

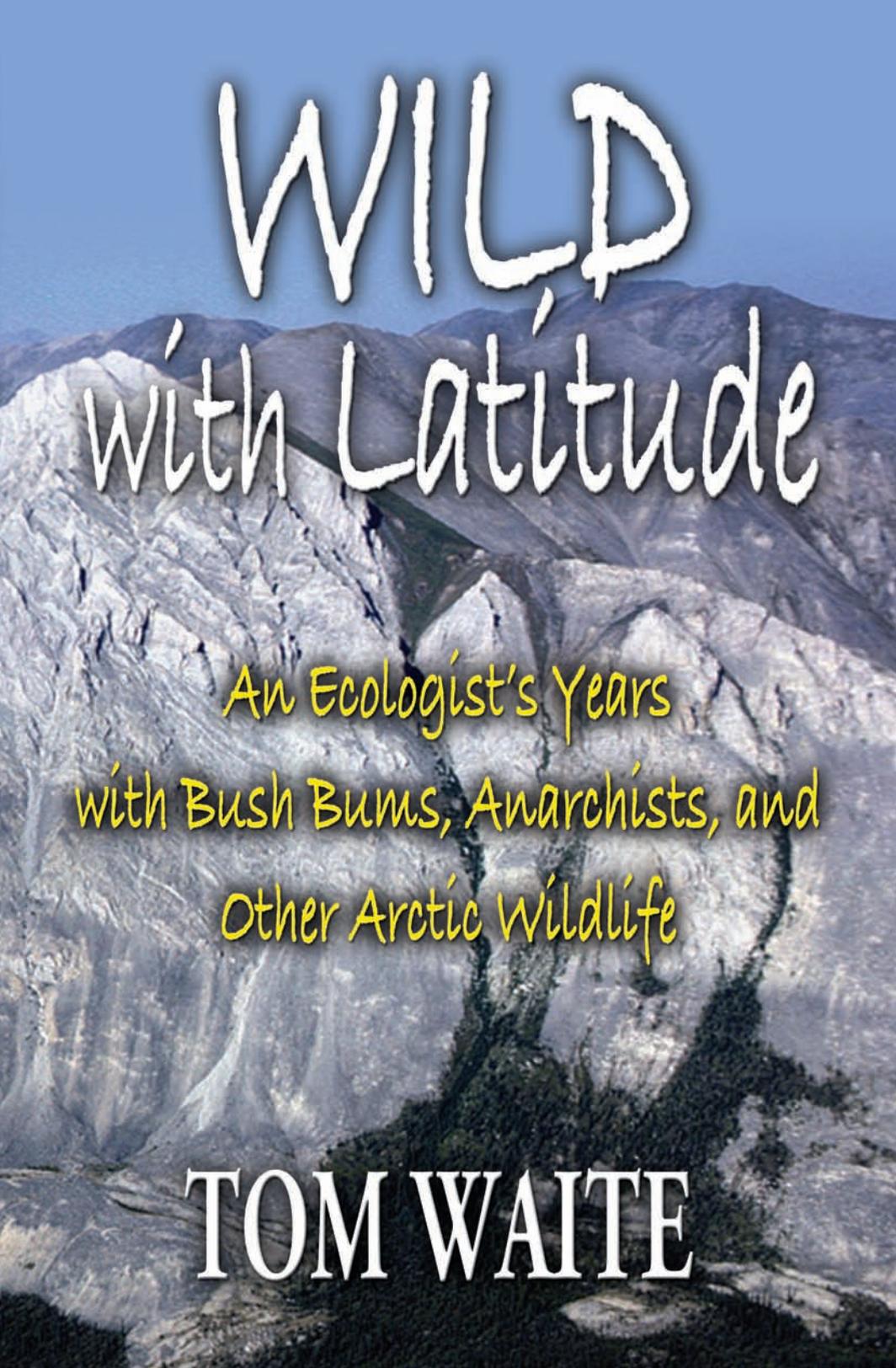
WILD with Latitude celebrates close encounters with Arctic beasts, human and otherwise. The author mingled with wild apes - bush bums, trappers, goldminers, mushers, and even townsfolk. And, when he wasn't face to face with apes, he was having close encounters with other charismatic creatures including bears, muskoxen, wolves, moose, and "Earth's Best Bird." His stories describe the adventure of being a semi-feral ecologist in the Brooks Range and the lives of extreme yet ordinary Alaskans.

WILD with Latitude: An Ecologist's Years with Bush Bums, Anarchists, and Other Arctic Wildlife

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WILD with Latitude

*An Ecologist's Years
with Bush Bums, Anarchists, and
Other Arctic Wildlife*

TOM WAITE

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CHAPTER 1

small world, **BIG GRIZZ**

A COSMIC COINCIDENCE, A DRUG-DEALING PUNK, AND ONE
BACON-LOVING BEAR

THE FIREWEED HAD BLOOMED TO THE TOP and the seeds had been blown far and wide. The bearberry leaves had turned the alpine tundra crimson. The Nearctic migratory birds were long gone, having produced a quick batch of nestlings before heading right back to their tropical wintering grounds. It was late August, 1984. It was time for me to migrate south too, back to Ohio where I was a PhD student — when I wasn't AWOL in Alaska. I had just spent a couple of months in the central Brooks Range developing a dissertation project on optimal food-hoarding strategies in gray jays (locally known as camp robbers or, more affectionately, campies). But my first summer had come to an end. It was time to go.

I packed my gear and said fare thee well to the jays and the vast wilderness. Then I took to the Dalton Highway, the 444-mile gravel North Slope Haul Road that parallels and crisscrosses the Alyeska oil pipeline, bisecting northern Alaska all the way to Prudhoe Bay. But I wasn't going to north to Prudhoe. I was going south to Fairbanks and beyond, back to "civilization."

Nine hours later, after rattling along the dusty haul road, I pulled into Fairbanks. I needed cash so I looked for an ATM. I

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soon discovered this novel phenomenon hadn't yet arrived in "The Interior." And in those days I had no credit cards, no gas cards, just the ATM card. And the banks were closed for the weekend. So I did the only illogical thing: I drove to Anchorage, where not one but two ATMs had recently come into existence, one of them at the official visitor center — a log cabin, of course. That's right, I drove down the Parks Highway, 360 miles, to withdraw some cash so I could buy gas and do my flagrantly hypocritical part to contribute to global warming.

I knew better even then. In fact, I'd divorced my first car five years earlier, in 1978. I went cold turkey. I'd divorced it to be ethical and green, to live sustainably. I switched wholesale to a subtle form of carpooling: I hitch-hiked, like it was my religion. Years later, after a series of failed car-marriages, I would divorce my last car — never to get remarried. This last time I went cold turkey for life because I could no longer pretend, like the average American, that six planet Earths exist to meet my consumptive demands. I saw the connection between global warming and the extinction crisis. I was keenly aware I lived in a country that wages war over fossil fuels. I opted out, as the only right thing to do. I gave my car to charity and pedaled away, happy in divorce at last.

But during my graduate school days I grudgingly participated in the car culture. Like an addict, I burned tank after tank of gasoline to propel myself back and forth — ten round-trips in all — between the Lower Forty-eight and the Brooks Range, not far from the still-untapped oil reserves in ANWR. Eventually, in a cruel twist of fate, I discovered the gray jay's geographic range is contracting poleward, apparently due to climate warming.

Trust me, I see the hypocrisy. As an ecologist, I grieve because I know what's happening to the natural world. I've painstakingly

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computed my own contribution to global warming and hence my own subtle sponsorship of shifting species' ranges and extinction. I confess my eco-crimes and misdemeanors, fully and openly. I see the hypocrisy. I really do.

As if to repay my karmic debt for all that hypocrisy and to share my carbon footprint with others, I indiscriminately picked up every unsavory hitch-hiker I encountered during my years of clutching a steering wheel and pushing a gas pedal. I would spot the extended right thumb and reflexively pull over. And as I'd learned during my own halcyon hitch-hiking days in the 70s, the moment the passenger-side door opens, an experiential play begins.

HERE'S ONE SUCH PLAY I CO-STARRED IN. Recall, it's late August 1984. I've just driven Anchorage to use an ATM. Sure enough, a new machine had just been installed at the visitor center, and I managed to score \$300 for my drive back to Ohio. But little did I know, I would not be going back to Ohio, not anytime soon. With a tank full of guzzleline and a pocket full of cash, I head northeast toward Tok, 200 miles east of Fairbanks. At Tok Junction, I turn right to head southeast, toward Ohio, on the two-lane paved road called the Alaska Highway. As always, I reflexively pull over when I see the queue of naked apes displaying the opposable digit on their right hand, hitching back to the Lower Forty-eight.

The first guy gets in and starts fulfilling his end of the implicit social contract: he tells his life story, sordid details and all. By his own admission, he's a drug-dealing punk from the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. He left Jersey months ago. He drove a step van to Humboldt County, in northern California, where he worked for a marijuana grower in one of those secretive backwoods encampments. Then he hopped on an old clunker 10-speed

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bicycle and headed north. The derailleur didn't work. The brakes didn't work. He wore shit-kicker work boots on his feet and an external-frame pack on his back. Through dogged perseverance he eventually made it to Seattle, where he hopped a ferry for southeast Alaska. He then spent the summer working at a cannery. And now he's headed back to Humboldt County to complete his work there before driving the step van back to the Pine Barrens.

It's my turn to reciprocate. I wasn't a drug-dealing punk from anywhere, so I tell innocent stories about riding trains and hitchhiking around Europe. I tell him about a guy I met on a ferry on my way from Italy to Greece. We were both shunning American tourists — for being overpaid, oversexed, overfed, overconfident, and over there. We were even shunning each other, until we noticed we were both reading *The Portable Nietzsche*. That broke the ice. We hit it off immediately. He was brilliant, verbal, and fascinating. He had just completed an undergraduate thesis project on pedestrianism within the context of urban planning and with an inventive philosophical treatise. We were instant friends, with a shared sense of spontaneity and adventure and play.

My instant Nietzsche-reading friend and I spontaneously fell into a pattern: we'd have a blast together for a day or two, until one of us would suddenly jump onto a boarding train and yell out the window something like, "See you at the main train station in Stockholm on Tuesday?" And, sure enough, we'd meet up, for another day or two.

But the last time we tried to rendezvous, it didn't work out. We found out months later, by postcard, that while I'd spent three days waiting for him to show up at the main train station in

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Barcelona, he'd spent the same three days waiting for me — at the *other* main train station in Barcelona. (I still firmly believe only one of us was at the bona fide main train station — and it wasn't my friend.)

And then I tell my drug-dealing passenger that my friend and I tried to rendezvous again just a couple of months ago, in Golden, British Columbia, on my way from Ohio to Alaska. I arrived in Golden and looked all around. I checked for a General Delivery letter at the post office. I asked locals if they'd seen him. I visited campgrounds, hostels, B&Bs, and motels. I searched high and low. And when I wasn't actively searching, I was waiting. I spent three days hanging out at a Chinese café, writing atrocious poetry, chatting with tourists, helping out in the kitchen. He never showed. Eventually, weeks later, I got a letter explaining that he'd arrived a day early and thought I'd already passed through, so he didn't wait for me.

At this point, my passenger, the drug-dealing punk from the pine barrens of New Jersey, interrupts and says, "I know that guy, your friend from Europe."

"Huh."

"I said, 'I know him.'"

"What? You mean you know someone *like* him?"

"No, I mean I know *him* and I can prove it."

"OK, prove it," I say.

"OK, you haven't mentioned his name, right?"

"Right."

"Well, I know his name."

"Oh really?"

"Yep. And I also know where he is right now and what he's doing."

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“Oh, I see.” At this point I’m regretting the indiscriminant way I pick up every last hitch-hiker. This happens sometimes. I pull away from the curb and within minutes discover that my passenger is a desperado with serious mental health issues. So, I begin my amateurish diagnosis. If he’s not just messing with me, then at a minimum he’s delusional. I brace myself. I start thinking about how to ditch my human cargo.

And then he blurts out, “Yeah, your friend’s name is Tim Twillinger and any day now he should be finishing an 8000-mile bike tour in Boston.”

What the bleep!?! He’s right! I’m stunned. How could he possibly know that? I don’t think he’s a mind-reader, but I can’t make sense of this. I’m baffled. And he’s sitting there gawking at me. He’s not laughing or giving me the evil eye. He’s just sitting there with his bare face hanging out.

Finally, I say, “Yeah, that’s right. But how could you possibly know that?”

“That’s easy,” he says. “I met him while I was biking through Oregon and we kinda hit it off and so we ended up biking together for a few days. And he even told me about you. So I already knew your story months before you stopped to give me a ride.”

Talk about synchronicity! This was a definitive case of Alaskan-style synchronicity — on steroids *and* human growth hormone.

I didn’t believe this was a case of divine intervention or even a meaningful coincidence of the Jungian miracle variety. But I have to admit I was blown away, so much so that I changed my free-form plans right on the spot. Rather than ditching this drug-dealing punk from Jersey at the end of the day, I felt a connection

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to him and so asked if he'd like to join me for a few days of hiking in Kluane National Park in the Yukon Territory.

He was keen so we hatched a plan right on the spot, while driving along the southern shoreline of Lake Kluane, the biggest lake in the Yukon Territory. We'd spend a couple days bushwhacking up to the nearest glacier, commune with mountain goats and golden eagles for a couple days, and then we'd make a leisurely descent, looping back around to Lake Kluane. It was an elegant plan.

KLUANE NATIONAL PARK SUFFERS NO ROOKIE FOOLS. Its Saint Elias Mountains include 17 of the 20 highest peaks in Canada and an enormous ice field. The terrain's rugged to say the least. The weather can be tricky. We knew that much.

We eased into Kluane on day 1, starting our climb at a perfectly benign 2400 feet above sea level. At that elevation, it was just another warm sunny day in late August. So, I wasn't too surprised when, just a few minutes into our hike, I turned around to discover the drug-dealing punk had stripped down to his underpants. Unlike me, he didn't own a pair of shorts, so he spent the whole day hiking in his BVDs — his only pair of BVDs. And I spent the whole day trying to overlook those two facts.

We stopped for the night well above treeline, at about 9,000 feet. It was still warm and crystal clear, but I pitched my tent anyway. The drug-dealing punk chided me for not sleeping under the stars. I shrugged it off and told him to feel free to join me in the tent when it starts snowing.

He scoffed at my weather forecast. The lad had spent all day hiking in his underwear and was still wearing nothing more. How could it snow?

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During the night, the temperature fell and the clouds rolled in. I woke several times to what sounded like snow on the fly, yet the punk continued sleeping “under the stars.” Later I woke to his yelling as he scrambled to get into the tent. He’d just rolled over and got a faceful of snow through the snorkel-opening of his sleeping bag. That got his attention.

By morning, about three feet of snow had fallen. We laughed and had a hurried breakfast of goatmeal and hot choc. We were unfazed.

But then we made a strategic error. We could have done the sensible thing and bailed. We could have simply retreated back down to our starting point. That would have been tough sledding, but we would have made it down below the snowline in a few hours.

But, no, we had way too much testosterone for that. We did exactly what you’d expect young overconfident semi-feral men to do: we climbed. We continued onward, upward. In no time, we were caught in a white-out.

The drug-dealing minimalist punk had no gear, so I gave him all of my extra clothes. I wrapped him in layer after layer. He looked like a mummy.

We trudged through the white-out — for the next 27 hours. We held the compass right in front of our eyes. We argued about which way to head, whether to turn back, whether to sleep in a snow cave, whose fault it was that we were about to die. It was unimaginably cold. We got mired in drifts. We were hypothermic and dehydrated. We teetered on the edge of disaster. And we knew it.

But we had no way of knowing that a search-and-rescue operation was underway. The folks in the helicopter weren’t looking for us, though, we learned days later. No, they were

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looking to airlift a certain VIP and his entourage. Mission accomplished.

Meanwhile, we the UPs (unimportant persons) were left to fend for ourselves, as was our strong preference.

Eventually we started descending bit by bit and canyon walls started forming beside us. And the canyon started to bend to the north northeast, in a way that seemed to match our map. And best of all: we finally saw a spruce and then another and another. We were below treeline — and we could violate the leave-no-trace principle and roast ourselves next to a bonfire, if necessary.

We kept trudging, heads down in the swirling wind. Little by little, we became increasingly convinced we'd made it into the right drainage. If so, we would arrive at our destination, a tiny black square on the map, in a few hours. That square symbolized an old gold prospector's cabin and it also symbolized our suddenly less dim prospects for survival. But we still didn't know for sure whether we were in the right drainage and we had no way of knowing whether the cabin still existed and, if so, whether it still had a roof and a woodstove. Yet, miracle of miracles, we eventually arrived at the map's little black square and it still represented an apparently intact cabin. We laughed and hugged and stumbled toward our new home.

It was a godsend, this cabin-like structure. It was poorly built with huge gaps between the logs. But it had an intact roof and a functional woodstove. We were going to thrive, if only we could somehow get a match lit. We did, eventually. We got the fire roaring and took celebratory photos of our fully iced bush bum beards. We thawed and trembled. We stripped down and hung our clothes near the woodstove. We eventually warmed up.

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And then we raided the larder, to be replenished days later in keeping with the code of bush ethics. We put a mammoth cast iron skillet on the stove and filled it with a gallon of baked beans and three pounds of canned bacon. We then gorged, fallen vegetarians that we were, on all that porcine fattiness and saltiness and savoriness. We agreed it was the best meal we'd ever had, by far, in our entire lives.

And then, while we luxuriated next to the woodstove, feeling all smug and fat and happy, it happened: ***the GRIZZ arrived!***

That's right, we'd lured in a grizzly that was hell bent on evicting us from the cabin and raiding the larder itself. Or perhaps it would consume our savory flesh. It circled the cabin again and again, putting its claws through the cracks in the wall and pushing and tugging. It snorted and sniffed.

We responded in the predictable way, with an adrenaline-fueled natural high like no other. We barricaded the door. We shouted and banged together cast iron skillets. But this grizz was apparently habituated to humans. It wasn't about to leave without its reward.

The standoff lasted for what seemed like hours, but probably wasn't any longer than 10 minutes. We argued about what to do, but somehow made a plan. We waited for just the right moment. When the bear was trying to break through the wall opposite the door, we frantically removed the barricade. The punk opened the door and I threw the delicious-smelling skillet as far as I could muster. The bear got spooked by this and bolted up the side of the mountain. We never saw it again.

We holed up in the cabin for the next three days and nights, basking in all that radiant heat and feasting and reading aloud in

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marathon sessions, despite the fact the cabin was stocked with nothing but Zane Grey novels.

The next morning, we hiked down the creek, following and crisscrossing one set of grizz tracks after another. Our heads were on a swivel.

When we reached the road, the drug-dealing punk from the Pine Barrens of New Jersey hitched the first of many rides on his way back to northern California. I waved as he climbed into the passenger side. And I wondered how long it would take for him to tell “our story.”

A day later, after trekking back to the cabin to restock the larder, I started driving back to the Lower Forty-eight. But I couldn't do it. The snow-capped peaks, the mammoth lake, the magpies and jays — it was all too hyperbolic.

So, a few miles beyond Haines Junction, I hid my vehicle in a willow thicket and hiked up into the mountains, where I lived for the next couple of months.

But that's another story.

*grizz grizz grizz
grizz grizz
grizz*

CHAPTER 2

HOTSPRINGS AND SEXCAPADES

A DEADBEAT DAD, A NAUGHTY NURSE,
AND A ROOKIE DISHWASHER

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON MY WAY back to the Lower Forty-eight: I got detained in the Yukon Territory. To be accurate, I detained myself. You see, I was motoring down the Alaska Highway along Kluane Lake and then through the village of Haines Junction and that's when it hit me. It was instantaneous. I got the impulse to abort my southern migration, to postpone my return to Ohio for a few weeks. Minutes later I hid my little pickup at the end of a dead-end dirt road that disintegrated into a moose path. I grabbed my gear and hiked a few miles up into the mountains, where I lived for six weeks. I slept under the stars, cooked over an open fire, and chopped a hole in the pond ice every few days to bathe polar-bear style.

It was heaven.

Each Saturday I made a foray to Haines Junction, the nearest town. I'd head straight to the library, where my metabolic furnace would blast me to sleep within minutes. At closing time, I'd head over to the pub, the Gateway Licensed Premises. I'd buy one beer to justify my hunkering in the corner to write in my journal and work on data. I'd agree to dance one dance with one of the local women from the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, for the same reason. I'd agree to play one game of pool, for the same

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reason. And I'd chat with my two friends, Billy Jack and Pugwash, for all sorts of reasons.

Billy Jack was a First Nations man in his 40s going on 70 whose claim to fame was his brief career as a professional bareback bronc rider. At 19 he'd run away to the rodeo in Sweetwater, Texas. He was back in the Yukon for good before his 20th birthday. But he'd never stopped dressing the part, from head to toe. He even still spoke like a vaquero from west Texas, that is, when he wasn't teaching me vocabulary words from his language, Southern Tutchone. He called me, "Bob, my friend" I would correct him and he'd say, "Oh, sorry, Tom, my friend" But within minutes he'd revert to "Bob, my friend" Eventually, I stopped correcting him. Then several weeks into our friendship, he "slipped" and called me, "Tom, my friend." I "corrected" him. And he said, "Sorry, Bob. I don't know why I called you 'Tom.' Sorry." I never corrected him again.

Pugwash, an Anglo guy in his 50s going on 80 and a quintessential crusty ole' sourdough, was originally from "back east." He had a terminal-length white beard down to his Buddha belly and a black lab under his bar stool. He accused me on several occasions of being a "liquor inspector," before finally warming up to me. Then he called me "Tommer, furchrissake," never "Bob, my friend" or "Bobber."

At closing time, I'd head back up the mountain, boulder hopping by the light of the headlamp all the way to my campsite. I'd burrow into my sleeping bag and thank my lucky stars.

But all good things must come to an end and, eventually, I couldn't stall any longer. After six weeks, it was time to resume my migration and to get back to reality. So, off I went down the road, heading toward Ohio. Bleck.

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In Watson Lake, I glide past the famous Sign Post Forest, where the municipality displays with impunity 10,000+ stolen road signs from all over the world. And then I see him, a lone hitch-hiker, proudly displaying his opposable thumb. I automatically pull over and invite this stranger to be my passenger, instant friend, and latest source of unscheduled adventure. He doesn't let me down. Turns out he's on the lam, having just abandoned his third wife and their kids, his latest batch. He's defected straight from the sofa in his broken home to the passenger seat in my car. And he seems content with his new lot in life.

We arrive after midnight at Liard River Hotsprings, looking forward to a sulfuric soak. We ditch the car and stroll along the boardwalk to the hotsprings. It's a cold night, but the water will be a painfully warm 114°F, so we leave our parkas behind. As we arrive, we can hear two women chatting quietly in the pitch dark. And my unsavory companion says, "I'll take that one, the one with the deeper voice. OK with you?"

"What do you mean you'll *take* her?" I ask rhetorically.

"I'll do 'er, that's what I mean. You do the other one, eh?" he says.

"Hey, I'm not *doing* anyone," I protest.

"Suit yourself, more for me," he says.

"Shouldn't you be in mourning over the recent loss of your wife and kids?" I ask, again rhetorically.

"I should but I'm not," he says as he slowly lowers himself into the steaming water and then starts closing in on his prey. I find myself worrying that he's really distraught, that he's masking his misery by acting stoic. But within minutes he's engaging in blatant acts of mock reproduction with his preferred prey, with only the pitch darkness providing privacy. He's "doing 'er," just

like he said he would. And they haven't even exchanged names. I'm shocked and appalled.

His copulatory partner's friend makes her way across the pond, sidles up to me in the dark, and says, "Classy, eh?"

"Yeah, super classy," I say. "In my defense, I shouldn't be considered guilty by association. I mean, I'd apologize for his unsavory behavior, but he isn't a friend of mine. I barely know the guy. I just picked him up hitch-hiking in Watson Lake a few hours ago."

"Well, in *my* defense, she's not really a friend of mine either. I know her from work. We're nurses in Fort Saint John and we've never hung out together before this weekend. Somehow, we got to chatting about weekend plans the other day at work and the next thing I knew we'd decided to go away together on the weekend. And now here she is bonking a total stranger in the hotspring."

"What are *you* going to do?" I ask.

"Not that!" she says.

"No, I mean, are you going to stay here and try not to eavesdrop on your quasi-friend's pornographic performance? And where are you going to stay? You're welcome to use my tent. I won't be using it. I'm going to sleep in the back of my truck anyway."

"That's generous. I think I'll take you up on that because I'm sure she plans to bring him back to the cabin we're renting."

"I have an extra sleeping bag too."

"OK, may I borrow your stuff right now? Please. I gotta get outta here ... now!" she says.

At this moment, we're surprised to discover a fifth person's been present all along. We hear someone coming toward us through the water, flailing about, splashing and gasping for

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breath. As a glib greeting I say, "Sounds like we're about to have a drowning victim here."

And he says, "It sounds that way because I'm paralyzed from the waist down."

"Oh damn, please forgive me for my faux pas. I'm so sorry."

"You're forgiven, provided the two of you don't start fornicating right in front of me, like those animals."

"Don't worry, we're all about abstinence," I say.

"Me too, unfortunately, thanks to the paralysis," he says.

"Damn, I did it again. I'm so sorry," I say.

"No worries. I'll forgive you for both of those cracks if you do me favor?" he asks.

"Sure, what can I do? Help you out of the water, into your chair?"

"No, I'm good with that. But what you *can* do is walk out the boardwalk with me and then drive my car over to the end of the ramp. It's so hard getting the wheelchair across that loose gravel."

"Of course, yes, I'd be glad to move your car."

So off we go, a trio of instant friends, in the dark. When we reach the end of the boardwalk, he gives me his keys and says "good luck."

"Good luck?" I ask.

"You'll see," he says cryptically.

As soon as I get into the car, I do see. I see it's a custom-made car. It has no pedals. So, it takes me a minute or two to figure out how to drive with my hands only, how to use the clutch, how to accelerate, and most important how to brake. And then I ease over to my new friends — with the windshield wipers on and the ajar-door alarm dinging and the high beams shining in their eyes.

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IN THE MORNING, MY TRUCK HAS A FLAT TIRE. The deadbeat dad, returning to the scene of the “crime” with his new co-star, offers to fix it. He wants to repay me for the ride — and perhaps also for subjecting me to the pornographic episode. I let him do it. And then off I go, back to the Lower Forty-eight. I’ll be there in a few days.

But a few miles down the road the vehicle lurches to the side on a sharp curve. Damn, another flat, I think, though it really feels like a wheel’s come off. I pull off the road and discover two of the lug nuts are missing, apparently because my benefactor botched the job of putting on the spare tire. My initial accusatory assumption is he forgot to put on the last two nuts. But then I jack up the vehicle and discover the lug nuts are missing because the bolts are missing. They’ve been sheared off, presumably because he didn’t properly seat the wheel and adequately secure it in place before lowering the jack to do the final tightening. I can see the remaining four bolts are nearly sheared off as well. And the once-circular holes in the rim are stretched into pronounced ellipses. I use the lug nut wrench to tighten one of them and, in the process, I break off another bolt. I hand-tighten the remaining three nuts, being careful not to snap off another bolt. I lower the vehicle ever so gently, stash the jack, and weigh my options.

Plan A: I could hitch to the next outpost down the road and call for a tow truck. The fee would be exorbitant. It would cost me more to tow the vehicle than to replace it.

I opt for Plan B. I get in and drive. I creep along in first gear, staying under 10 mph all the way to Fort Nelson, British Columbia, 180 miles down the road. Miraculously, I make it to town. It takes about 22 hours. I could have pedaled my bike there in half that time. But so what, I’m just glad to be there. In the

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morning, I'm told that I'll have to wait six days for the parts to arrive on a Greyhound bus. That's OK too.

I walk over to the Chinese/Canadian restaurant, the Muskwa, and begin insinuating myself into the three-generation family that runs the place and lives upstairs. At first, I hang out reading and drinking cup after cup of what looks a little like coffee. Then I start to pitch in. By the third day, I've tacitly accepted a pro bono position as resident multi-tasker. I'm a dishwasher, sous chef, busser, server, cook, and so on. But it's more than a work-for-food arrangement. Without exchanging a single word, we enter into a subtly negotiated arrangement where I become a de facto adoptee — the uninvited guest that wouldn't leave.

SEVEN MONTHS LATER, I passed back through Fort Nelson, headed north for my second field season in the Brooks Range in northern Alaska. I stopped at the Muskwa Chinese-Canadian restaurant for a happy reunion and a slice of pie. The elders peppered me with questions like "you back?" and "you stay?" I assured them I was just passing back through but I'd be back to visit again someday. It was a promise I'd keep seventeen times over the years to come.

Hours later I arrived at Liard Hotsprings Provincial Park, where I paused for the requisite late-night soak. There were no shenanigans this time, which came as both relief and disappointment.

The next day I paid Pugwash a surprise visit at his hermitage, a dilapidated one-room log cabin on the "outskirts" of Haines Junction. He was a shadow of his former self. It had been *the* winter of his discontent. His constant companion, the black lab, had been killed by wolves, or so he claimed. His human companion, his paramour had gone missing. She'd materialized out of nowhere 2 years earlier, while Pugwash was out moose-

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hunting. When he got back to his isolated cabin, there were candles burning. When he entered the cabin, he saw his paramour to be. She'd arrived on foot a few days ago, having walked 7 miles down his dirt road, until she happened upon what seemed like an abandoned cabin. She immediately decided to squat in Pugwash's cabin, planning to overwinter solo. When he showed up a few days later replete with enough moose meat for two — and lust in his heart — they hit it off. They became copulatory partners that evening and somehow managed to stay together for two tumultuous years. But she'd finally had enough and went walking back down the dirt road from whence she'd come.

These events, especially the loss of his dog, sent Pugwash into a tailspin. He went on a death-defying bender (“drunker ‘n fuckall fer months, furchrissake”) and eventually retreated to his sleeping bag (“fuckin’ eider down fart sack, fer fucksake”), where he stayed mummified almost continuously for months. He showed me the pot (“fuckin’ piss pot”) next to his bunk and explained that its contents had been frozen solid (“cock fuckin’ stiff”) all winter long because he never bothered to light a fire in the woodstove. He'd spent months on end sober but depressed, *living* inside his eider down sleeping bag, like a homeless desperado but within his own home. He was still in his sleeping bag now, in June.

I suddenly had a purpose, a mission. I opened the widows. I coaxed and cajoled, trying to get him to snap out of his funk. I heated water so he could bathe. I finally convinced him to rejoin the living. He grudgingly got out his sleeping bag, took a bath, and, inexplicably, shaved off his perennial white beard. I cooked him some dinner. We went for a little hike through the spruce bog behind his cabin. He promised to get himself together. I promised

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to visit him for a few days on my way back through in a few months.

Months later, when I stopped to check on him, his cabin was vacant. The townsfolk had no idea what had become of him. Disappointed, I continued on to Fairbanks, anxious to roll into town in time for that evening's baseball game. If he'd been home I would have asked him to join me.

I never saw Pugwash again. But I like to imagine he got his act together, dried out, divorced his truck, traded for provisions, and then launched a canoe in Whitehorse and floated the mighty Yukon River into Alaska — at long last, to homestead in the wildest place on Earth.

*yukon yukon yukon
yukon yukon
yukon*

CHAPTER 3

ELEPHANT IN THE OUTFIELD

THE #1 SUPERFAN, THE MAN WHO WORE #2, AND THE
KISSING BANDIT

WITH THE REGULARITY OF SUMMER SOLSTICE, the circus came to town. Not the circus circus, but the baseball circus known as the Alaska League, a collegiate summer league that has served as a pipeline to the Big Leagues for decades. By now, nearly 400 Alaska League players have gone on to make it to The Bigs. The list of former players in this gritty frontier league reads like a Who's Who and even includes Hall of Famers, enshrined all the way down there to the south and east in Cooperstown, New York. But when they arrived in Fairbanks, Alaska, they were fresh-faced unknowns here to hone their skills, impress the pro scouts, and entertain the locals.

With the same regularity as summer solstice, I too came to town. I arrived in Fairbanks each June on my way to the Brooks Range to do ecological research. I arrived alone or with an accomplice — my brother, Barnacle, or one of my other friends, Vollers, Deege, or Shrew. Fairbanks was the last stopover on our way to spending three to nine months in the bush, above the Arctic Circle. It was the psychological jumping-off point, from which we'd soon leave "civilization" behind. It was our source of supplies and our last opportunity to get our fill of town fun. We'd arrive in town and immediately get busy gathering the gear and

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groceries we'd need for the coming months. We'd hit the co-op near the UAF campus for bulk beans and rice, cous cous and falafel, and dried herbs and spices. We'd hit a warehouse-style grocery store for a half dozen 8-pound tins of peanut butter, two dozen boxes of Sailor Boy Pilot Bread, stacks of 48-count boxes of Babe Ruth and Snickers bars, enough toxic-orange Tang powder to quench the thirst of a Mars mission crew, and so on.

In the early evening we'd head over to Growden Memorial Park, the hallowed home field of the Alaska Goldpanners. We'd arrive early and hang out in the gravel parking lot, making massive two-fisted sandwiches and playing hacky sack and watching fellow fans arrive. It was a quintessentially Alaskan scene. Folks in Fairbanks had only recently shed their parkas and Arctic-insulated Carhartt overalls and bunny boots. Now they wore T-shirts that were much too small and had slogans like, "Alaska, where men are men ... and women win the Iditarod." And their massive four-wheel drive trucks were festooned with bumper stickers with equally Alaskan slogans like, "My child could kick your honor student's ass." We watched this opening act and jotted notes in our journals.

Around 6 PM, we'd head over to *the* ticket booth and then enter the "Big Top," just in time for batting practice. But I wasn't there early so I could get a front-row seat for batting practice. I'd survey the surreal scene and head straight for *my* seat. I always sat in the same place, third row back in the bleachers behind the backstop just to the right of home plate. I sat there for one reason and one reason only: Rosie. Sitting in the third row, I had a front-row seat for The Rosie Show.

Rosie was a flamboyant, ancient, beautiful, African American gent. He was an imp in a Hawaiian shirt. He kept everyone within

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earshot entertained throughout the game with his running commentary. I sat as close as I could get without intruding on his little social triangle, which included his two best friends, Big Rosie and Jim.

Big Rosie wasn't any taller than Rosie, but he outweighed him by a couple hundred pounds. He was spheroid yet muscular. He spent each game failing to get a word in edgewise and smiling in response to each of Rosie's countless quips. Jim was tall and mesomorphic (built like a brick shithouse) and wore a stern expression. He spent each game bantering with Rosie, trying to convince him of the foolishness of his ways and rolling his eyes in mock disapproval.

Rosie spent each game maintaining his well-deserved status as #1 Superfan of all time. But he wasn't even a fan of the hometown heroes, the Alaska Goldpanners. No, he couldn't root for the 'Panners, not during the 1985 and 1986 seasons. During those years, he rooted for their rival, the North Pole Nicks. But he didn't root for the Nicks as a whole. He really rooted for his favorite Nick. It was a full-blown man-crush. Rosie was in love with the young man from Pepperdine University who played second base and wore #2. Rosie was the #1 fan of the #2 man, Andy Stankiewicz.

And I could see why. Andy was a standout. What made him stand out — beyond his stellar defensive play, his base-stealing prowess, his contact-hitting par excellence — was his over-the-top hustle, his radiating enthusiasm. He was like a modern-day Pete Rose, aka "Charlie Hustle," but without all the gambling and lying and arrogance and unsavoriness. Andy sprinted to the dugout at the end of each inning, always arriving first. He sprinted out to his position, always ritualistically tagging second base. And

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unlike any other player, he even sprinted from the on-deck circle to the batter's box. He was a sparkplug extraordinaire.

Not to be outdone by Andy's enthusiasm, Rosie broadcast his love for Andy like the future of their relationship depended on it. Andy would sprint into the batter's box to take his cuts during batting practice, still an hour or so before game time, and Rosie's banter would announce this inconsequential detail to everyone within earshot: "Is that two? Is that Andy? Come on, two. Come on, two, get sumthin' stahted, now. Come on, two. Come on, Andy."

Jim would pretend to intervene: "Rosie, it's just *batting practice!*"

Unfazed, Andy's one-person cheering section — the self-appointed play-by-play announcer for Andy's every exploit, no matter how small — would continue: "That's number two. Come on, two. Come on, Andy. Get sumthin' stahted, now. Come on, two. Come on, Andy."

Like a well-rehearsed actor with impeccable timing, Jim would plead, "Rosie, we're beggin' you. Stop. It's batting practice. Save it for the game, Rose."

"Come on, Andy. Come on, two. Ooooh, nice hit, young man. Come on, number two."

"Rosie, the game won't start for another hour. Save your energy," Jim would suggest.

"Come on, Andy, hit one over the fence. Come on, two, get sumthin' stahted. Come on, Andy. Come on, two. Nice swing, number two. That's my favorite player, that number two. That's my guy, Andy. Come on, Andy. Come on, two."

Jim eventually backed off. He followed his own advice and saved his energy for the game. Big Rosie smiled and smiled, and made frequent, knowing eye contact with me.

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When Andy returned to his position for infield practice, Rosie would praise his every move with his familiar refrain.

Years later, Andy would tell me he had no awareness of all this adulation. In fact, he didn't even know Rosie existed. It seems Rosie's was just another face in the crowd.

WITH GAME TIME APPROACHING, the fans would trickle in and the entertainment value of the evening's outing would skyrocket. It was a wild and wooly scene. There were naked apes everywhere. It was like an experiential play, where fans and vendors and ushers and players were all cast members, and the action on the field often took a backseat to the many spontaneous sideshows.

It really was circus-like.

One such evening, I looked out and saw an elephant, the icon of the old timey circus. It was standing beyond the left field fence. At first I just thought, "Only in Alaska!" But then I got to wondering what an elephant was doing at the game. It felt eerie, like seeing a ghost of extinction past, the wooly mammoth. These charismatic megavertebrates roamed the present-day Growden outfield as recently as 10,000 years ago, when they might have encountered ancestors of some of the rambunctious young Native Alaskan fans. (These days a local youngster can find a fossilized molar and get his name in the *Daily News-Miner* and his face on the *Tonight Show*, but the only elephants he'll see are the ice sculptures he climbs on annually at the Fairbanks-based Ice Sculpture World Championships.)

As an aspiring ecologist, I thought about colleagues who favored reintroducing extant relatives of big mammals driven to extinction by humans. And I fantasized that *this* elephant might be pregnant and might wander off and found an inbred population.

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She could reintroduce elephants to the Continent of North America, starting with Alaska where the last lingering population of woolly mammoths went kaput only 4000 years ago.

So, what *was* a live *African* elephant doing at Growden circa 1984 C.E.? Nothing much, she'd simply made the long trek north and west, like the boys of summer, to entertain the locals. The circus circus just happened to be in town at the same time as the baseball circus. That's all. There would be no reintroduction.

Not surprisingly, Growden has become a popular destination for affluent baseball geeks. It's been listed by ESPN in the Top 10 of must-see baseball destinations, along with Cooperstown, NY, home to the Hall of Fame, and Williamstown, PA, host town of the annual Little League World Series. But if you're hoping to see elephants, then you should go where elephants routinely roam. Don't go to Growden. I've seen a grand total of one elephant at Growden Park, and that was many years ago.

But I've always seen plenty of naked apes of the tame upright variety at Growden. Aside from Rosie and his two-man entourage, the fans I enjoyed most of all were the roving band of renegade pre-teen boys. They ran roughshod over the whole park, as if it was their own private island and they were straight out of *Lord of the Flies*.

Sad to say, the pre-teen scene at Growden is fairly subdued these days, but a quarter of a century ago it was a wild romp. Security, if you could call it that, was all about the laissez-faire principle. Kids were allowed to be kids and Growden was their rumpus room. Starting around 6:30 each evening, small bands of these half-grown semi-feral apes formed spontaneously, initially coming together in duos, trios, and quartets. Eventually, they coalesced into one large pack. They ran wild and free. They

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sprinted with Stankiewiczian enthusiasm. They swarmed hither and yon. They chased after foul balls and wrassled for these prized souvenirs. They scaled the chain link fence and descended onto the home team's dugout, where they would extend their arms and wiggle their fingers to put a hex on the opposing pitcher as he began each windup. And they raced back and forth, a thundering herd on the metal bleachers, hundreds of times each game.

My friend, Jeff (aka The Shrew), and I sat in the bleachers one ideal June evening in 1986, when one of the small apes suddenly slammed on his brakes right in front of us. He had momentarily dropped out of the pack. He looked Jeff in the eye, pointed at an unopened Snickers bar, and said, "You doing anything with that?"

Jeff had been impatiently coaxing the molecules back into a solid state after unintentionally leaving the Snickers bar in the sun to melt. His nickname was The Shrew because he had a phenomenally high metabolism and was always hungry. He'd been craving that candy bar, couldn't wait to eat it, and yet he said, "No, I'm not doing anything with it. You want it?"

The kid grabbed it. But instead of thanking Jeff and then sprinting off with his trophy, he said, "Ooooooh, it all's muuusshh." Then he reared back and threw it from point-blank range right into Jeff's sternum, where it exploded like a giant paint ball full of chocolate syrup, splattering in all directions. The crushed-peanut shrapnel and chocolaty goo were in Jeff's beard and all over his chest and lap. The wad of viscous nougat stuck to his shirt. The kid pointed at his handy work, laughed, and thundered off to rejoin the pack.

These days a semi-feral lad could get himself tasered — in the neck — for pulling a stunt like that. But in that time and place, we

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just laughed and laughed. Jeff laughed till he peed himself. In mid-hysteria, he managed to say, "Only in Alaska!"

WHILE THE SWARM PROVIDED NONSTOP ENTERTAINMENT, the public address announcer punctuated the end of each half inning with a musical treat. He blasted a little ditty called "Happy Boy," by The Beat Farmers. Their music defies categorization, but seems to be a concoction of roughly three parts cow punk, two parts roots rock, one part country rock, with hints of jangle pop and hardtwang Americana, not to mention swingabilly and Creedence swamp-pop. Within the first three notes, the players would break into freestyle dance. And they'd sing along:

*I was walkin' down the street on a sunny day
Hubba hubba hubba hubba hubba*

Minor pandemonium would break out. The players in the field danced discreetly while warming up for the inning, but the players on the other team would gather in front of their dugout and dance with abandon. And everyone would impersonate the singer's guttural style:

*A feeling in my bones that I'll have my way
Hubba hubba hubba hubba hubba*

The renegade pre-teen boy-fans and some of the older fans would bust a move. And nearly everyone would sing the chorus:

*Well I'm a happy boy <happy boy>
Well I'm a happy boy <happy boy>
Oh ain't it good when things are going your way, hey hey?*

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Everyone sang along. Well, nearly everyone. Not Rosie, of course. He was transfixed on #2, watching his every move.

*My little dog spot got hit by a car
Hubba hubba hubba hubba hubba*

Everybody laughed, even the dog lovers among us.

*Put his guts in a box and put him in a drawer
Hubba hubba hubba hubba hubba*

More laughter, lousy singing, and the kind of vaguely dance-like hip-shaking that makes you want to look away. Then came the chorus again followed by kazoo and gargling flourishes blared over the PA system. And, all too soon, the final verse:

*I forgot all about it for a month and a half
Hubba hubba hubba hubba hubba
I looked in the drawer and started to laugh
Hubba hubba hubba hubba hubba*

These days the PA system broadcasts “Happy Boy” during the seventh-inning stretch only. But when the song first came out the PA guy had an itchy trigger finger and the novelty hadn’t worn off yet, so he played this little ditty many times per game — at the end of each half inning, during conferences on the mound, and during each new relief pitcher’s trot in from the bullpen.

If you like theater of the absurd and you don’t mind paying \$3, that’s entertainment.

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DURING STRETCHES OF ACTUAL BASEBALL, I monitored Rosie's banter and looked for opportunities to chat him up. Here's a prime example. One evening I overheard him say, "I used to play ball, you know. That's right, I played ball. Uh-huh."

Jim rolled his eyes and Big Rosie smiled, but I took the bait and asked, "Where was that Rosie?"

"In Alabamee, when I was a boy. That was a long time ago, young man. In the 20s, it was."

"Which position did you play?" I asked.

"Backcatcher."

"Huh? What?"

"Backcatcher. I always played backcatcher."

"What's that? Was that what you called 'catcher' where you grew up?"

"No, young man, the backcatcher was the little kid who played *behind* the catcher. We were poor. We didn't have no backstop, so if the ball got by the catcher, someone would have to chase it."

"That's fun. Were you a good backcatcher?"

"The best."

"The best in your town?"

"The best in Alabamee!" Rosie concluded, just before updating us about Andy's latest exploit.

ALTHOUGH EVERY GAME AT GROWDEN PARK is thoroughly entertaining, there's one particular game each year that outshines all others. First held in 1906, it's been played annually ever since on the night of summer solstice. The game starts at 10:30 PM and ends after midnight — under natural lighting — so it's called the Midnight Sun Game. For the fans who pack the place for this spectacle, the social event of the year in Fairbanks, it's the Midnight Fun Game.

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One of the most entertaining editions of the Midnight Sun Game took place in 2008, when Bill “Spaceman” Lee, the former major leaguer and winningest pitcher in ‘Panners history was invited back — at age 61 — for a cameo appearance. But he didn’t just show up and yuck it up and pose for photos and sign autographs. Nope, he was the starting — and winning — pitcher for the hometown heroes!

To commemorate this feat, the ‘Panners issued one of their quintessentially Alaskan Scratch ‘n Spit baseball cards. The front of the card shows Bill, the former All Star lefty pitcher for the Boston Red Sox and one-time half-hearted lefty Presidential candidate, as he appeared at the 2008 game, sans post-game victory cigar. And it lists his years of service as a Goldpanner starting pitcher as 1966-67 *and* 2008. Only at Growden!

THAT ‘08 MIDNIGHT FUN GAME might have been the most entertaining game ever for many of the ‘Panner faithful, but *my* favorite game took place one June evening back in the early ‘90s. I arrived in time for batting practice, having just driven from Columbus, Ohio, where I’d seen Andy Stankiewicz play for the Columbus Clippers, then the AAA affiliate of the New York Yankees. As soon as I got my ticket, I headed straight for *my* seat, to join *my* guys. And sure enough, the usual suspects were all present and accounted for: Rosie, Big Rosie, and Jim.

Rosie was still vital and vivid. He greeted me with a handshake and back-slap and said, “Thank you for coming back up to see me, young man.”

We chatted for a few minutes about this and that. And then I couldn’t hold back any longer, so I asked, “Hey Rosie, who would you say was your favorite player of all time in the Alaska League?”

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Big Rosie smiled. Jim rolled his eyes. And Rosie said, "Oh, that's easy, it was that young man ... what was his name?"

"Bill Lee?" I teased.

"No, that's not it."

"Dave Winfield?" I suggested.

"No, but I like him."

"Barry Bonds?"

"No, no, it was ... what was his name?"

"Do you remember his number?" I prompted.

"I sure do, it was number two."

"But what was his name?" I asked.

"Andy. Number two. He was Andy."

"Andy who?"

"His name was Andy ... Andy ... Stanky ... uh ... witch."

"You mean *this* guy?!" I blurted out as I unfurled the newspaper clipping of a close-up photo. I handed it to him.

Rosie was stunned, flattered, and momentarily speechless. He immediately recognized Andy, even though the Clippers uniform bore a numeral other than 2. He said, with a tear in his eye, "Thank you for bringing this to me, young man."

"You're welcome, Rosie. Do you recognize the other person in the photo with Andy?" I asked.

"Well, I don't have my glasses, but it looks Morganna. Is that Morganna kissing number two on the cheek?"

"Sure is," I said, confirming that "The Kissing Bandit" had struck again.

For the uninitiated, Morganna was an entertainer of the exotic-dancer variety who became famous for running onto baseball fields, kissing unsuspecting players, and sometimes getting arrested. Her first "victim" was Pete Rose, when she was just 17 years old; her most embarrassed victim was Andy. The

photo showed the freakishly voluptuous Morganna engulfing diminutive Andy. To clarify, Morganna's comedy career was largely based on her quips that Dolly Parton was developmentally challenged. And in the courtroom she once invoked "the Gravity Defense," telling the judge she'd fallen over the railing onto the field due to her high center of gravity. The judge dismissed the case.

But Rosie didn't give a rat about Morganna. He was teary-eyed over the fact I'd honored him with this clipped photo of his favorite Alaska Leaguer of all time. He carefully folded the clipping and said, "Thank you, young man, for bringing this to me."

Then he stood up and walked away. I gave Jim and Big Rosie a quizzical look, but they just shrugged. I felt bad, of course, for upsetting him so much that he was leaving the game. I thought I'd humiliated him irreparably in front of the Growden faithful by provoking all those tears.

I spied on him as he walked slowly out across the gravel parking lot. Eventually, he arrived at a car — a monstrosity of an old brown caddy. But he didn't get in and drive away. Instead, he opened the passenger-side door and put the newspaper clipping in the glove box — for safe keeping. Then he slowly made his way back into the ball park and eventually to his seat.

When he got back to his seat, Jim handed Rosie a hanky and said, "If you're going to start cryin' again, please don't sit next to me." Big Rosie giggled as he giggled.

After the game, I said goodbye to the triumvirate: Jim, Big Rosie, and Rosie. I told them I'd be heading off to the bush for months and so wouldn't see them again for the rest of that season. Jim gave me a bone-crushing handshake, Big Rosie smiled, and

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Rosie instructed, “Young man, you come back up here and see me ... *before I die.*”

SEVENTEEN YEARS HAVE PASSED and, sadly, so too has Rosie. He believed in an afterlife and a promised land. If that stuff’s true, I imagine he’s now the #1 Superfan at the Big Ballpark in the Sky, where there’s a Midnight Fun Game every night for all eternity and every player at every position — backcatcher included — wears the same number: **2!**

ANDY IS ALIVE AND WELL. He went on to play for the Columbus Clippers in subsequent years, four tours in all, the final one in 2000. I chatted with him after a game that year. We reminisced about the Alaska League and Growden Park. And I told him the story of how I’d clipped the photo and passed it on to Rosie. He expressed mild regret over never having met Rosie and his pals. And he thanked me, saying simply, “That’s a cool story. Thanks for sharing it.”

A year after the Morganna Incident, Andy became the everyday starting shortstop for the New York Yankees. Ultimately, he spent part or all of seven seasons in the Major Leagues, playing for four teams. As far as I know, he never again wore #2.

Andy might have hustled like Pete Rose, but his Major League career numbers hardly compare. Rose was the all-time hits leaders, with an astonishing 4256; Andy had a meager 203 career hits. That’s a whopping 21-fold advantage to Pete. But Pete turned out to be an unsavory character. He ultimately got himself banned from baseball, so who wants to be compared with him anyway.

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Besides, Andy's accomplishments in the majors do compare quite favorably with those of the arguably greatest all-around athlete in USA history. Believe it or not, Andy's career statistics strongly resemble those of Jim Thorpe, the famous Native American superstar athlete. Their career numbers are strikingly similar — batting average: 0.241 for Andy vs. 0.252 for Jim; hits: 203 vs. 176; RBI: 59 vs. 82; home runs: 4 vs. 7; seasons: 7 vs. 6; and teams: 4 vs. 3.

The numerical similarities extend to other sports as well. For instance, although Andy never competed in the National Ballroom Dancing Championships while a student-athlete at Pepperdine, Jim won this national championship *just once* during his years at the Carlisle Indian [*sic*] School. Because one versus zero is the smallest difference possible other than zero, Andy and Jim were virtually identical in their career statistics for collegiate ballroom dancing as well.

Likewise, Andy and Jim amassed the same number of Olympic Gold Medals. While Andy was never an Olympian, Jim's two gold medals in track and field were stripped after it was revealed that he'd — naively — compromised his amateur status by playing pro baseball in North Carolina during his college days. Just think, if only the Alaska League had existed during Jim's day, he could have played outfield for the 'Panners and ultimately retained his gold medals.

These musings prompt one final thought. Jim Thorpe is buried in the Jim Thorpe Tomb in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania — pending a lawsuit aimed at returning his remains to their rightful place. The town bearing his name renamed itself after Thorpe's death in 1953, and purchased Thorpe's remains in a shameless cash grab. So, I can't help but wonder whether North Pole, Alaska, will be renamed Andy Stankiewicz, Alaska, and whether Andy will be

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buried in the Andy Stankiewicz Tomb, right next to Santa's Village ... just a thought.

Back in the land of the living, Andy currently serves as Minor League Field Coordinator for the Seattle Mariners. And by all outward appearances, he remains a person of spotless character and extraordinary work ethic. In the words of Mark Newman, an executive with the Evil Empire (aka New York Yankees):

*There are no baseball people who I hold in higher regard ...
Andy was an exceptional player, coach, manager and scout ...
His impact on our organization has been extraordinary. Andy is
a winner, a great teacher of the game and a man of the highest
honesty and integrity.*

MORGANNA THE KISSING BANDIT retired from *her* "baseball career," like Andy, in the 1990s — never to frolic again. It's probably for the best. After all, in the post 9-11 era, she'd probably get tasered if she were to obey gravity, fall over a railing onto the field, and then plant one on someone's cheek. For better or worse, it seems we've lost our sense of humor for those sorts of shenanigans.

In fact, the recent taserings of a 17-year-old fellow at a ballgame in Philadelphia made lots of folks nostalgic for the days of Morganna. And this episode got me to wondering what had become of Morganna. It turns out she dropped out of the public eye and became Morganna the Non-kissing Suburbanite.

But Morganna hasn't completely faded from societal consciousness. For instance, her lingering infamy was exploited in the run-up to the last US Presidential election. Upper Deck, the baseball card outfit, invoked her image in their Presidential Predictors card series, portraying Hillary Rodham Clinton as the Kissing Bandit. They didn't do this to imply Hillary and Morganna

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are interchangeable. No, it seems their rationale for placing Hillary's cartoon head on Morganna's cartoon body was to analogize their shared approach to life: "go after what you want and get it!" Does it follow that criminally trespassing by running onto a baseball field and smooching an unsuspecting Andy Stankiewicz is on par with running for Presidency of the United Lower Forty-eight States?

THE BEAT FARMERS ARE DEFUNCT. They disbanded tragically, in 1995, three days after their drummer, Country Dick Montana, had a fatal heart attack during a live performance. But their signature tune, "Happy Boy," remains a fixture at Growden Memorial Park. It seems "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" may never supplant "Happy Boy" as the official musical interlude during the seventh-inning stretch.

THE MIDNIGHT FUN GAME IS ALIVE AND WELL. It too remains a fixture. One can only imagine what kind of antics may take place under the midnight sun in years to come. Considering the brilliant way Bill Lee pitched, at age 61, perhaps Andy will return for a similar cameo, when he reaches that age. (Save the date: June 20, 2026.) He could wear #2 and bat lead-off. If he does, I'll play backcatcher and cheer him on, "Come on, two. Get sumthin stahted now."

Bill could get the starting nod for the hometown heroes. He'll be 79 years young and should be in good form still considering he recently signed a contract with the Brocton Rox, an independent minor league team in the Canadian-American Association of *Professional* Baseball. I'm not making this up. Believe it or not, Bill Lee's on the 22-man roster for the upcoming 2011 season. (He won't be "managed" by Don Zimmer, his former manager with the Boston Red Sox whom he unflatteringly called "The Gerbil.")

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Instead, he'll be managed by none other than Bill Buckner, the vilified former Red Sox first baseman who let a weak groundball trickle into right field — and in doing so let the winning run score — in game six of the 1986 World Series.)

And if this scenario isn't whimsical enough already, Morganna could resurrect *her* "baseball career" and get the nod as starting pitcher for the visiting team. Don't laugh, rumor has it Morganna throws harder than Bill. The other Bill (Buckner) could play first base. And the rambunctious kids could heckle the opposing pitcher while riding bareback on elephants in the outfield.

Only at Growden, only in Fairbanks, only in Alaska!

hubba hubba hubba
hubba hubba
hubba

WILD with Latitude celebrates close encounters with Arctic beasts, human and otherwise. The author mingled with wild apes - bush bums, trappers, goldminers, mushers, and even townsfolk. And, when he wasn't face to face with apes, he was having close encounters with other charismatic creatures including bears, muskoxen, wolves, moose, and "Earth's Best Bird." His stories describe the adventure of being a semi-feral ecologist in the Brooks Range and the lives of extreme yet ordinary Alaskans.

WILD with Latitude: An Ecologist's Years with Bush Bums, Anarchists, and Other Arctic Wildlife

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