I cut the throttle. *Nugget* kind of heaved and started falling at a different angle; more "straight down," as the aeronautics manuals say. We were out over the lake. I had a sense of measureless whiteness lethally spread out below me. Either the landscape was baffled or I was. There were trees on the bank, but we were dropping too fast; I couldn't relate them to anything. My references had gone sideways. At the last moment I pulled back on the stick.

There was a chiropractic *skrrrk* of skis entering snow. There was, simultaneously, a feeling of force transmitting itself upward into the plane. *Nugget* bounced, like a skipped stone, off the ice. We were tossed up and forward, maybe 15 feet into the air...

...and came down again, bounced again, came down again, and, unbelievably, slid to a stop.

"Guess what," the reanimated form of my pilot said, popping up. "You just landed an airplane."

I've never felt all that caught up, personally, in the miracle of air travel. I played a little *Wing Commander* once upon a time, but it's not like I was one of those pre-9/11 kids who used to lurk around open cockpit doors hoping some head-tousling type would kick them a set of plastic wings. Still, there are moments when your adrenal glands just aren't even going to pretend to hold back.

I HAVE CONQUERED THE MYSTERIES OF FLIGHT, I hollered inwardly, across the valleys of my emotions. LET THE AIR ITSELF BOW DOWN BEFORE ME.

“That was pretty good,” Jay said. “Let’s try it again.”

EEP, NO, I bellowed to the valleys.

Anchorage, Alaska’s one real city. Fairbanks is a town, Juneau is an admin building with ideas. Anchorage is Tulsa, only poured into a little hollow in a celestially beautiful mountain range on the outer rim of the world.

When you’re there, it truly feels like you’re at the end of something. Like a last outpost. You’re in a coffee shop, you ordered cappuccino, you can see white mountains from the window, and on the other side of the mountains is wilderness that hasn’t changed since 1492.

That’s an exaggeration, but not as much of one as you might think.

It’s Saturday, March 2nd, the start of the Iditarod. Here’s how this works: In the middle of the night, large trucks beep-reverse in and dump snow over an area of downtown. Race volunteers wearing little lanyard-clipped name badges spend a chunk of the night smoothing the snow down over the streets. Early the next morning, mushers and their dog handlers roll into the staging area in pickup trucks, the beds of which have been fitted with multi-compartmented dog carriers. The compartments on the carriers are arranged in a tic-tac-toe grid with little doors that open to the outside. Your reference here is a wall of PO boxes, only behind each door there’s a sled dog lying in a petite bed of straw. Some of the dog carriers have cards hanging from their side-clamps with clothespins attached to them. A quick reportorial investigation reveals that each clothespin has a dog’s name marked on it: Cutter, Lyra, Harp, Sable, Chisel, Bree. Soon the mushers are opening compartment doors and pulling out dogs. The dogs have their toes examined and their lips peeled back so the mushers can check their gums. There’s a scholarly air, on the mushers’ part, to these inspections. You get the impression that they’ve checked the dogs out of a library. The dogs shake nonexistent water off their coats and are chained, one by one, to the trailer hitches and free grab-handles on their mushers’ trucks. Dog handlers drop food in each dog’s particular vicinity. The food is in some cases raw meat, which leaves soggy pinkish traces in the snow. Human food is being vended to the growing crowd of spectators via several small pavilions, which bear signs like “Alaska Reindeer Sausage” and, impenetrably, “Reindeer Bratwurst Louisiana.” The air smells of hot meat and hay. I spot Jay talking to a woman near Linwood’s truck, so I go over to say hello, and it turns out she’s Libby Riddles, the famous Iditarod champion from ‘85. A shivery breeze keeps blowing up Fourth Avenue off the Cook Inlet, maybe six blocks to the west, but the day’s sunny, it’s 30°F. You can see your breath, but it’s pleasant. The crowd milling under the giant carved bear that hangs above Grizzly’s Unique Alaskan Gifts does sport some heavy-fur wearers, but that’s a cultural thing, it’s celebratory. All of the heavy furs that I spot are on men. There’s a stout, bearded race official going around in not only a heavy fur coat but also an astounding brutalist apartment block of a fur hat that has a bobcat’s entire face on it. The face has teeth. I make a note to check whether it would be possible to eyeball the hierarchy of race officials based on the food-chain status of the dead animals whose faces are on their hats, but, though it feels like a searing reportorial lead at the moment, the results of my follow-up investigation will prove disappointing.

Bobcat-hat-face is going around doing little knee-dips over dog teams that are starting to be hooked up to their sleds’ riggings. It’s maybe a half-hour before the official 10am start of the race. Volunteers circulate with clipboards; near the starting line, the bulge of the crowd is impassable. The Iditarod is a huge deal in Alaska, did I mention that? Sled-dog racing in general is a big deal; the Iditarod is the most famous race, but there are others, like the 1,000-mile Yukon Quest, that draw major attention. Among the tiny population of the

state, the top mushers are massively famous. You can walk into a hardware store in Anchorage and go, “Did you hear about DeeDee,” or “Just saw the news – Dallas might lose his nose,” and no one will answer, “Who, creep-o?”

I’ve been YouTubing pretty diligently, so I spot some familiar faces. There’s Lance Mackey, maybe the greatest long-distance musher of all time: four straight Iditarods from 2007 to 2010; also four titles in the Yukon Quest. Do you know him? He got nominated for a couple of ESPYs a few years back. Won his first Iditarod after beating throat cancer. He’s a redneck icon in Alaska, a sort of ratty-looking, scrawny, patchy, permanently beat-down guy, tiny pinched head like the head of a curious tortoise. I heard somebody describe him as “the white Snoop Dogg,” which fits. The first time I saw him I took out a notebook and wrote “my best friend he shoots water rats and feeds them to his geese.” He’s got crazy star power even though he seems to be physically disintegrating. Near the end of this year’s race, he will bite into a piece of fudge and lose one of his three remaining original teeth.

There’s Aliy Zirkle, last year’s runner-up, a red-cheeked and physically imposing 43-year-old who always seems to be laughing. About half the fans I talk to are pulling for her, many of them out of a feeling that a woman is due to win. At race HQ they’re selling shirts that read “Alaska: Where Men Are Men and Women Win the Iditarod,” but only two women ever have, and none since 1990. “It’s time, you know?” people say. I’m pulling for Aliy because she makes the Iditarod look fun. (Which, Jesus.) Some glimmer in her happy eyes seems to say the whole race is a game. She’s married to a musher, Allen Moore, and they trade their best dogs back and forth, depending on the event. He won the Yukon Quest with the majority of the team just three weeks ago and now she’s racing them in the Iditarod.

I also spot Mitch Seavey, the 2004 champion, who’s 53 and wiry, with a bacterial-looking mustache and weird little wisps of stray hair kind of haloing around his cap. Something about the prickly briskness of his movements as he tends to his dogs suggests both a high school chemistry teacher and a bird building a nest. I had read his book, *Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way!: Unconventional Sled Dog Secrets of an Alaskan Iditarod Champion, Volume One*, and found it fascinating both as a guide to the art of sled-dog training and as a window into the vaguely paranoid self-regard of one M. Seavey. *Lead, Follow* fixates often on the idea that its author’s thoughts and stances are offending unspecified “wackos,” who wield unspecified powers and who deserve whatever offense they get. You know how some small-town guys like imagining that everything they say is driving people on the other side of the political spectrum, none of whom they personally know, crazy? Mitch scratched in 2011 after nearly severing his index finger with a knife at the Ophir checkpoint. Then he sued the knife-maker, which has led to a lot of eye-rolling within hard-core dog-mushing circles. He’s feuding with at least one Alaskan newspaper over its coverage of the lawsuit. Mitch looks like, and is, the kind of guy who holds grudges.

For most of the Iditarod, mushers will run teams of up to 16 dogs, which they’re not allowed to swap out – dogs that get sick or injured can be dropped, but they can’t be replaced with new ones. For the start day in Anchorage, however, the mushers can bring only 12, to minimize downtown chaos. A key detail about the start day in Anchorage is that it’s purely for show. It’s not timed, and doesn’t count toward the outcome of the race. The word that gets used is “ceremonial.” It’s a chance for city folk to clap for the mushers before they enter the genuine wild. The official start will happen the next day, near the small town of Willow.

Still, there are 66 teams entered this year. With 12 dogs each, we’re looking at nearly 800 dogs within about a five-block radius. The dog factor is crazy, tremendous. Dogs are scratching themselves, snarfing down meat, yawning, whining, wrestling, drum-majoring their tails. Iditarod sled dogs are mostly not the Siberian huskies you might be picturing but smaller, faster mixed breeds, engineered for speed rather than hauling power. Downtown is giddy with barking. Reportorially, I note falsetto yaps, screams, howls, baritone woofs.

There's something jungle- or apelike about the cacophony. The presence of so many dogs drives all the dogs crazy. When the handlers start pulling out sleds and clipping the teams to their tow lines, the collective canine intelligence realizes that – ohmigosh, *ohmigosh* – it's about to go for a run. This is when the dogs truly begin to freak out.

There's a serious case that animal-rights people make against the Iditarod; namely, that it's long and cold and dangerous and sometimes fatal, and who are we to subject living creatures to that for our own entertainment? A dog will in fact die during this year's race, will asphyxiate in a snowdrift one night at the Unalakleet checkpoint. What you can't deny, though, is that these animals, having been bred to want to pull sleds, *really* want to pull them. I mean, the dogs are hysterical, they're in raptures. I watch one little guy, a black-and-tan with a shaggy belly, hurl himself forward against the restraint of his own tug line about 15 times in a row, barking up a storm, as if he's decided to get the sled going all on his own. He stops every now and again to look incredulously at his teammates. *What – is – the – hold-up – here – people?* This is happening all over the place. It's like standing inside the mind of a saint right before an out-of-body experience. The dogs' ropes all have to be pulled by straining handlers to stop them from just taking off.

Around 9:40am, I make my way to the starting line. My own lanyard-attached media badge gets me through the crowd and into a kind of holding pen adjacent to the starting chute, which itself is just a roped-off area of the street. The Iditarod starting line is a flag-surrounded banner hanging above Fourth Avenue. Seven flags correspond to the nationalities of this year's 66 contestants: the USA (obviously), Canada, Norway, Russia, New Zealand, Brazil (!), Jamaica (!!). A PA guy's warm booming baritone is priming us with factoids about the race. Every year, the first person through the chute is an honorary musher chosen for his/her contributions to the Iditarod. This year's honorary musher is the late Jan Newton, who died in August. She was a volunteer who helped run the checkpoint at the tiny village of Takotna. She was known as the Queen of Takotna, the *Official 2013 Race Guide* says, and she was famous for her pies. That's how big a deal the race is in Alaska: You can be famous for baking Iditarod-associated pies. "Her contributions to the race are remarkable and have elevated her to a position of legendary prominence" is the *Official 2013 Race Guide's* line on this. Her sled will be driven by this year's Junior Iditarod champion, Noah Pereira.

After the honorary musher, the starting order is determined by an elaborate NBA-draft-lottery-style number draw at a pre-race banquet. The numbers are drawn from a sealskin Eskimo mukluk, which is something the NBA should maybe look into. I was at this banquet; it ran for five hours. Every single musher made a speech (that's more than 60 speeches). It was brutal. The only speech I liked was the one by Scott Janssen, a funeral-home director by trade who's known as the "Mushin' Mortician." He introduced himself by saying, "Hi! I'm Scott Janssen, the Mushin' Mortician."

Anyway. Once the honorary musher's sled goes skittering out of sight, it's time for the real race to (ceremonially) start. Bib #2, to the excitement of Iditarod fans everywhere, has fallen to Martin Buser, a Swiss-born four-time champion (1992, 1994, 1997, 2002) and race icon who not only named both his sons after Iditarod checkpoints but was sworn in as an American citizen under the burlled arch that serves as the finish line in Nome. He's 54 and maybe not quite a top-shelf contender any longer – Norman Vaughan, who went to Antarctica with Admiral Byrd in 1928, completed an Iditarod at the age of 84, but only one musher over 50 has ever won it (Jeff King in 2006). But Buser's known among mushers for his shrewdness, and the fashionable intelligence can't help but speculate about the implications of such a seasoned veteran leaving first.

Bobcat-hat-face, who's emerged as some sort of superimportant race marshal with the job of importantly standing in the starting chute, consulting with mushers, and pointing at things that want pointing at, is doing a little waist bend over Buser's sled while Buser goes from dog to dog down the line, patting cheeks and communing. The ex-champ is ceremonially stuffed into so many layers of arctic gear that all you can really see of him is his clear-eyed handsome Swiss face.

“One minute,” says the PA guy.

Buser gets in a few more canine cheek pats.

“Thirty seconds,” says the PA guy.

Buser shaking hands, receiving hugs from loved ones. Bobcat-hat-face steps back out of the way.

“Ten seconds,” says the PA guy.

Buser on his sled.

“3...2...1...GO!”

Profound roar from the crowd. The dog-handlers let go of the restraining ropes. The pandemonium in which the dog team was immersed one second ago disappears, replaced by a sense of sudden, efficient shared purpose. The dogs take off; the tow line snaps taut; the sled, with Buser standing on the back rails, slides out beyond the starting line. The dogs are quiet, running. They build speed as they go until the sled is more or less sliding on its own momentum. They keep running down Fourth Avenue and I lose sight of them in the crowd.

The next musher’s team enters the chute.

And we are off.

Chapter 2: Flight 985-Whiskey

We were a squadron of four Super Cubs, assembled by ACTS for Jay’s Iditarod expedition. The deal was, if you were a small-plane pilot looking to get some hard-core Alaska bush-flying experience, you could pay ACTS a fee of approximately \$1,000 per day to fly along with the race. ACTS provided the planes. Also rural Alaska accommodations, Arctic-survival knowhow, and (speaking only about the rear cabin of *Nugget*, here, but) trail mix. Good stuff, possibly homemade. It had the little M&Ms in it.

I was the only person Jay had ever approved for the Iditarod trip who had never flown a plane. I still don’t know why he let me come. He told me a story, early on, about taking along an Israeli fighter ace one year, a guy with jet-combat experience, “multiple unrecorded kills,” and asking him what was the most dangerous flying he’d ever done. “This,” the fighter pilot said. I thought of that guy often, mostly while calculating whether my empty trail-mix bag could double as an airsickness container in a pinch.

There were seven of us, including Jay and me, at that first preflight briefing in the ACTS hangar on Monday. We were spread out on a couple of couches. One of the couches was made out of seats from a 737, I think? Some jumbo jet. *Nugget* would be 985-Whiskey’s lead plane, Jay declared; the other Cubs would fly behind, in echelon formation (the familiar upside-down V). Or in rare cases we might switch to trail (single-file) or line abreast (a horizontal line, useful when scanning for wildlife). “985-Whiskey” was *Nugget*’s personal call sign and would double as our flight name for the expedition.

Bernard and Christophe, French pilots who’d flown in for the expedition, loitered behind the couches, watching Jay point out locations on a huge map. Bernard was 67, a retired Air France captain, regal of bearing; short, but imperially short, like a famous surgeon. His favorite off-aircraft pastime, I mean back home, was freestyle skiing. He keenly wished for his wife to spend time freestyle skiing with him; she wouldn’t; his marriage was a little bit sad. Christophe, his friend and former student, was younger, maybe in his late 40s, and cool in a louche French way, with a weird personal ostrich of uncombed gray hair; he was cigarette-thin and spent the whole trip with his neck elaborately engulfed in a camouflage-print silk scarf. He had this way of leaning on things. The heir to a rock-quarry fortune, he’d worked as a photographer but retired young to a

life of intensively having cheekbones. “So I sink to myself, I ’ave zis job,” he would say with a shrug. “I should give eet to one who needs eet.” According to Jay, they were two of the best pilots in Europe. They knew how to land, apparently, on these glaciers in the Alps that you could land on. (Bernard complained about the paperwork associated with this.)

At the briefing Jay gave us some basic squadron vocabulary – “tally-ho” if you’re able to spot whatever another flight member points out over the radio, “no joy” if you’re not – then showed us where the Iditarod Trail climbed over the Alaska Range, at Rainy Pass. That was where we’d be crossing the mountains into the Interior. “Be prepared,” Jay said. “It’s kind of a maze up there, that stinkin’ pass. You take a wrong turn between those mountains, you wind up at a dead end, no room to turn around, and at that point it’s pretty much uh-oh time. Just watch your visibility, and if anybody doesn’t like what they see, give a shout on the radio and we’ll put ‘em down till you feel comfortable.”

“Guys, my dad’s not kidding,” Steve said. Steve was Jay’s son, on leave from Afghanistan and flying with us in *Sunshine, Nugget’s* yellow twin. He told us that the mountains were littered with sheet metal from old wrecks. “Nobody ever cleans up old wrecks in Alaska.”

Flying through the pass was – how can I put this? – awesome. I mean in the sense of inspiring genuine awe. You are a dot moving among white clouds. White cliffs break through the clouds and you fly beside them. You’re not high up by mountain standards, maybe 2,500 feet, maybe a little more. But it *feels* high. It’s hard to explain. For much of the crossing the snow makes it impossible to tell where the ground is, and then when you spot it, it’s crazy, striations of ice and rock like the inside of a marble. It doesn’t seem to exist in any measurable relation to where you are. (Even crazier: the occasional glimpse of mushers and dog teams moving against this background, upside-down *I’s* crossing a sheet of crushed-up paper.) Little canyon-like channels go wriggling off the main path. I don’t know what to tell you. It’s otherworldly; it’s like passing into another world.

We touched down at the Rainy Pass checkpoint, a white plain below a small wooden lodge. White with purple shadows. It was cold, and the snow was knee-deep where it hadn’t been packed down by volunteers’ snow machines. We watched the dogs sleeping in little piles of straw. On the other side of the mountains, we flew over Dalzell Gorge, the steep, twisty run where the trail descends from the mountains, dropping hundreds of feet in just a couple of miles. We flew over the freaky bleakness of the Burn. We flew over a herd of wild buffalo, then landed on an icy lake, just for a pause, moments before a musher, I couldn’t tell you which one, came bursting out of the trees on the far side. I chased after her, snapping pictures.

We flew a long way north, to get ahead of the race. When we stopped for fuel at McGrath, we heard that a Cessna 182 carrying three people had crashed after taking a wrong turn in the mountains. The pilot and both passengers were killed. They were following the Iditarod and bound for the same village where we planned to spend the night.

It turned out that Martin Buser, the musher whom I’d watched start the race, had come up with a strategy that was blowing people’s minds. He wasn’t stopping. Conventional Iditarod tactics call for frequent voluntary rest periods in addition to the two eight-hour breaks and one 24-hour break mandated by the rules. Iditarod sled dogs are bred for stamina, but they need food and sleep. Mushers, who will be almost unimaginably sleep-deprived by the time they reach Nome in any event, need at least token periods of semi-unconsciousness. You know the story of the tortoise and the hare? Yeah, the hare *definitely* wins the Iditarod. Slow and steady is not the ticket in the long-distance dog-mushing game. You want a lot of naps punctuated by periods of hellish subzero hustling.

Buser, though? He ran from Willow to the Yentna checkpoint and stopped for just 21 minutes. Then he ran to Skwentna and stopped for half an hour. He ran to Finger Lake, in the snow country just before the mountains, and stopped for 26 minutes. Then he ran practically all the way over the Alaska Range on no rest. Through Rainy Pass on no rest. When he reached Rohn, just before 10 on the morning of Monday, March 4th, he'd driven his dogs nearly 200 miles in less than 20 hours, and he hadn't stopped for longer than it took to have a vet eyeball them at the checkpoints. It was demented, was the feeling on the trail. What the pound-sign-percent-asterisk-dollar-sign was the guy thinking?

Then at Rohn, way earlier than most top mushers would even consider doing this, he declared that he was taking his 24. And this move, which he later told reporters he'd spent eight months plotting out (I pictured the lonely candle in the window, Buser bent over the table with graph paper and a set of miniature pewter dogs) – this move, I think it's fair to say, [stunned] observers for the whole first two-thirds of the race. The Iditerati were confounded. Because while Buser was sleeping in Rohn, everybody else passed him, and passed him by a lot, by hours. But everybody else, and this was the rub, *still had to take their 24s*. When they did, Buser would end up hours ahead of *them*. He'd have a huge lead, because of all the rest he'd skipped at the beginning. But could he cover the last 900 miles of the race without a significant break? Could his dogs handle it? The volunteers were shaking their heads at the checkpoints.

Late Tuesday afternoon we landed at the village of Takotna in the Kuskokwim Mountains, about 170 miles northwest of Rainy Pass. There was fresh snow, deep snow, on the river, and two of the Cubs got stuck, their skis sunk too far to slide. A couple of villagers had to come down with snow machines to drive Jay and me back to where Steve and the Frenchmen were waiting with the stranded planes. The villager who drove me was Frankie, plump and flinty and maybe 65, and while we drove along the river she told me that she and her husband owned a gold mine and that was how they made their living. They mined at Takotna in the summer and spent their winters in Homer. Every March Frankie came back to Takotna to help with the Iditarod.

But then everyone helped with the Iditarod in Takotna. According to the printout of a report about the village by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game that I stole from the dormitory where we spent the night, there were 33 households in the village and 52 people, evenly split between whites and Athabascan Indians, though Takotnans I talked to said that the number of full-time residents was really closer to 30. Takotna could be a thousand times bigger and still be a pretty small town. But as an Iditarod checkpoint, it's legendary. This year, 30 of the 66 mushers opted to take their 24s here, and that's only partly because it's an ideal strategic resting spot, a little over a quarter of the way to Nome and safely past the rigors of the Alaska Range. It's also due to the hospitality of the villagers, which is truly above and beyond. Every musher gets his or her choice of meal, and if that doesn't sound impressive, please mull over the logistics of supplying and staffing a temporary restaurant kitchen in a remote Alaskan village of 30-odd people that isn't reachable by road. It's a point of pride, even of identity, for the villagers. Kids get off school. Everyone works in 12-hour shifts. When we arrived, none of the mushers had come in yet and here and there volunteers were counting the blue plastic bags that held hay bales and making tiny checkmarks on their clipboards.

There was a dining hall set up in the community center, and because Jay had made a donation to the village we were allowed to have dinner there, in a crowded warm room with long tables. Green-and-white plastic gingham tablecloths. I ate roast moose. *Comprehensive Subsistence Harvests of Takotna*, a report compiled by subsistence resource specialist Seth Wilson, a printout of which was just lying around in the dormitory where I'd already dumped my duffel bag, estimates that moose accounts for 77 percent, poundwise, of wildlife harvested for subsistence purposes in the area, putting it well ahead of spruce grouse (4 percent), black bear (4 percent), and beaver (3 percent), and in easy lapping distance of pretenders like wild rhubarb, Chinook salmon, and blueberry (1 percent each). You could fill a tiny plastic cup with Kool-Aid

or Tang from the dispensers in one corner (dispensers not mentioned by S. Wilson). I drank Kool-Aid and talked to Colin, the downily facial-haired young guy who ran the local clinic. He could patch up bumps and bruises. If anything serious happened, they'd have to fly you out.

Colin had a fascinatingly odd way of maintaining intense eye contact while simultaneously all but squirming with agony over the fact that he was being noticed – the way, say, your 15-year-old goth cousin might do. This was something I noticed time and again in the inhabitants of remote Alaska, this total, helpless acuteness in the presence of a stranger. It was as if isolation had kept them from numbing themselves to the fact of other people. You walk down the sidewalk in Manhattan and maybe you know on some level that every single person you pass is a constellation of memory and perception as huge and unique as whatever's inside you, but there's no way to really *appreciate* that on a case-by-case basis; you'd go loony. You get anesthetized, living among crowds, to the implications of faces. The *terra incognita* of every gaze, Saul Bellow calls it. Whereas if you walk up to a remote Alaskan, I mean buying a bag of chips in the village store or whatever, a lot of the time the response you get is this sort of HELLO, VAST AND TERRIFYING COSMOS OF PERSONHOOD. The apertures are just wide open.

I took a walk through the village. Couple of roads twisting down a couple of hills, some pretty rough-looking houses. Moose antlers over the doorways. Things happen to the color blue during an Alaska twilight that I've never seen anywhere else. Imagine that the regular, daytime blue sky spends all its time floating on the night sky, the way you'd float on the surface of a pool. Now it's submerging itself. You could see it vanishing upward. The cars looked derelict, half-buried in snow. Snowdrifts rammed up doorknob-high against the houses. Every now and again a snow machine would go screaming by; the drivers always waved. Snow 3 and 4 feet high on the roofs.

But it was such a warm place. I mean, fine, we're all cynics here, go ahead and click over to your next open tab or whatever, but you could feel it: this fragile human warmth surrounded by almost unmanageable sadness. Outside the checkpoint building the Takotnans had set up a row of burlled tree stumps beside the flagpoles, and now two guys with chain saws were carving long crosscuts in the stumps. Each night during the Iditarod they'd pour diesel into one stump's cuts and then light it, making a torch as wide as two people embracing that'd burn for hours and hours. Musher's coming down the river toward the checkpoint would see the torches from – I don't know about miles, but a long way away. Eight or nine villagers, along with a few volunteers, gathered around the fire. Jay was there, talking about airplanes with Bernard – you could tell from the way he'd sort of bank his hand at the wrist and slide it through the air. Christophe went around taking pictures. A little gang of kids played king of the hill on a snowdrift. The night just dwarfed all this. I mean a sadness that's unmanageable in the sense that you can be in the middle of an outwardly happy scene and suddenly feel yourself ringed by it, feel it closing in, to the point that you have to excuse yourself for a while and go back to the dormitory where you've dropped off your duffel and regroup by reading whatever Seth Wilson-penned subsistence-harvest reports happen to be lying around in color-inkjet printout form on the table.

The first mushers started arriving around nine that night. You'd see dogs' eyes shining green down the trail with the reflected light from the fire, then their bodies would sort of form around them. Finally the musher would come sliding up. The mushers looked haggard, frost-rimmed. I hadn't seen them up close for 180 miles. I kept thinking about a story Linwood told me one night at the Baldwins' house, about how he'd arrived at a checkpoint one year at 50 below and with one of his ears black from frostbite. He hadn't even noticed. The volunteers had to break the news. The Air Force guys rushed him back to Anchorage so the hospital could save the ear. This year it'd been warm by Iditarod standards, teens and 20s, and when the dogs came to a stop they'd turn their heads upside down and flip over and shimmy in the snow to cool off. The mushers would sign the checkers' clipboard and then bang, they'd be off their sleds, putting down straw and scattering food for the team. The volunteer vets came out in huge parkas and knelt by particular dogs. There'd

be hasty conferences. “Is it a shoulder?” “A bicep.” “A bicep!” “He looks OK, I just want to get his breathing slowed.”

Aliy Zirkle rolled in at 9:35, smiling; Mitch Seavey followed 10 minutes later. They both declared their 24s. I stayed out and watched Lance Mackey tend to his dogs. He was being shadowed on the trail by a personal camera crew, because Canada Goose, his primary sponsor, had decided to finance a documentary, tentatively titled *Lance!*, about his run through this year’s race. He started bedding down the team, looking bleary as hell, eyes kohled with red, beyond exhausted, just unclipping harnesses and shucking out handfuls of straw, and here are two guys in shiny Canada Goose jackets orbiting him with a video camera and a boom mic, I mean about 10 inches from his face, bright light on the camera, surreal. All this under the night sky in the transcendent middle of nowhere. Hardly anybody was still out. A wonderstruck volunteer named Cindy watched him with her hands sort of romantically clasped, and he kept half-eyeing her while he rubbed ointment into one of his dogs’ chests. “How’s the show so far?” he asked.

“Well...you’re my first...this is my first Iditarod, so...pretty wonderful.”

“Oh, is that right?”

“Your dogs are beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s...it’s wonderful to see the magic of what you do.”

“Stupid harness, anyway,” he murmured to the dog, in sympathy.

“You must be tired,” Cindy said.

“I could use a little nap,” he said. “Actually fell asleep on the sled. Went out for about 10 minutes back on the trail.”

“Oh, goodness. Good thing your dogs know where to go.”

“Ha! You’d think so. You wasn’t watchin’ ‘em back at McGrath. Ran me right off the trail. Tried to give ‘em a command and I might as well’ve spoke Japanese for all they was listenin’ to me. They were not. Listenin’. At all.”

Cindy made empathetic noises. Lance got up and strode into the checkpoint building. It was starting to fill up with mushers – standing in line for food, chatting with each other about dogs. Lance ordered a cheeseburger and talked to Aliy while he ate it. He took off his shoes and socks.

I met Dick Newton. Jan’s husband. Remember the Queen of Takotna, with her pies? He introduced himself to me in the dining hall. “Introduced” is a strong word. He kind of walked over to me and said, “Well, who are you?” Not in an unfriendly way. Just in a way that said he was 82 and still messed with deep Alaska wilderness on a daily basis and maybe shouldn’t have to smile extra just because he met some kid who knew a decent Thai place in Dumbo. We started talking. He had weepy pale eyes and a grizzled John Brown beard and unkempt hair and liver spots. He wore a camouflage button-neck sweater with red suspenders. He was a fur trapper. He could sell a marten pelt for \$200 and a wolf pelt for \$300. But martens were one hell of a lot easier to skin and haul around. He’d come to Alaska 40-plus years ago to work oil but gave it up because it meant spending months away from “her,” not specifying who that was. My heart felt like a helium balloon when he said that. Just reporting. Everyone in Takotna called him “my uncle.” He’d made the trip from the village to Nome via snow machine for 21 straight years, and he was going again this year, with a buddy. “Call ourselves Team Viagra,” he said. The distance from Takotna to Nome is way more than 600 miles. Actually, his buddy hated the name Team Viagra. “But that’s how it is.”

He'd known frenzied living in his time. In the '60s he did detective work in Sacramento, but he couldn't make ends meet kicking down motel doors. "I gave it up for my health," he growled. "I was starvin' to death." He kept finding himself on the wrong side of the law, without quite knowing how it happened; he described police chases, remembered hiding out in bars. Alaska had loomed for him as a possibility of freedom, a life of not being interfered with. In the 19th century he'd have lit out for the Territory.

"I kept seein' the inside o' them jail cells in California," he told me. "But up here, a fella can do just about anythin' he's big enough to do."

He let me take his picture. "I don't care," he said. He wouldn't smile or look at the camera. I got him to laugh by asking about books. He read a lot, he told me, but he never remembered anything he read, so he only had a few books in his cabin. They were good ones. He kept cycling through them again and again, always encountering them as if he were reading them for the first time.

That night a storm blew in and didn't let up. The whole next day is kind of a blur. I remember Jay hopping behind the food counter at the checkpoint building, grilling bacon for the mushers. Linwood slid up to the checkpoint late in the morning, looking five years older and vacant; he gave Jay a hug, then me one. "I know now that this run is a celebration," he told me. "I'm not racing to win, I'm racing to be *here*."

Everyone was asking when Martin Buser would arrive. He pulled in a little after 1pm and stopped for just eight minutes. His rivals were sleeping in the village; it was time for his big passing move. By the time Mitch and Aliy left town, they were nine hours behind him. Still no one could say whether his strategy made any sense.

At one point I remember standing on the riverbank, looking down at our planes on the river. It was still snowing away grimly – you couldn't see the mountain on the opposite bank – and a small airplane emerged out of the clouds overhead, and Dick the fur trapper, who was tottering past, squinted up at it and said, without changing his expression one iota, "Ol' Blackie. Come after all. Blackie, you crazy bastard."

I swear to God that happened.

There were dogs everywhere – I mean, of course there were. Sleeping in every hollow. They seemed different here than they'd been in Anchorage, calmer, somehow more noble. They'd watch you watching them, snow on their foreheads, their jaws shagged with ice. In the late afternoon, they started waking up in large numbers. There was no barking. Dog teams when they're contented do these controlled, sustained group howls. A pack thing, I guess. They did that now, till the village rang with it. The sound made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. That was how I spent the afternoon – walking through Takotna while the air filled up with the sound of the dog teams singing.

Chapter 3: The Dark Pyramid

"OK, uh...985-Whiskey Flight, radio check."

"Two."

"Four."

"OK, uh...three? Do we have three?"

[*Conspicuous silence.*]

"Bernard, you there?"

[*Sustained, heavy silence.*]

“OK, Steve, is he still on one-two-two-niner, you want to jump over and check?”

“Two...Yeah, Dad, I'm not getting him.”

“OK, uh...push to common. Repeat: 985-Whiskey, push to common, that's one-two-three-four-seven-five. Bernard?”

[*Silence so profound it seems almost passive-aggressive.*]

“Well, puke.”

I don't know what it was about the Frenchmen and their ACTS planes. Or actually, I know exactly what it was – it was that their planes broke down every time Bernard and Christophe so much as glanced at them. *Nugget* never gave us a peep of trouble, as Jay put it; Bernard could be sitting at dinner *visualizing* a button in his Cub and it would pong off in a spume of fire. I don't know what caused it. You could trace this subtle tension throughout 985-Whiskey's whole existence. The Alaska guys thought the French guys were careless about maintenance, that in France “the pilot just shows up and ‘Oh, here's a cup of coffee, sir’ and some other poor scrub does all the work.” The French guys – well, Christophe was pretty chill on the whole, but I know Bernard thought he'd been handed inferior equipment. As he saw it, this whole expedition was at least 30 percent messed-up.

There was one problem in particular that we couldn't shake. The radio in N57532, a Cub we'd borrowed from Linwood (only ACTS's own planes had proper names), cut out every time Bernard tried to use it. Steve would test it and it worked great, tally-ho; then Bernard would take charge, we'd get airborne, and within a couple of minutes we'd be looking at a no-joy situation. We lost hours to this, I can't tell you. Mechanics at tiny nowhere airstrips would say they'd locked down a problem with the electrical system. Then the next day the glitch would migrate somewhere else. I didn't follow it all, but apparently the logic was Gordian. We started making jokes that the flight was haunted, talking about “the ghost.” Did the ghost bring his luggage. Was the ghost angry today. Had the ghost been eating my trail mix.

Things got weird after Takotna. We flew into a blizzard, for one. The world just disappeared. It was Thursday afternoon. We'd been trying to find a route through the Nulato Hills, west of the Yukon River, on our way to Unalakleet, an Inupiaq village on the coast of Norton Sound. We'd planned to spend a few nights in a bear-hunting cabin about eight miles from the village. That way we'd be ahead of the race, and we could use it as a base, flying out on day trips to track the mushers as they made their way toward the sea. But up in the hills every pass we flew into would dead-end into this sort of gray wall. Then the gray was all around us. Thanks to the ghost, we had no radio contact with Bernard's plane; if we got separated in the hills, we'd have no way to find each other again.

Jay scanned for a place to land. We were over the Anvik, one of a snarl of small rivers running down from the hills to the Yukon. He'd glimpse a stretch of seemingly unobstructed river and we'd dive-bomb it, no fooling around now, doing urgent arcs, and we'd get to within six feet of touching down and only then be able to see the upthrust broken ice that would rip the planes' skis off. Finally we found a spot. To pack down the snow we had to go into trail formation and do multiple passes where we'd touch down at full speed and instantly take off again, veering off at crazy angles to come back around as quickly as possible. Somehow Bernard knew to follow. I was not in peak shape, stomachwise. I'd like to say I was grateful for the nausea because it kept me from being terrified, but the thing about nausea is that it sucks and you hate it. I did little breathey-county exercises while Jay focused on the less-important work of keeping the plane from crashing.

We tumbled out of the cockpit onto the river. The air stung. Huge wet flying flakes of snow. If you stepped carefully you'd sink up to your shin before the snow compressed enough to hold you; if you stepped a little harder you'd break through up to your thigh. Along the riverbank there were these spindly collections of upraised sticks. They looked like scrawny bushes but were really the tops of trees.

I felt oddly light. I congratulated myself for not having thrown up, and also for, as I thought, not freaking out, for keeping a cool head in the crisis. I had it together, I thought, as I slipped out my iPhone, in the middle of the blizzard, to check what was happening on Twitter. I could tell weather jokes, maybe post a picture. I was disappointed – saddened – to see the NO SERVICE message here, untold miles from the nearest human infrastructure, but I wasn't exactly surprised. I was far too collected to be surprised. Verizon wasn't as together as I was, that was all.

We put on snowshoes and took the shovels out of our planes' belly pods. Getting out of the wind was the first priority. We dug a sort of recessed shelter in the snow and made a bivouac out of one of *Nugget's* wing covers. Jay pegged the temperature at -15°F. Wind at 35 knots. I had no idea what a knot was. I ate trail mix.

At first we thought we might be able to make a quick escape, that the storm was bound to blow over. But an hour went past, and if anything the snowfall intensified.

Here was a problem: 985-Whiskey wasn't equipped to fly after dark. We had about a three-hour window to make it out before we'd be forced to spend the night.

On the map Jay pointed out a hill a mile off, with a larger hill a mile or so behind it. It'd be safe to take off when we could see both hills. We kept getting these fleeting, torn-curtain glimpses of the first; the second might as well not have been there.

Another hour and we started scouting downriver for a place to dig a snow cave.

We would have been fine. Uncomfortable, but we'd have survived. We had plenty of food and water and we'd brought Arctic-grade sleeping bags. We'd have scraped out a snow cave, spent a probably fairly hellish and claustrophobic night, and left the next day, when the storm passed. Fully alive, one big memory. But about 20 minutes before our takeoff window closed, Steve jumped up. "I see the far hill! Dad! Dad, look!"

So we made it out. But my lasting memory of that time on the river is not the crazy, elated scramble to strip the blankets off the planes and take off. It's from about an hour earlier, when Jay, I guess to keep our morale up, suddenly started talking about poetry.

"You guys ever hear of a writer called Robert Service?" he asked.

I said sure, but I didn't know his work well, and Jay went on: "To my mind – in my opinion – Robert Service is *by some measure* the greatest poet who's ever graced the English language. Why, compared to Bob Service, Shakespeare is a piker. And OH BY THE WAY...it's beautiful how he captured the soul of the Arctic."

And he broke into "The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill." *Recited* is too flimsy a word; he *performed* it, in a wild sea-captain brogue, eyes bulging under the beaver hat with the big ear flaps. In the blowing snow in the middle of the Anvik River, waving his arms all around. Here's how it goes. Bill MacKie (rhymes with die) is a gold-rush type who's scared he'll meet his end in the Klondike with no one to bury him. So he slips this other gold-rush guy some money in exchange for the promise that when the time comes, the other guy will find his body and put it in the ground. Well, sure enough, Bill dies, and when word reaches the burial guy (who's narrating the poem), B.G. bundles himself up and sets out to look for the remote hut where the body is waiting. And Jay goes:

You know what it's like in the Yukon wild when it's sixty-nine below;
When the ice-worms wriggle their purple heads through the crust of the pale blue snow;
When the pine-trees crack like little guns in the silence of the wood,
And the icicles hang down like tusks under the parka hood;
When the stove-pipe smoke breaks sudden off, and the sky is weirdly lit,
And the careless feel of a bit of steel burns like a red-hot spit;
When the mercury is a frozen ball, and the frost-fiend stalks to kill –

Well, it was just like that that day when I set out to look for Bill.

He finds the hut. Bill's corpse is there. Mission accomplished, except for one problem: Bill's frozen solid. And he's managed to die "with his arms and legs outspread," so he won't fit into the coffin that our by this point extremely cold and downcast speaker has hauled here for him.

Have you ever stood in an Arctic hut in the shadow of the Pole,
With a little coffin six by three and a grief you can't control?
Have you ever sat by a frozen corpse that looks at you with a grin,
And that seems to say: "You may try all day, but you'll never jam me in"?

Well, he's not a quitter, our B.G., so he takes the obvious next step. He builds a fire and tries to thaw Bill out. But after 13 days by the stove, Bill's still a star-shaped icicle. So B.G. does the only thing he can think of. He takes out a saw, hacks Bill into pieces, and lays the pieces in the coffin. Boom, contract fulfilled. In his later and more contemplative years, B.G. tells us, his mind sometimes drifts back to that day: "And as I sit and the parson talks, expounding of the Law, / I often think of poor old Bill – *and how hard he was to saw.*"

Jay, you guys. What an endlessly surprising person. We were laughing and clapping on the ice. I asked him if he knew Rudyard Kipling's poems – I think I described Kipling as "pretty much the Robert Service of British India," which isn't going to win me tenure at Berkeley, but it was cold out – and he said, oh, sure, he'd read Kipling. Actually grew up in Vermont near the house where Kipling lived for a while, where he wrote *The Jungle Book*. Got hired one summer to clean the first floor. Ask him; I'm not making this up. He'd spent a day of his childhood vacuuming Rudyard Kipling's carpets.

Martin Buser took the lead that same day, at Iditarod, and extended it as the mushers started their grueling 200-mile run up the Yukon River. Conditions on the trail had gotten worse; dogs were struggling through mashed-potato snow, falling into overflow holes where fresh water had broken through a solid surface of ice. Freezing water slopped over into the sleds. Ice gnarled the mustaches of the men pulling into checkpoints.

My old friend the Mushin' Mortician had been the first to scratch, at Rainy Pass on the second day of the race. Now more started calling it quits. Lance Mackey, who'd made a push around Takotna, fell off the pace.

It rained on the Yukon, in heavy slashing lines. The trail there runs down the middle of the river, which is perfectly flat, half a mile wide in places, leaving the mushers no cover from the wind. The cold and the unchanging blank landscape makes it one of the most brutal stretches of the race, a place where sleep-deprived mushers regularly hallucinate. "While I had taken thirty, even forty below and some wind," Gary Paulsen says in *Winterdance*, "and had even become something close to cocksure about my ability to handle winter, I had absolutely no goddamn idea what was about to hit me. The Yukon River defines that which is cold."

Slowly, the teams fought their way forward. Buser's dogs, forced to break trail for the chasing pack, and with their daylong rest a memory, finally wore out. They needed nine hours to get from Grayling to Eagle Island; Buser's five-hour lead shrunk to three. And this was where the strategy he'd spent eight months perfecting, the one that had blown minds around the mushing world, began to come unraveled. "Felt like I was going backwards," he told reporters. "No trail. Lots of wind. No bottom. Lots of water." Then his dogs got diarrhea from slurping groundwater, a constant problem in long-distance mushing. They lost weight. They went slower.

On Saturday, Aliy and Mitch passed him around Kaltag, as did a handful of others. He never led again.

Slowly up the river, days and nights of rain. We followed most of this on the radio. At the cabin near Unalakleet, where we'd finally landed safely after our close call on the Anvik, heavy snow kept us grounded for two days. We'd listen for updates every hour as the mushers made their way toward us, hoping for news on Linwood. Finally Jay and I managed a solo flight down the Yukon, to Grayling and Eagle Island. We saw mushers on the river, black dots on an endless white background, words in a font too small to read. Miles separated them. We spotted a team we thought might be Linwood's, so Jay – it's a signal they have – rocked *Nugget's* yellow wings back and forth. Whoever was down there waved back like someone drowning.

On our second day at the cabin I walked in to find a beautiful woman covered in blood.

The cabin was wood-paneled and lined with hunting photos, dozens of them, frame after frame of kneeling tourists grinning with their rifles. The owner was a bear-hunting guide named Vance, a big friendly fist of a guy who normally used the cabin as a staging area. The hide of a huge grizzly (face attached) sprawled across one wall, next to the head of a big bull musk ox. We had no running water; there was a pot for melting snow on top of the cast-iron wood stove.

Vance's daughter Andri was the one holding the knife. Actually, it was only her hands that were bloody; she'd looked bloodier at first because of the bowl full of dark-red organs on the coffee table in front of her. She was dismembering the ptarmigan – 15 of them – that she and Steve had shot that afternoon, hunting.

"Bro," Steve said. "It was incredible. These birds are so dumb! I missed one from 20 feet and it reacted by *walking toward me.*"

Since the snow was keeping me from following the race, and Jay was busy taking N57532 apart to try to chase down the ghost, I'd decided earlier that day to hike into Unalakleet, eight miles down the Iditarod Trail, and thereby to experience something of the isolation-amid-mind-annihilating-beauty that the mushers encountered every day. But Bernard and Christophe came with me, which sort of defeated the purpose. Christophe hung back half a mile or so to take pictures, but Bernard, after days of being marginalized in fast-paced English conversations, most of which barely even *touched* on French tax policy, was delighted to have a captive listener. He went nonstop the whole way, his chest thrust out like the chest of a singing bird.

"A lot of people who come to Alaska say they come here to feel free," I said.

"Ah, oui," he breathed, taking in the landscape with a gesture. "Fweedom! Alaska is fweedom."

We were standing in the open. All of a sudden I felt...but I don't want to overstate it; it wasn't despair or anything, just melancholy, just an extreme forlornness. It hit me that what I really felt – I realize how weird this is to write – was loneliness for history. Alaska has its own past: the murdering flaming wreck of the Russian colonies, the gold insanity, the deep-time traditions of the tribes. But it doesn't saturate the landscape. In the Lower 48, you carry around a sense that the human environment has been molded by people who went before – this battle on this hill and so on. There's a texture that you, too, are part of, even when it's bloody or frightening, a texture within which your life can assume some kind of meaning. And that, as Bernard's theory of tax policy and generations of writers have discovered, can be its own nightmare, but in remote Alaska, the nightmare is: *It's not there.* It's hard to explain, though this felt absence is an obvious part of both the allure and the terror of the frontier. There are no pre-written meanings. A fella can do just about anything he's big enough to do. And one strong gust of wind could blow the whole edifice of human habitation away.

So we reached Unalakleet. Pastel siding, jumble of metal roofs. Boats buried in snow on the coast of a frozen sea.

I had a long talk with Andri after she'd finished gutting the ptarmigan. It turned out that she was a graphic designer who'd earned an MFA in San Francisco. She had declined a coveted spot at the Rhode Island School of Design and come back to Unalakleet, where – the bear guide's daughter – she kept a shotgun in her

car in case she happened to run across dinner. Recently she'd won a small-business grant to make *uluut*, traditional Eskimo knives, and sell them online. I found her enthralling. She had dark eyes and a fascinating obsession with the occult mysteries of Alaska. Late one night she'd been out with a friend when an unexplained semicircle of light appeared on the horizon. It started out small and expanded for several minutes, holding the same proportions, a mathematically perfect half-circle or half-spheroid of soft white light, until it covered half the sky. Then it faded away. *X-Files* stuff, nothing like the northern lights. She'd sent the pictures she took to a physicist and an astronomer at the university in Anchorage and they'd confirmed that it wasn't a celestial or known phenomenon. It looked like the pulse of a futuristic weapon. But it had been absolutely silent. I saw the pictures. Did you know that there are military installations hidden all over Alaska? Relics of the Cold War, abandoned. Underground bunkers, empty Quonset huts. White Alice sites, some of them are called, the ruins of a once-sophisticated communications relay. The phrase "White Alice" made me shiver. Folks who'd snuck in reported unexplained noises, visions. They'd hallucinate. There were stories about ghosts.

Andri didn't believe in ghosts herself, but she'd heard the stories. Her own philosophy was *don't rule anything out till you've looked into it*. She had a friend who with her own eyes had seen the *ircenrraat*, the little people of Alaska, sinister gnome-like creatures who inhabit the deep tundra. And not a friend who goes in for those kinds of stories, Andri said; a responsible friend. She could believe that there was an energy in the earth. Each year five out of every 1,000 Alaskans go missing. People vanish without a trace at twice the rate of Outside. Start reading about why the disappearances happen and you'll encounter rumors of a dark or underground pyramid, a huge structure, bigger than the Great Pyramid at Giza, buried beneath the ice west of Mount McKinley. There were anomalies in the aerial photographs, men in black uniforms, hints on Google Earth. There was a little-understood link between the site and the abandoned airport inside the Farewell Bend. Some speculation held that the pyramid was a covered-up nuclear site; further speculation countered that the nuclear-site rumors were themselves a cover-up meant to divert attention away from the pyramid's actual identity as an ancient power source of unknown origin. Andri was an expert, had in fact corresponded with the leading amateur researcher into the pyramid's presumed existence until the e-mails suddenly ceased, a cessation that was itself troublingly mysterious. Some people said that the pyramid would be capable of powering half of North America. It made sense, didn't it, because if the government had discovered an energy source of that magnitude, it'd do everything it could to keep it secret. So the lack of evidence became a kind of evidence. Sitting by the fire in the hunting cabin, a million miles from everywhere, I could believe it was down there, darkly pulsing.

The first mushers passed us the next morning, on the river just below the cabin's porch. They were close enough to talk to. Mitch had moved into the lead. "How far ahead is he?" a couple of the guys who went by next called out to us.

"Shoot, you can practically see him," Jay called back.

How had the trail been, we called. "Slow," they said. "Awful night. Awful. So slow."

In eight miles they'd stop at Unalakleet, at the checkpoint. Then they'd start the final phase of the Iditarod: the long sprint up the coast of Norton Sound, 200 miles on the sea ice.

Chapter 4: End of the World

We flew to Russia. It was the Frenchmen's idea. For two days Christophe spent all his free time studying this giant map of western Alaska, folded up to show one square of the Bering Sea coast; he kept

making little marks with a mechanical pencil and frowning. Then he and Bernard huddled over the map together, murmuring in French. Finally they went to Jay.

“Ah, *oui*,” Christophe said. “I enquire. Is it possible...we go to Diomède?”

“The Diomedes Islands?” Jay said. His lips stretched in an exaggerated grimace. “It’s...possible. I’ve never done it, but it’s possible. Let me hop on the radio.”

Christophe had circled two tiny islands in the middle of the Bering Strait, the stretch of water, just 53 miles across, that separates Alaska from Russia. The islands couldn’t have been more than a couple of miles apart. The border, as well as the International Date Line, ran right between them. Big Diomedes was on the Russian side, Little Diomedes on the American.

“OK,” Jay said the next day. “What I’m hearing is, during the winter, they carve an airstrip on the sea ice right plum in the middle of the islands. Weather’s only clear for a Cub to land about 2 percent of the time. Partner, it is rough stuff out there. But we can darn sure give it a crack.”

We flew to Nome on Sunday; on Monday we set out for the Diomedes. It meant losing the race for a day. But when you’re on an Arctic expedition, and fate beckons you to a frozen sea on the edge of Chukotka, you don’t say no.

Once you have left behind the spruce forests, and left behind the tundra, and gone out over the sea ice, Alaska becomes a different thing, even huger, almost unbearably bright. The sheets of ice crack and collide and form fault lines, spaces of open sea called leads, so that what you’re looking at is a field of snow that’s crazed in places with zigzags of black water.

It’s the other side of the mist. I mean, it’s another world. Beluga whales swim up into the leads and you would see these little divots in the water where their foreheads poked through. White forms streaming angelically down beneath the divots. We surprised a small herd of musk ox near some sort of deserted military compound on the coast and flew low over them while they formed their protective circle. We chased a herd of caribou. I saw three seals lying on the edges of three adjacent leads.

Steve chimed in over the radio: “Dad, we might want to go to line abreast. We’ve got bear tracks *everywhere* down there.” And there were. Heavy dashed lines across the snow, like blue stitches around the edges of the leads. Jay had gone searching for polar bears every year on the Iditarod expedition and never found one. (He’d gotten up close and personal with the bears that destroyed *Nugget*, but that was farther north, way up in the Arctic Circle. “Only time I see those little pukes,” he told me, “they’re chomping on my airplane.”) We circled for 10 minutes, 15 minutes without luck. The flight to the Diomedes was already going to stretch our fuel reserves to the limit; we’d have to break off in another couple of minutes. “They hide from me!” Jay moaned. “They always hide.”

Then I saw her.

She was almost invisible, a tiny yellow-white spot against the rim of the water, an imperfection in the snow. I screamed something that might as well have been in Japanese and Jay banked the plane hard and dove while I whipped my head around trying to keep the polar bear in view. I couldn’t keep my o’clocks straight. “Polar bear at three o’clock! Twelve forty-five! Eight seventeen! No! Eight seventeenish!” Then Jay saw her too.

The nine seconds of video I managed to shoot during the first pass we made over the bear shows a tiny lumbering ivory *something*, the size of a fly on a kitchen floor, galloping across the ice shelf under *Nugget’s* yellow right wingtip. We made a second pass and got close enough to see her haunches shuddering, but by that point I’d dropped the camera.

Everybody pretty cynical here? Fantastic.

I couldn't feel my spine, she was so beautiful.

In the summer I guess they look like islands, but in the winter the Diomedes just look like cliffs, dusty white rocks towering up out of the snow. The runway on the sea between the islands was a thin plowed line, too rough to land on; we touched down right beside it, on the sea ice. The day was bright and clear. Apparently we'd picked a moment that fell within the lucky 2 percent. On the American island, a tiny Eskimo village bunched together in one corner at the base of the cliff – home, we'd read, to about 100 Inupiat. There had once been a sister village on the Russian island but it was forcibly disbanded by the Soviets to prevent ideological contamination. Otherwise the Cold War might have been ended prematurely by a few dozen Eskimo capitalists. Now the Russian side just had a border guard headquarters and a weather station.

We were only supposed to look. That was the deal. We'd hop out of our planes, eat a sandwich, and take a picture of Russia. Then we'd head home. Anything more would be illegal. But I was so giddy from the flight and the polar bear (we all were, we were grinning like idiots) that as soon as I'd finished throwing an engine blanket on *Nugget* I turned to the villager who took care of the airstrip – Henry, his name was, he'd come out on a snow machine to greet us – and asked how far to the border.

“Oh, about 400 yards over yonder,” Henry said.

And I took off. I didn't ask permission. Looking back, I can see that I was undergoing pretty intense mood swings as a result of the PTSD from all the amazing experiences I'd been having. But I was free, wasn't I, in Alaska? It was slow going, because I was too free to bother with snowshoes and thus had to churn through 30 inches of snow.

I headed across the frozen strait, toward the jagged white rock of Big Diomedede.

This was it – the actual end of America. Sure, we had borders with other countries. We had nothing close to this.

Every way you could think of that sentence was true.

How far I'd come! Hundreds and hundreds of miles to reach this place. You couldn't fathom how huge Alaska was until you'd seen it from a Super Cub, one horizon crawling into the next, day after day after day. And the white rock in front of me was the end. Somewhere behind it lay the beginning of Siberia.

When I estimated I'd gone five or six hundred yards, I went up on tiptoe and waved like mad to the Russian side. I thought I saw something flash, like light striking a mirror, off the tower the top of which could just be made out over the rock. But that was the only thing that happened.

A few minutes later Steve and the Frenchmen caught up with me. When I'd bolted for the border, they'd taken it as an excuse to follow. I'd built a lead because they put on snowshoes first. Jay, who was an adult, had stayed behind with the airplanes.

A few minutes after that a border-patrol agent came from the American side and called out that if we didn't come back the Russians would fire warning shots.

On the way back I noticed that my face felt like it had been sandblasted. Jay came forward to meet me. “We need to get these stinkers out of this cold, ASAP. If the engines freeze we'll never get out of here. Are you OK? Your face is as red as a beet.”

Oh, right – it was cold! I'd had too much adrenaline to notice. Now I realized that the wind was roaring down the channel between the islands. I'd staggered through it without even realizing. Thirty knots, Jay said. And we were looking at probably 35 below. Still, it was hard to move quickly. We ate our sandwiches and took pictures. The villagers who came out from Little Diomedede told us we were the first

planes, not counting the helicopter that brought the mail, to be able to land at the island all winter. More and more kept coming out, just to look at us.

Someone should have noticed that the Frenchmen had neglected to put a blanket on their plane. Afterward, there was disagreement about what had happened. Jay insisted that they'd asked him and he'd told them not to bother, which makes so little sense that I'm sure he was being diplomatic. Regardless, I am an idiot non-pilot who never even flew the Tahiti route for Air France, and I was out of my head with excitement, and I threw the blanket on *Nugget* without being told. It's just something you do. And Steve and I discussed, in dark tones, the time Bernard had taken after we landed to retrieve and then put on his finespun red wool face mask, how carefully he'd straightened out the mouth. We wound up writing it off with a shrug as the final revenge of the ghost. Whatever happened, by the time we'd finished taking snapshots and meeting villagers, by the time we'd gotten our helmets strapped on and our windows latched, it was too late. Jay climbed out of *Nugget* and tried to manually start their propeller with a two-handed spin, the way you see in old movies. The Frenchmen's engine was as dead as the island rock. It was as dead as a gunshot ptarmigan. It was as dead as the alien civilization that had built the dark pyramid, probably.

We were stranded out there for three hours. It was the first time I ever understood why freezing to death is sometimes described as *peaceful* or *soothing* or *just like falling asleep*, descriptions that had always seemed to hint at some unfathomable mind-transformation within the freezing person, some power extreme cold had to enchant the brain's basic mechanisms of homeostasis. It didn't feel violent, that was the thing. Even with the wind ripping past you. It was like certain parts of your body just accrued this strange hush. Like you were disappearing piece by piece. I thought I'd be warmer outside and walking around than inside *Nugget*, so I would sort of exaggeratedly move one limb at a time, my left arm or whatever, and while I was concentrating on my left arm my right leg would start to be erased.

More than affecting my sense perceptions, though, the cold seemed to affect the way I thought about my sense perceptions. I'd take my glove off to adjust a zipper and lose feeling in my hand almost immediately and instead of thinking *Holy no I need to get my glove back on right this second* I'd sort of pause and go *My, how interesting that my hand feels as though it's visibly translucent*. Then my brain's inbox would gently ding. PLEASE DON'T DIE.

Jay had it the worst. He was out there the whole time, crouched under the plane, trying to get the engine heated. Villagers from Little Diomedé kept forming little peering semicircles a few feet away from him. Finally he walked back to *Nugget*.

"We're taking off," he said. "Bernard and Christophe can stay in the village." The teachers had agreed to put them up at the school.

The last I saw of our two French pilots, they were being carted away on snow machines, half-bewildered, waving back at us.

Nome, a northern Alaskan metropolis of 3,731 souls, may be the most steampunk city in the world. Imagine a Wild West mining town, the sort with free-swinging saloon doors and a jailhouse with a rocking chair on the porch – call it Buzzard Gulch – then transport it away from cacti and outcroppings to a snowy waste on the shore of a frozen bay. Modernize it some, give it electricity. Now litter it, and be enthusiastic, with twisted hulks of sheet metal, headless fuselages, giant noseless propellers, detritus of air travel that no one has the resources or motive to clean up. Picture *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, only if the climactic battle involved two blimp armadas. Sink, at weird angles in the snow outside of town, locomotives not used since the Gold Rush. Freeze eerie derelict mining ships into the ice. Now draw back. Look over your work. And: Nome.

There's a story that it was named by accident, through a misreading. Before anyone had thought what to call it, they penciled in "Name?" on the map. Some nearsighted cartographer mistook the writing and handed the wrong vowel to history.

Front Street is where they'd have gunfights, if they had gunfights. It's a skinny thoroughfare with its back to the Sound; the drunks lurch-strutting to the next bar, of whom at any moment there are several, get glimpses of the sea between the buildings. The town's put up Christmas lights to celebrate the end of the Iditarod. Big zigzagging strings of them. The snow-packed road terminates in a chute exactly like the one at the starting line in Anchorage. Above the chute there's a wooden arch, and above the arch there's a banner that reads: "FINISH."

This is Tuesday, March 12th. The end of the Iditarod, for the winners, anyway. Here's how this works. It's night. A small crowd turns out, maybe 300 people, under the Christmas lights. I'm there alone, because Jay and Steve have flown back to Little Diomedea on a mission to rescue the Frenchmen. There's a screen the size of a king-size bed hanging from the second story of one of the storefronts across the street. It's playing "Idita-Rock n' Roll," a kid-friendly Iditarod-themed music video from the '90s. The spectacle is largely financed by Anchorage Chrysler Dodge, one of the Iditarod's major sponsors, whose owner, Rod Udd, is known as "Idita-Rod" due to his obsessive love of the race. The storefronts – Nome Liquor Store, Gold Buyers of Alaska, the Bering Sea Restaurant/Bar, Arctic Trading Post Gift Emporium, the Nugget Inn – are doing slow but respectable trade, almost none of which seems Iditarod-related. The night is a very deep blue. It's -2°F. The church next to the "Idita-Rock n' Roll" screen has a banner in front advertising Icy 100.3 FM.

This year's race has come down to a straight fight between Mitch and Aliy. Unsurprisingly given the times and distances involved, Iditarod finishes are rarely close, but this one's going to be; leaving the White Mountain checkpoint, 75 miles from the finish line, Aliy's just 13 minutes behind. In 1978, Lance Mackey's father, Dick, won the Iditarod by just one second; certain reckless members of the crowd speculate within reportorial earshot that we could be fixing to see that all over again. Certainly the guy who seemed to be in charge at the media briefing an hour earlier said to expect both dog teams to be in the chute at once, something that hadn't happened in his previous 20-plus years of seeming to be in charge at Iditarod media briefings. Literally every single person I talk to wants Aliy to win, and so do I. There's a feeling, when the crowd first assembles, that she has a slim but real chance.

You find out early, though. Barring an actual photo finish, there's almost no scenario in which the end of an Iditarod can be surprising. The mushers are half-mad and starved and frozen and the dogs have run 1,000 miles in a week; the sleds are going maybe 7 miles an hour; no one's making up much ground under those circumstances. When the PA guy, after we've been standing around for an hour, says, "Mitch is three miles out," it means Mitch has won, only you end up waiting another half-hour for him to finally arrive. In the end, Mitch pulls in at 10:40pm and Aliy's 23 minutes behind. It's head-twistingly close by Iditarod standards, but Mitch has plenty of time to sob and embrace loved ones and commune with dogs and have camera lights pointed in his haggard frost-mustached face and shake hands for official photos and still clear out of the chute a good while before Aliy arrives.

He's the oldest winner in the history of the Iditarod, Mitch, at 53. Last year, his son Dallas became the youngest champion when he won at 24. Now they're bookending all the other winners, agewise, a fact that will lead most of the newspaper coverage tomorrow.

There's such goodwill at the press conference. Mitch and Aliy eat cheeseburgers and crack jokes. There's no sense that one of them just suffered an agonizing defeat; instead, there's an air of conspiratorial wonder, like, *Oh, wow, can you believe we made it?* As the sporting event that most closely mimics the experience of sustained brutal catastrophe, the Iditarod is maybe uniquely designed to amplify sport's natural

euphoria-making power with basic human relief. Which is one of the most thrilling things there is, if you think about it. Imagine if Game 7 were played on inflatable rafts in a shark tank; afterward, LeBron would be all, *That happened! I survived!*

Everyone in the room gets this: fans, volunteers, media. It's a close-knit world; people know each other. So when Mitch says "The brain kind of stops working somewhere along the Yukon. I offered Aliy a cough drop this morning and she decided it was too complicated to unwrap it," the laugh that rolls through the room is not the brittle pre-deadline laugh of reporters being fed good copy but a delighted and leisurely laugh of people who've been there, or know someone who's been there, and who just want to share in the moment.

What are you going to do tomorrow? someone asks.

"Probably hang out with my dogs and my family," Aliy says.

"I'm going to sleep and eat," Mitch says. "My family can hang out with my dogs."

They'd both had hallucinations. Near the end, kind of beautifully, each had visions of the other. Aliy thought she saw Mitch's yellow sled floating somewhere ahead of her. Whenever Mitch looked behind him, the world kept turning into Aliy. "I saw the raven Aliy, I saw the fuel-tank Aliy. And the upside-down-boat Aliy," he says. The way he says it, it's like something from a myth. They share a look, like, hello, vast and terrifying cosmos.

At around midnight, as I'm on my way out, this happens at race HQ: I see Uncle Dick. From Takotna, remember? He made it, all 700 miles on his snow machine. He's sitting at a folding table with six or seven other race fans, drinking coffee. Team Viagra kept the streak alive.

There are taxis in Nome – in fact there are whole taxi companies. Somehow this makes economic sense in a town of 3,700 people just below the Arctic Circle. There are small fleets of battered gray minivans, the 800 numbers on their sliding doors half-covered by winter curb-silt. Mr. Kab, Checker Cab, E-Z Transportation. I called one in the middle of the night. My driver's name was Roxy. She was a young native woman, maybe 27, with a laughing-Buddha face and sparkly star-shaped glasses. I remember them being sunglasses, but that can't possibly be right. The reflections of the Christmas lights shone out of them like colored lanterns. I was thinking about this city, Nome, which felt like something someone had generated by accident during their first try at a video game, and how it was crisscrossed by all these nonsensical taxis – this arbitrary pattern of routes, so many origins and destinations, dots appearing and disappearing on a map. So I asked Roxy how she'd gotten into the cab game, hoping to use that intro to transition into a follow-up about people and where they're all going.

But she seemed kind of taken aback. "Oh," she said at length. "I'm only doing this for a while, you know? My family, we're more into subsistence stuff. Fishing, gathering berries." She reached into the van's ash tray, where there was a loose ball of rubber bands, and rolled the rubber bands between her fingers. She spoke so slowly I wasn't sure she'd go on. "We practice those skills, my family, because who knows, we say. Who knows what'll still be here tomorrow?"

I thought of Jay, who'd flown with me for 1,100 miles, who'd kept me alive, and who'd given me a copy of his book, *Survival Flying: Bush Flying Tales and Techniques, As Flown and Taught in Alaska*, by C. Jay "The Piper Poet" Baldwin. He'd inscribed it "read and heed!" It was a textbook, but it opened with a poem about bush pilots, a poem Jay had written himself.

Here's to the brave souls that aviate,
Across that vast Alaskan state...

The poem was dedicated to the memory of Jay's friend and mentor Bert, the one who'd disappeared in the waters of the Shelikof Strait.

Who knew what would ever be there tomorrow? And it hit me that that was exactly the point of the Iditarod, why it was so important to Alaska. When everything can vanish, you make a sport out of not vanishing. You submit yourself to the forces that could erase you from the earth, and then you turn up at the end, not erased. I'd had it wrong before, when I'd seen the dog teams as saints on the cusp of a religious vision. It was the opposite. Visionaries are trying to escape into something larger. Mushers are heading into something larger that they have to escape. They're going into the vision to show that they can come out of it again. The vision will be beautiful, and it will try to kill you. And (oh by the way) that doesn't have to be the last word. That's why you go to the end of the world – to see whether you're still there.