THE GHOST VOYAGE
BOOKS BY GONTRAN DE PONCINS

The Ghost Voyage
Home Is the Hunter • Kabloona
Point Barrow, Alaska
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(A.P. NEWS)

An eight-ship United States Navy expedition finally ran the hazard of polar ice pack today and successfully reached this outpost on top of the world.

The convoy had been barred for two days from reaching Barrow by treacherously shifting ice, which breaks up for only short periods each year.

Author’s note: Our voyage was made nine years before.
INTRODUCTION

This book is the account of a 4,600-mile sea voyage which I made with two men, sailing from Coppermine, in the Arctic, through the Bering Strait and down to Vancouver. Chronologically, it follows Kabloona. For I had hardly come to the end of my adventure among the Ekimos than an experience of quite another kind presented itself, curious enough to be worth relating.

Here is how it happened. I was about to leave the Arctic after having spent more than a year with the Eskimos. I had covered 1,500 miles on foot under precarious and not always comfortable conditions. I was worn out. Toward the end of my journey I was taken aboard the icebreaker Saint Roch of the Canadian Arctic Patrol. "Stay with us awhile," said the captain. "At least long enough to take a rest." But what I was worried about was how I was going to get away.¹ The Mackenzie Air Service, which carries

¹I have explained in Kabloona that the Arctic of the Eskimos was separated from the civilized world by a no man's land of 1,500 miles. There were only two ways of crossing it, by a fifteen-hour plane trip or by going up the Mackenzie River in a boat, which took about a month.
mail to and from the Great North twice a year, had offered to fly me down. But how would I bring back my precious Eskimo collections and all the other things I was carrying back with me? By plane, at the rate of two dollars a pound? I couldn’t dream of it. As for separating from them by shipping my baggage via the Mackenzie, I would no more have done that than would a child separate from his toys.

That was as far as I’d got in my thinking when a cable was delivered to me on board.² Art Watson and Slim Purcell, two trappers from the Great North, had wired me an offer. As trapping had stopped paying off, they were planning to bring their boat down to Vancouver. But the two of them couldn’t do the trip alone. They had just about enough seamanship for coasting—and that when the weather was good. Would I agree to make a third on a boat that normally took a six-man crew, and to share the risk? In exchange, they would carry me and all my baggage. It wouldn’t cost me a cent.

My answer went off at once. It was dictated less by the spirit of economy than the spirit of adventure. A chance to “do” the Bering Strait, especially under such conditions, was one of those rare opportunities, the kind that doesn’t come everybody’s way. And I’d been told that in the Aleutians, which were on our route, there were whalers. With a bit of luck, I might join up with them.

As far as an epic voyage is concerned, I was in for a disappointment. Adventure rarely—if ever—turns out to be what one expects. The reader will see that our voyage proved to be less heroic than absurd. A voyage of three

²This is just a way of talking. The Saint Roch had been solidly immobilized in the ice of Cambridge Bay for eight months.
landlubbers venturing out on the deep sea. We knew how to travel on land, but on water! The three of us together knew less than the first sailor who comes along. As a result, our behavior and that of our boat proved to be really comic. We sailed along the coasts with our noses right on the water for fear of getting lost. And despite this, we did get lost. We no longer knew where Alaska was. Or else we couldn’t manage to find the Bering Strait, which nevertheless was clear enough on the map. Not that we didn’t take the thing seriously. But good will isn’t enough.

We were off on a thankless voyage. If we succeeded, no one would congratulate us. And if we failed, we knew what the post-mortem would be: a pack of scatterbrains. Rounding Cape Barrow is no less a feat than rounding the Horn, but whereas the Cape Horn route is glorious, the other, for some reason, isn’t at all.

As for the passages in this book where I seem, compared to my companions, to be endowed with a certain valor, I should like things to be clear. It was owing to the fact that I was not subject, as they were, to seasickness. It was due not to a stout heart but a strong stomach; in short, to a simple absence of antiperistaltic movements.
I
On the evening of July 28, 1939, a tubby, odd-shaped boat, whose rounded hull looked like a barrel, was moving through Coronation Gulf, in the Arctic Ocean, toward a point on the Canadian coast opposite the mouth of Coppermine River. The boat sailed slowly and solemnly past a few islands that lay sleeping on the water. Aboard ship, all was calm, all except myself. Bundled up in Eskimo furs, I stood on deck, eagerly scanning the horizon. In a few minutes we would touch land. For me, this arrival was big with meaning. It meant that a chapter—and not the least thrilling one—of my life as a voyager was drawing to a close. My life in the ice age among the Eskimos was about to end.

Was I in a hurry to get back to civilization? I must admit I wasn't. I suddenly became aware that my existence of the past fifteen months had left a deep mark. Its starkness and authenticity had had an extraordinary effect upon me. A man as complex as myself, an anxious, tormented man, had become simplified, had found the peace of heart he so deeply needed. Not only had it made me sound of body and mind, but it had also taught me a host of things: patience, self-control, the infinite value of silence, and the value of mutual aid as well. Little by little, I had found my-
self, had cleansed myself of all the anxieties and fevers and gastric disturbances of civilized life. And now I was going to lose everything I had acquired at such great pains. In short, I was afraid of returning to a civilization from which I had fled. For I had gone north not so much for the sake of exploration or to carry on ethnological studies as to find myself, to regain certain values which to me were essential.

I had already experienced, a few days earlier, an advance shock, when, from the depths of my peace and solitude, I had boarded the Saint Roch, the icebreaker of the Canadian Arctic Patrol on which I now found myself. Though the crew welcomed me most cordially and seemed delighted to have me on board, nevertheless, this renewal of contact with white men was a shock. The noisiness of their speech was in sharp contrast with the silence I had come to love, and the roughness of their behavior was strikingly unlike the lightness and delicacy of the Eskimos, who avoided asking questions and never plunged directly into a subject, but preferred to wait until you felt like talking. I was already beginning to see a certain aspect of civilization, of modern civilization, which, based as it is on the gathering of men into ever-larger communities, and concerned as it claims to be with the social factor, is actually becoming less and less concerned with the individual and has less respect for man, regarding him no longer as a well-defined entity but rather as a standard unit, the more or less anonymous member of a monolithic community, to be subjected to uniform processes which end by suiting no one in particular. And I wondered whether collectivization, by losing sight of the strictly personal character of each of us, had not taken a wrong path. It gratified the mass but
thereby conflicted with each of the individuals composing it.

And so it proved to be on the boat. With the pretext of welcoming and aiding me, the crew had pushed me around. I had been offered food and rest, but they had been forced upon me. "You’ll sleep here! You’ll eat this!" My wishes had not been consulted. These men lacked grace, without even realizing it. They didn’t even listen to what I had to say—and God knows that I had lots of things to tell about. They bombarded me with questions but paid no attention to my replies. They had, if I may say so, kindness without consideration. The thing that counted to them was the assistance that they were obliged to furnish. But I, personally, didn’t count. I had been both offended and jostled.

My reaction was quite Eskimo: I felt distrustful. What did it all mean? And what would it be like when I returned to the City? A number of times I felt tempted, violently tempted, to flee, to run away from the ship and return to my Eskimos and my igloo life. But it was no longer possible to turn back. A host of considerations required that I return to France, even though my peace of mind was already disturbed. I was a man who, about to see friends and close relatives after a long separation, asked himself anxiously:

"What will they be like? Will we recognize each other? They probably haven’t changed, but I have. So much so, that I wonder whether I have anything left in common with their world."

But this anxiety was brushed aside for the moment by another emotion, the excitement that was suddenly aroused
in me by the approach of Coppermine. Though not yet visible, Coppermine was nearby, behind the islands.

Coppermine¹ is, to Canadians, the farthest outpost of civilization. It is the terminal of the airline that leaves Edmonton and links the few inhabited spots in the Barren Lands. Twice a year² it brings mail and news, in winter by ski and in summer by float. Here the white man’s mastery ends. But seen from the other direction, by the few trappers who live beyond it, each alone with himself, without news and with no other means of locomotion than a sled and dogs, Coppermine is the City. Coppermine has an official telegraph office, a police station run by two “mounties,” a Hudson’s Bay Company store, which is also flanked by a warehouse, and two missions, one of which is Catholic and is run by the lay brothers of France. It was from there that I had left a year before, “moving eastward,” as my family had learned from the reports of the police, who knew little more than this about my winter wanderings. Now that the boat bringing me back was about to make a stop there, I suddenly became eager to see the place again. It was a kind of hunger I had never before experienced. I had forgotten about this kind of life during the winter because it had been too far away.

Since my return, I have often been asked, “When you were all the way up north, so far from your own world, didn’t you ever get a violent desire for scrambled eggs, or for some music?” Never! Such needs, which I had thought

¹On the shore of the Arctic Ocean, at the mouth of the river of the same name, so called because copper is found there. The Eskimos of the region are known as the “Copper Eskimos.”
²At least it was so at the time.
essential, had ceased to exist. And I can still see myself, squatting in the igloo, in my clothes of animal hide, drooling at the sight of a quarter of seal that had been tossed to the ground, seized with stupor and irritation like a man who had been tricked since childhood. "What? All my life I thought I needed refinement and luxury. And in less than six months here am I back at the cave-man stage, as if it were the most natural thing in the world!"

Was the civilization I had made such a fuss about just a fragile varnish, something I could pick off with my nail? This simply proved that we have an amazing faculty of adaptation, and that a man, particularly a man who liked his comfort and who wasn't easy to please, could live in the ice age and adapt himself to it.

Hiking thirty or forty miles a day through a shapeless world, rubbing his face when it began to freeze until the circulation started up again, building a snowhouse at nightfall and sleeping in it at a temperature of fifty below with a skullcap of ice on his head, melting the icicles on his mustache when he got up before he could utter a word—these were mere trifles! Ordinary everyday matters, so natural that I felt as if I'd been doing them all my life. Adventure? It had become a domestic affair. I would carefully arrange the Primus, the matches and the seal-oil lamp before sliding into my skin sleeping bag, so as to have them within reach when I got up. It was all just plain hominess! Me, a hero? Not a bit. Just a bourgeois in an igloo, with all the fussiness and routine that the word implies! As far as I was concerned, adventure now meant being in Coppermine.

No doubt, the excitement wouldn't last long, and the
counteraction would soon set in, but the first moments would be fantastic. This is a phenomenon that I cannot understand. When I am traveling, I never feel homesick. Nostalgia is utterly foreign to me. If ever I think of home, I do so objectively, as if it were something belonging to another life. But when I actually return home, suddenly, even before the train arrives, I go into a frenzy. I flatten my nose against the window of the compartment. I look for the slightest details of the landscape. This landscape, MINE, which—I had forgotten—belongs to my inner geography. There’s the level crossing! Then a grove of trees, then the wall of my park! It’s enough to heighten my frenzy. Something phenomenal takes place within me. Another I is coming gaily to meet me. Barely has the train stopped when I jump to the ground.

No one is waiting for me. I’ve taken care not to let anyone know I’m coming. I want to taste my homecoming ALONE. It’s a matter between me and myself. I check my bags so as to be lighter, to enjoy unhampered the foretaste of delight. I take the street that goes past the station. It’s a very ordinary street, but to me, at that moment, it’s the loveliest in the world. And every detail, every odor, enters my body. I speed up my pace. I feel so light, so transported, that I almost run. Look at that blue line of mountains at the horizon—there’s not another one like it in all the world. . . . There’s the wall of the park! I don’t even take the trouble to follow it to the gate. I scale it. I’m a burglar stealing into his past. Here are the trees of the park. I know every last silhouette. There’s the pond, a big tranquil mirror which reflects the front of the house. And my heart starts hopping.
I understand people who, when they return to their native soil, fall to their knees and kiss the ground. And it’s I, the vagabond, the international wanderer, the man who claimed to be as much at home in China as in the Arctic, who’s carrying on that way. I’ve become a Frenchman again, more of a Frenchman than anyone else . . . though I know full well that the emotion won’t last, that the excitement will quickly subside, that in a few days I’ll be bored and will start thinking about my next departure. . . . And so at Coppermine. “I’m going to see a house again! Frenchmen, my own people!”

I, who am usually so unsociable, was longing for the sight of my fellow creatures more than for anything else. I was going to see Father Delalande, the lively and humorous missionary who had put me up in his place before my big take-off and had gone to such trouble to introduce the greenhorn I was to the rudiments of life in the Arctic and who had described it to me as only a real Parisian could: “It’s so flat that when you stand on the ground you can’t see a thing. But get up on a chair and you’ll see the whole region!” And as the midnight sun lit up the post, he crammed me with advice as to what I had to do—and above all not do—with the Eskimos: “Whatever happens, keep a smile on your face. Otherwise, with birds like that, you’re a goner!”

I was relishing in advance this renewal of contact, this rediscovery of myself as well as of others. I knew exactly what the sequence of events would be. From the missionary’s place I’d go to see “Mr. Deacon,” the wireless operator who did his job in Coppermine in as quiet and orderly a fashion as if he were at some suburban telegraph office,
and whose wife, as neat and precise as her husband, made excellent pies. From there to the Hudson’s Bay Company, whose stock of supplies would make my jaw drop. And each of these visits would be made in accordance with the ceremony of the Great North. I would enter and be welcomed with the customary exclamations. I would remove some of my caribou furs and lay them in a corner; after filling my pipe with the tobacco that would be offered me, I would tell my tale. Without haste, for they would ask me no questions; they would just wait for it to come.

The wonderful thing about the Great North is that you have all the time in the world. A story up there is not something that you listen to but a dish that you savor, that you absorb slowly, carefully, so as to “render” it in its minutest details for chance acquaintances, or simply in order to repeat it to yourself throughout the winter. Human contacts, because of their rarity, take on an amplitude which is difficult for others to imagine. You rediscover there the essential value of the human. You thought you were strong in your solitude and able to adjust to it. But just let another human being loom before you at the turn of a day’s march and suddenly there wells up within you the need for exchange, the instinct of sociability. Take the trapper whose cabin you’ve happened upon by the purest chance. In other circumstances, you probably wouldn’t have been much interested in him. But because you haven’t seen a fellow creature in months, you rush up to him and grab him in your arms: “Hello, old fellow!” You look at him and grin, you steep yourself in him—not because it’s he, but because you’ve rediscovered the human in yourself. That’s what Coppermine was like for me. I was bent on enjoying it to
the full. It would be my reward after long months of isolation.

When I landed, however, it wasn’t Father Delalande with his red beard whom I saw walking toward me, but another missionary, with a black one. “Father Delalande had to leave for Minto Inlet. He was sorry to miss you and left this note. As for mail, I’ve got only two letters for you.” (Where could the others have gone?) “The Audrey’s here. Art and Slim are waiting for you, and they’re pretty impatient. The season’s far along, and they want to get under way this evening.”

And so, as soon as I arrived, I found myself completely frustrated. Such are the ups and downs to which the voyager is exposed. Luck may smile at him, but more often he’s flouted and disappointed and the thing he’s been looking forward to fails to come off! You rush through the vast grayness, driving your dogs on to a point in the surrounding immensity where you know that there’s bound to be someone. And you feel a sudden hunger for the encounter that means a halt and rest and the warmth of a human heart. Your dogs understand, too, for they push on with all their muscles straining. And you urge them forward. You’re in such a hurry to reach your goal that you overtax them. . . . Finally, utterly exhausted, you get to the igloo. The igloo is empty. All that remains are some traces, several days old, which show that a man has been there and is on his way north. Your heart sinks. Your dogs stand there questioningly. And you don’t know what to answer, for you’ve deceived them. . . .

That’s what it was like for me that evening. Instead of the rest and relaxation to which I had been looking forward
with such pleasure, I had time enough only to run to the store for the indispensable purchases—I hadn’t a single shirt left—and to toss a hasty greeting all around, which was quite inappropriate to the circumstances. My baggage and all my acquisitions had already been put on board the *Audrey*. And we were on our way.

Entire fragments of the voyage that had just begun have left absolutely no trace in my memory. Memory is a sieve. I became aware of this when I was a newspaperman. It was one thing to report on an event while it was still red-hot. But if I let some time elapse between my presence at the event and my writing about it, the story became quite different, as if two observers existed within me side by side. While one diligently noted the slightest details of the scene, the other was independently taking quite different notes, retaining only the deeper meaning of what had happened, filtering it so as to render only its quintessence. Not that the resulting account was more abstract. In fact, it was just as visual; it would report a gesture or detail that summed up everything, that took on its full importance. But if this gesture remained, it did so because it was symbolic, because it epitomized the character of the man who was being described. And the same holds for my personal life. I may keep a diary, but as time passes, it proves to be a mere source of reference. All that remains of my childhood is the color of the dress my grandmother wore on a certain day, the odor of a room, or the sound of a key in the lock.

And so for my voyage. Though I jotted down in my notebook from day to day everything that happened, even the most trivial events, yet, as I write this book, the record is of no use except to check on the accuracy of an occa-
sional detail. Entire pages have no further meaning to me. They are the chronicle of days that were exactly alike and that aren’t worth writing about.

But, on the other hand, certain moments, such as that first night, have remained engraved in my mind, as if time had stopped so that I could note every detail. There I am on the outer poop of the Audrey, wearing my koliktak because it’s chilly. The Diesel engine is throbbing as the ship cuts through the smooth surface of the sea at a speed of nine knots. But what sea is it? The water looks heavy and leaden, less like a liquid than a sheet of metal. Silence all about. The silence is also heavy, heavy and disturbing. Not the slightest sign of life anywhere. Not a sound, not even the cry of a bird. Nothing stirring. We’re moving through a dead world. Every now and then there looms up on the horizon a strip of dark land, or a cape, which vanishes almost at once. Apart from that, nothing.

Everywhere else, summer is the season of life, of exuberance. Here it’s the very opposite. The Arctic is alive in winter, if only with its shifts of wind and its blizzards. And in spring, particularly when the earth revives, when the soil exults and the air resounds with the cries of birds. But when summer comes round, all life vanishes. Life digs into the soil. The animals crouch in the hollows. Not a single one is to be seen. The landscape itself becomes corpse-like. The field of snow makes way for a field of round stones that lie strewn like skulls on the dull brown earth where the slight-

*During the two summers I spent up North, all I ever saw was one lone fox! To be sure, the birds and animals of the Great North are white in winter and turn brown in summer, thus blending perfectly with the landscape, for example, the white fox, the ptarmigan and the big owl.
est spot has a leprous cast and the slightest protrusion looks like a rash.

And over this dead world gleams a strange light, more vivid at night than during the day, and more unreal, too. For though the sun may be there, tracing its slow curve above the horizon, its red disk is a mere stage prop. It's not from the sun that the light comes, but from the edges of the earth, as if the earth were a ball that was lit from below by a lantern, so that the background is more luminous than the foreground, and the farther off the area, the clearer it is.

The boat on which I was sailing was no less strange, with its swordfish bow, its hull low in the water from which all that emerged was a casemate with cut corners, like a periscope, and two bare masts bearing only a crow’s-nest (and not round, but square, like a box that had been hooked on halfway up). A rumrunner, built in the old days at Halifax, with bulletproof portholes and two motors that let it work up enough speed to escape from the curiosity of the coast guards, a boat made to stand up in any sea and to cruise offshore until someone came from land at night to unload it. What trials and tribulations had it been through before being put on sale in Seattle, where it was bought by Art Watson and Slim? I didn’t know.

The two men were English Canadians whom I had met the summer before. All I knew about them was that they had been trapping in the Great North. Art was round and stocky. With his spotted dungarees and his beret pulled down over his ears, he looked rather like a cleaning woman, the crabby kind that holds a broom as if it were a weapon. Slim was the very opposite. Thin wasn’t the word for him—he was like a bean pole. His skin was so taut on his bones
that he couldn’t laugh; at best, he grimaced. But all in all, a pair of solid men. And their offer had excited me from a distance. Though not quite realizing what it involved, I had thought to myself, “It’ll be a wonderful voyage . . . provided we work together!” I had felt at one with them in advance, their companion—and somewhat their accomplice—in an adventure that would be out of the ordinary. So when I went to see them in Coppermine, my face was all smiles and I put out my hand to them. All my good will, all my warmth, were in that smile. But my enthusiasm found no echo. “Better hurry!” That was all Art had to say. And Slim, who was standing beside him, didn’t even open his mouth—a thin, dry mouth that had no lips! I stood there dumfounded. Is there anything more embarrassing, more irritating, than just standing before someone with your hand hanging in the air?

Coppermine had no sooner disappeared over the horizon than they said, “Your turn to take the wheel!” And without another word, they disappeared, leaving me with an uneasy feeling. It was pretty strange! All winter long, among my Eskimos, I had had a sense of belonging. With or without conversation, there had been a constant communication between us, an exchange. And here, with men of my own race, there was none at all! Was it possible? I was a man who had enthusiastically accepted the Adventure, and who, upon discovering that it had a different face from the one he had anticipated, grew disturbed and bewildered, who found that it no longer even had a face! Was I the victim of a bad dream? I began humming. But this didn’t ease my anxiety. I was a man who had confidently opened a door that was supposed to lead out into
space and who realized too late that he had opened the wrong door, that he had locked himself in. Hadn't it been rash of me to accept this adventure? What was in store for me?

At about six in the morning, Slim turned up again.

"You'll sleep over there!" he said, pointing to the bow of the ship. Without another word, he took the wheel from my hands. I staggered off. A worm-eaten ladder was there. It led to a dark hole that had obviously served in the past as the crew's quarters. It was a V-shaped room, in the middle of which was a greasy table, also V-shaped, with a bench around it. Above the bench were berths. Or rather tiny nooks. Was that where I was to sleep? Behind the ladder, in the hollow, was a rusty stove. So the place was also used as a kitchen and mess. The musty smell mingled with the stale smell of food. Of all the crew's quarters where I had ever slept, this was the most sordid! My luggage was there, but I hadn't the strength to open my bags. I rolled up in a blanket, with my clothes on. No sooner was it around me than I felt as if I were draped in a shroud.

No doubt but that my companions had quite a different notion of the boat and the voyage. Everyone to his own reality! I don't pretend to give any other notion than mine. I'd like this to be clear before going on with my story. . . .

I don't know how long I'd been sleeping when I was awakened by a slight sound. I half opened my eyes. A woman was there, near the stove. A short Indian half-breed. Surely Art's wife. I knew she was on board with her child. I didn't stir. I lay there with my eyes half closed, spying on her. She lit the fire very cautiously so as not to wake me. Suddenly she raised her head, as if she felt she was being
observed. Our gazes met. I didn’t move. My dealings with
the men had taught me prudence. But she smiled. Then, as
if she had gone too far, she turned her eyes away.

The fire had begun to blaze when I heard heavy foot-
steps on deck. A moment later, two down-at-the-heel shoes
appeared at the top of the ladder, then two legs. A man was
coming down backward. Now I could see his back. It was
a round, brutal back. Art. When he got to the bottom, he
turned around, took a strip of oakum from the pocket of
his dungarees to wipe his hands, came over to me—I pre-
tended to be asleep—and shook me. “Breakfast!” Then,
without looking at his wife, he sat down at the table, took
a knife from his pocket, and then a row of false teeth which
he stuck—click!—into his mouth.

I extracted myself, all doubled up, from my berth and
sat down opposite him. He didn’t even say hello. He pushed
some bread over to me, and a can of jam which he pulled
out from under the bench. Still without looking at his wife,
he called out to her: “Two eggs!” Then to me, as if noticing
my presence for the first time: “Two for you, too? Make
it four!”

She brought them, with a timid “Morning” to me. He
raised his head. His eyes went from her to me. “My wife,”
he said. Without more ado, he began to eat. I didn’t say a
word. I was thinking of my Eskimos who always had a big
grin for me when I got up—a pure matter of convention,
but still and all!—and who immediately felt a need of start-
ing a conversation: “Did you sleep well?” (even if only to
learn that I hadn’t shut my eyes). Could it be that the prim-
itives were more courteous than the whites?

Art finished eating. He wiped his knife on his overalls,
folded it and got up. Then, leaning both hands on the table, he said to me, “When you get around to it . . .” (in a tone of injunction rather than invitation). His dumpy body moved off to the ladder and disappeared.

That was how things stood when, thirteen hours after leaving Coppermine, the Audrey cast anchor in Bernard Harbor.

A simple creek, and the creek was deserted. But at the other end was an abandoned cabin containing two metal caissons that my two shipmates intended to use as ballast. As the Audrey was loaded only with food for the rest of the voyage and a stock of furs, she had to be weighted down.

In the past, there had been a group of Eskimos at Bernard Harbor, and the cabin had sheltered the policeman who watched over them. But the white man’s influenza had decimated the natives. Their bones had been scattered by the foxes. And the policeman had left. The door was wide open. It had a big hook inside, probably a precaution against bears. The cot of roughly squared wood on which the man used to sleep was still there. On the table lay some old magazines.

These vestiges moved me! But the Two didn’t see that. Straining with their shoulders, they rolled the caissons and

"It is astounding to see how natives, who are otherwise so strong and solid, are unable to resist certain diseases. There is the case of a whalerman who had been put ashore sick on the Marquesas and who was responsible for the death of several hundred Marquesans. I myself had seen in the Great North with what lightning speed tuberculosis spreads among the Eskimos. This is one of the most tragic aspects of the contact between natives and whites.

"Not the polar bears, which are harmless, but the brown ones (akiak), which are dangerous."
threw them into the water. They towed them out to the *Audrey* with the jolly-boat, lowered them into the hold and then filled them with stones. We were off!

Six hours later, we got to Stypleton Bay. It was there that Art and Slim had their trading post; there, too, that their trap line began. But perhaps I ought to tell how this works. Trapping in the Great North consists in running from the beginning of a season to the end along a line—sometimes 100 miles long—over which the traps are spread. This kind of work requires endurance and resistance to fatigue rather than cleverness. Starting from the center, each of the partners goes off with his dogs and sled to "work" his end. Then, after going out and back, they come together again. Not for long, for if the traps remain unvisited for two or three days, they're likely to be empty. Either the fox will have freed himself by gnawing off the paw that has been caught, or else other foxes, perhaps a wolverine, will have eaten him.

Resetting a trap takes a good ten minutes. The animal has to be removed. Not by striking him, which would make him bleed and risks damaging the fur, but by strangling him, which isn't easy, for the white fox, chained though he be, attacks—growling like a cur—and his teeth are real razors. Then the trap has to be reset by placing a "plate" of hard snow over it, which then has to be shaved, when in place, until it is paper-thin. If the snow is the least bit crumbly, the plate breaks at the last minute and the work has to be done all over again. When the trap is set, it has to be baited with scraps of rotten fish, the odor of which at-

*A kind of badger armed with long claws. Not only is he very carnivorous, but he also destroys or soils what he cannot eat. Hence, his reputation up North for being "diabolical."*
tracts the foxes from a distance. And if there are two or three hundred traps, you can imagine the work there is!

When you get back to the post, you’ve got to skin the animals with the utmost care, for the hides are as delicate as tissue paper. Each hide has to be put on a stretcher. Then, when it’s dry, it has to be cleaned with a mixture of gasoline and sawdust and finally beaten with a switch to knock out the sawdust. All this goes on while a third partner minds the post.7

There he was coming toward us in his boat: a giant of a man named Bill. “No way of getting in!” he yelled to us. The bay was cluttered, I might even say jammed. In addition to the “young” ice, there was the old ice which had been pushed over by the wind and which rose up in huge blocks. But Bill was built to the same scale. “Ho!”—in a stentorian voice—“I’m the ferryman!” He grabbed hold of me and set me down in the bottom of the boat. Then he pushed it along with tremendous vigor among the huge cubes which were leaning over on their sides in this temple of collapsed ice. Standing in the middle of it all with his six feet three inches, he looked like a god of ice-age mythology, like a Samson laughing at the damage he’d just done. He himself was the most striking thing in the whole setting. Bill was not only the finest human specimen I’d seen up there, but also the most intact. To be sure, before him I had seen old-timers in the Arctic who had displayed a joyous surprise that made their wrinkles crack. But they were nevertheless marked by it. So sternly marked that the faces of some of them seemed petrified.

7In addition to trapping, the men usually run a little trading post as well.
But Bill was one of those creatures whom nothing spoils or mars. Ten years in the Great North had not left the slightest trace on him. The curly hair over his forehead was like that of a schoolboy. His face beamed. His lively eyes were full of mischief. Bill was a joyous force that stood up against the world, the kind of man who, at a bar, would make some challenging remark to a half-dozen men, right to their faces, with the hope that they’d react, and, being too strong to fight them, would content himself with laughing before knocking them head over heels with a flick of his finger.

“Well!”—to the Two—“So it’s farewell, eh? Now I’ll be boss of the rock pile!”

Yes, it was farewell. The partnership of the three men was breaking up. Art and Slim were leaving. Bill remained behind. As for the “rock pile”: two cabins side by side, but quite different from the log cabins you read about in stories. Hovels covered over flat with a sheet of corrugated iron from which emerged a pipe held up by a wire, because of the wind. As for romanticism, it was all pretty dreary. But Bill . . . With a sweeping gesture, he invited me into his cabin. Miserable! No fireplace—there’s no wood up there. Just a frail rusty stove on four legs.

When I entered, a lean Eskimo woman gave me a sly look. Bill was living with her. “She’s a smart gal, all right,” said Watson. “But she’ll kill him!” She had already tried twice. Because Bill beat her. Not out of meanness. There wasn’t a mean streak in him. But out of exuberance, out of a need to work off his superfluous energy. She’d do it—it was a sure thing! (The natives have remarkable patience and perseverance.) She’d go with him to his traps—she was
an excellent trapper. And there, she'd do as do many of her race. She'd strike from behind, and when he least expected it. A knife between the shoulder blades, or a .30-.30 bullet fired into his back, point-blank, and that would be the end of Bill.

He knew what was in store for him (to him, it was just another challenge). He also knew that he had to stay where he was. For the giant had his weakness. Outside, once he got going, he couldn't stop. “Throws away his money as fast as he can,” said Watson, “and drinking himself to death, the damned fool!” And once he got going, he couldn’t stop.

And how many others like him throughout the world! All the outer signs of superiority, except for one weak point . . . sometimes the merest trifle, but enough to mark the distance between success and failure. And what unexpected forms failure can sometimes take! I remember the scientist, an eminently serious man, very austere in appearance, who left for Polynesia with a mass of scientific equipment. Unfortunately, he landed on an island where men were rare and the women unsatisfied, and in less than no time he became a derelict and completely forgot about his ambitious projects.

And then there was the young man from a distinguished family, he, too, exceptionally gifted, who left for Ottawa.

If Eskimos commit murders, it is less out of greed—there are so few things to steal!—than out of vengeance, or because their code requires it. I have seen two Eskimos who always hunted together, the younger of whom was obliged to kill the other, in accordance with the code, because his companion had killed his father. The elder knew what was in store for him. Nevertheless, for reasons incomprehensible to a white man, he continued the partnership.
to take his bar examinations. On the way, he met some friends who plied him with drink . . . and he never got there. He drifted from one jag to another and landed up in a trading post in the Canadian North. And there, after exhausting his stock of liquor, he drank—for want of anything else—some samples of perfume he’d managed to get hold of. (I can see still him breathing into my face: “Guess what it is! . . . Nuit d’Amour!”) He ended up drinking ink!

Bill’s case was different. His weakness was due not to a flaw but to an excess of health. This overabundance of health, which he never succeeded in fully expending, exasperated him. And so, he was killing himself, just for the fun of it. There was not a single one of life’s challenges that he did not take up. Did men drink? Very well, he would drink more than anyone else. The others were dead, but he was still standing. “Have another one, you cream puffs!” That and women. It’s not “a girl in every port” that he needed, but every girl alive!

It was better for Bill not to leave Coronation Gulf. The place was his best refuge, and he knew it. “When you get to Vancouver, send two good stiff ones down the hatch for me!” It comforted him somewhat to think that that was at least a place where men could drink.

It was three in the morning when we lifted anchor. Bill

“This reminds me of an episode in my childhood. My father had in his employ an Irishman who used to look after the horses. The man was an excellent horseman but very fond of the bottle. The result was that the horses he rode often failed to clear the obstacle. My father therefore cut off his wine supply. To our surprise, his condition not only failed to improve but grew worse, until one day we discovered that he had taken to drinking Elliman’s Embrocation by the bottle!”

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strolled casually back to his cabin. All that remained was the surrounding dreariness. As for us, we fled like shadows.

It was 600 miles from Stypleton Bay to the next stop, Tuktuylaktuk, near the mouth of the Mackenzie River. The voyage had begun in earnest. And I was already being assailed by a thousand questions. With a boat like that, how would we ever manage to get through our almost 5,000-mile itinerary? We needed at least five men to handle her, and there were only three of us. Hence, the impossibility of drawing up a schedule of watches. For the time being, the Two decided on the following system: Art would look after the motors, I would attend to the wheel and Slim would be relief man for each of us. This might have worked out as long as the sea stayed calm. But when things started getting rough, which was inevitable, what would we do?

And what would my life on board be, humanly speaking? Would I simply be a steering machine, a good-natured idiot whose strength would be exploited to the maximum? Was their coldness toward me, their way of ignoring me apart from my work, going to continue? Would I remain alone in my hole in the bow while they slept astern, together and in much more comfortable quarters? If so, what business had I had getting on board that ship? Bah! (I tried to calm my apprehensions.) I’d been through worse! Thank God, the winter had made a healthy man of me, though it had put me to the test physically. “In two months’ time our relations are bound to improve!” And then there was the wheel. I like being at the wheel. It never bores me. All I had to do was install myself in the pilothouse as comfortably as possible, with my tobacco jar and notebook at arm’s reach. Then I’d see what happened!
So we sailed along at nine knots an hour toward the farthermost point of the American continent, Point Barrow. But the reader has a right to ask whether I knew enough about nautical matters to go off on such a jaunt with two men who weren’t sailors. Theoretically, my seamanship was nil. I knew how to use a sextant, but we didn’t have one. As for the rest, all I knew was what had been picked up in the course of things by a man who had knocked about in lots of boats, almost all of them makeshift affairs, and who, in spite of himself, found himself involved in ship’s work. But I didn’t pretend to be a real seaman. Especially since I feel that there’s something terrifying about the sea, just as I do about the immense empty air when I jump out of a plane. In other words, I regard myself, once and for all, as a greenhorn in such matters. I had picked up some notions, though quite scattered ones, which as a whole delighted me—man being so made that he feels no pride in having a thorough knowledge of his own occupation but gets a mischievous pleasure in having the barest smattering of his neighbor’s. Especially as the notions I had acquired were the opposite of what I had imagined. The danger in navigation is not the open sea but the coasts, and it’s advisable to give them as wide a berth as possible. A cape is always rounded too closely. A head wind is less dangerous than a leading wind, which may rock you (to say nothing of the fact that veering in a leading wind is one of the worst risks anyone can take). I knew, from having seen it done on sailing ships all over the world, how to call the wind by

10 Particularly in view of the fact that on two occasions I almost drowned. I am so terrified by the sea that if I fell into the water I couldn’t even make the few strokes necessary to save myself.
whistling from the top of the mast . . . gently, so as not to get too much. And I had also learned, after almost going down in the Mediterranean and the English Channel, to mistrust seas that are reputed not to be dangerous.

But of what use would this knowledge be to me, since this ocean resembled no other and since the rules, which elsewhere were categorical, were no longer applicable here. Everywhere else you’re safe on the high sea. But here you mustn’t risk it. First of all, because of the ice . . . . But perhaps I ought to say something about how this portion of the west Arctic behaves, from the point of view of frost.

Around the beginning of October, the ocean congeals—incidentally, it’s quite a spectacle—and freezes to a thickness of about six feet. For the men of the North, this is the long-awaited moment, the beginning of the blissful season when they can travel over the hard, smooth surface of the sea, with its snow constantly beaten by the winds. (At least the little there is, for the Arctic is one of the driest regions in the world. Less snow falls there in the course of a year than in a single day in Chicago. The proof is that at the end of a day’s trek we often had to drive on for several miles at nightfall to find a snowdrift thick enough for us to cut out our blocks.)

The thaw begins in May. But the thawing of the ocean lasts a good three months. At first, the surface of the sea is a kind of spongy substance which sticks to the runners of the sled; then, a layer of water through which you wade in boots; until the day the ice starts breaking up all around with cracking noises.

Around the middle of July, the sea opens up (at least, in the good years, for there are also times when it doesn’t).
But it is, at best, a thin strip along the coasts. On the high
sea is the ever-present ice pack, ready to move in as soon
as the wind starts blowing from the north. And even in the
free strip there remains ice drifting left and right, depend-
ing upon the winds. Hence, the uncertainty of navigation.
You never know an hour ahead what may happen.

We therefore kept to the coast. We sailed from point to
point. No different in that respect from my Eskimos, who,
in winter, went from beacon to beacon, from one familiar
hill or mound to the following one. Or even, if the visibility
diminished, from one rock pointing out of the snow to the
next rock, and, if they got lost, retraced their steps until
they got to a known point in order to orient themselves and
take off again.

Seen from the outside, our navigation was laughable. We
looked like people who were afraid of getting wet, and also
afraid of getting lost. But the only instruments we had
were the log and compass. Though the log indicated the
number of miles we had done, it did not tell us how far we
had gone in a straight line. We had one compass in the
pilothouse and another on the outer poop. But though we
were 700 miles from the Magnetic Pole, they were con-
stantly being thrown out of order. At one moment, they
would be in agreement, and then, for no apparent reason,
there would be a sudden difference of 40 degrees! Or else,
while one of them behaved, the other would start wavering
and would even spin all the way around and then come to a
stop at any point. And we would no longer know where
we were. That point over there, what was it? (Those low
necks of land all looked alike!) We would take out the
map and ponder it only to end by deciding to push on until
we reached a point about whose identity there was no doubt.

But then a serious obstacle arose: the bottoms. The chief characteristic of these seas is their shallowness. Ten miles out, you’re in danger of running aground. And you can’t trust the soundings marked on the map.

Another charming peculiarity of these regions is the instability of the weather. Everywhere else at sea there are prevailing winds. Everywhere else you can, with a bit of experience, forecast the weather, within certain limits. But not here. The winds are constantly shifting. They whirl round as in a caldron. The weather is fair; you go down to sleep. No sooner have you dozed off than you’re suddenly shaken. You get up grumbling; you go to have a look. Everything has changed. It’s not the surge that’s the matter but the short waves, which are just as nasty.

Still another thing: the mist. But I’ll have plenty of opportunity to talk about that.

So far we hadn’t run into that sort of thing. A sea of oil. Heavy, opaque water (was it due to the light? The water of this ocean has no transparency). Here and there a seal would emerge, take a look around and then dive down again, leaving behind him a perfectly round ring.

The fourth day out, however, while we were passing Pierce Point, the sea began rising. The three of us were on our feet. The propeller came out of the water and roared. But it was only an alert.

Beyond Pierce Point, the coast turns inward on the map. In order to avoid hugging it, we headed for Cape Parry—a hop of about a hundred miles—and from there for Cape Bathurst. Off Bathurst we were again given the third de-
gree. The *Audrey* with its streamlined shape and shallow draft, was pitching like a drunk. How could she manage when the sea got rough?

We had just rounded Baillie Island—where there was a Hudson’s Bay Company post, but we didn’t stop—when Art, who was on deck, started sniffing. “There comes the fog!” I heard him mutter to himself. You’re probably wondering whether mist does have an odor. I’d be inclined to say that it has a grain that strikes the nostrils. (How often I was to recognize it later on!) Where had it suddenly come up from? God knows! But in less than ten minutes, we were in a real pea souper, with a visibility of just about fifty yards. All we could see were the crests of the waves chasing each other and disappearing into the grayness.

When we passed Baillie—the northernmost point, along with Barrow—we altered our course in order to go down again. But the coast was marked on the map with shoals, and we had to be careful. The demonstration wasn’t long in coming. I had gone down to sleep at two a.m., but was awakened at four with a start. The engines had stopped. Slim had taken soundings and announced five fathoms. This section—from Cape Dalhousie to Cape Brown—is one of the most treacherous. Watson had told me that the year before they had sounded four fathoms twelve miles out!

“Head north to clear it!” (How often we were to repeat this cry in the course of the voyage.) The sea shook us without our being able to see real waves. It was actually more irritating than dangerous. When mealtime came round, we had to make a special effort to hold on to the plates, which kept sliding away, and also to hide our ill temper. An incident occurred just at the right moment to
distract me. An Arctic loon—the kind whose laugh can be heard at night, miles away—appeared ahead of the boat and indulged in a funny pantomime. Seeing the stern coming down on it, it tried to get away. But it had eaten too much and couldn’t make it and kept fluttering about madly. Its panic was comical—if only human beings were as expressive! Finally it gave up in sheer exhaustion and passed so close to the side of the ship that I could have fished it up with a scoop.

Another unexpected distraction was whales. We were in McKinley Bay. Slim, breaking his silence for once, had just said, “Better keep an eye open!” when all at once I saw ahead of us a spout. I got all excited. There hadn’t been any where I had lived, though the region had swarmed with them in the past. The ancient dwellings that were brought to light by excavations were cluttered with them. The Eskimos of the time, having an abundant food supply at hand, had lived a sedentary existence, like those of Alaska or Baffin Land today. But with the rising of the continent, the cetaceans have cleared out. Their disappearance brought about a radical transformation in the lives of the Eskimos of the region. In order to subsist, they had to change from a sedentary to a nomadic way of life. Their worldly goods consisted only of what a man could carry on a sled, in other words, just about nothing. There then began that race against hunger, those biblical wanderings which I witnessed.

Do salmon go up the river at the beginning of October?

*I shall speak later on about whalebirds, which are also unable to take off when they have eaten too much. However, when a boat bears down on them, they throw up their food. It is a comical sight to see hundreds of birds hastily vomiting in order to drop ballast.*
The men pitch their tents on the shore and as long as there are any fish left, they harpoon like mad.\textsuperscript{12} When the run is over, they go to the lakes for the ice fishing. Is the ice getting too thick? En route for the North, in quest of seals! There goes the tribe—four or five sleds at most—twining through the gray immensity. They stop on the way to re-ice the runners, to let the mothers nurse their babies and to give the old folks, who are attached in rough-and-ready fashion with seal straps, a chance to stir the circulation in their limbs. The members of the tribe are all bound together by the instinct of self-preservation which makes them fly at once to lend a hand to anyone in need of help. They keep pushing north. Has the spring come around? They about-face and dash south to meet the caribou that come up from the Barren Lands. And so, from year to year, they move in the same orbit, sleeping in igloos built at nightfall and abandoned at dawn, and, if they’re caught in a blizzard, digging themselves into hastily built shelters where they stay for three days, or more, listening to the howling of the wind and the no-less-mournful howling of their dogs. And no sooner does the wind drop than they resume their trek, an endless trek.

But as you approach Alaska, the sea gets deeper and the

\textsuperscript{21}I have explained in \textit{Kabloona} the ingenious way in which the Eskimos capture salmon: they dam up a river with a wall of stones, leaving a few openings. During the run, the salmon, blocked by the wall, swims along until it finds a passage. When it clears the passage, it finds itself in a circular pocket, also made of stones but entirely closed. In this way, the fish are caught one after the other. The pocket gradually fills up like a fish pond. When it is swarming, the Eskimo comes along with his harpoon and clears the pond in no time. These constructions, many of which are hundreds of years old, are still used every season.
whales appear, at least in certain deeps, such as the one we were going through, and they are particularly numerous because these waters have been closed to whalers for thirty years. From the crow’s-nest, I could count a good fifty of them emerging and plunging with the nonchalance characteristic of cetaceans eating. They were “bowheads,” a variety whose tails, after emerging, rise up in the air like a huge “T.” It was all done with a slowness that gave the scene an added solemnity. To me, who, in the course of my wanderings, had seen only an occasional whale here and there, and never at close quarters, the sight of a whole pack of them suddenly surging up about me was enough to take my breath away, particularly since I have always dreamed of going whaling. But the spectacle lasted only about five minutes.

Since the mist had come up, we had to drop the hook. As soon as it cleared, we hastily lifted anchor. For the season was getting on and the danger of ice increased accordingly.

Lifting anchor was quite a job. We had a winch all right, but it kept kicking. Right in the middle of the job, it left us in the lurch. We decided it was better to forget about it and raise the anchor with the crank. There was I bent double and out of breath. What was the matter with me? It was the canned food that had done me in.

But here I ought to go back a bit in order to show how wrong doctors can be. . . . In civilized life, I was a man who had been forbidden meat and heavy food. “Boiled vegetables. Fruit. Above all, don’t eat much at a time, and chew well!” I left for the Great North. There wasn’t much choice there. So what did I eat? First, raw fish; then, seal;
and then, more seal. In Eskimo quantities. And anyone who hasn’t seen these people digging into it doesn’t know what eating is! To them, a white man’s meal is a joke. I can still see them arriving in the middle of winter at the King William Land post, where the white man served them, in accordance with etiquette and the laws of hospitality, an enormous bowl of soup with lard. In two seconds they lapped it clean. “Mamakto” (it was good), they said, out of simple politeness. And they quickly slipped away to join their fellows outside and begin the real meal. They would chop up a seal into huge quarters and throw themselves on it with the zeal, the savage joy of the primitive, in whose eyes the white man is a puny fellow, a “delicate creature.” And finally I myself, as much from hunger as to accept the challenge, matched their appetite. The high point was the meal—I shall never forget it—that I had when I got back from Pelly Bay. I had been traveling for thirty-three days, hungry and exhausted—in an average temperature of fifty-five degrees below zero—when we fell by chance, I and the Eskimo who was with me, on an igloo that was not only well stocked—with seal, smoked caribou, salmon and even musk ox—but which was also occupied by a man who, as a shaman, was very eager to be magnanimous toward the white man. Hardly had we entered than we threw ourselves on the seals that were still steaming with frost. In our haste, we cut them into such enormous pieces that the best we could do was dig our teeth into them, remove a piece with our circular-bladed knives and swallow almost without chewing, and then start right in again!

An Eskimo witch doctor.
In Kabloona, I have given an account of a feast at the beginning of winter which I attended as a spellbound spectator, unable to do justice to it. But now, a few months later, I was redeeming myself. Let the doctors believe it or not, but we ate for twenty hours! The ceremony was broken up, as was fitting, by pauses, belching and pipe smoking, but this in no way slowed up the rhythm. Quite the contrary! For though, at the beginning, I had internal contractions which forced me to stop from time to time, I felt my strength gathering as I went along. Instead of decreasing, my appetite kept developing, and I quickly reached out my arm to grab the pieces as they were passed around. For we ate in Eskimo style, clockwise. Seal was followed by twenty-pound fish and saddle of caribou and musk ox, and then by more seal. The food was passed round faster and faster—we were now hitting our full stride. I was overcome with a kind of dizziness. My eyes dimmed. I saw the food going by through a kind of mist, but I bit into it all the same. My hunger had long since been satisfied, but I continued eating in accordance with the Eskimo principle: "Eat, eat, tomorrow you may be hungry!"

Meanwhile, outside, the dogs, in a state of exasperation, were trying to force the entrance. I remember that the block that was barring it finally gave way. The dogs rushed in like savage beasts, with their fur steaming and their eyes bloodshot. A scuffle ensued in the semidarkness, with kicks and punches. Someone let fly an ax, which was answered with a howl. We finally repulsed the attackers—luckily they were so hungry that they had taken almost nothing. No sooner would they seize one piece than they would
drop it and go after one that looked bigger—and we went on with the feast until one after the other we fell into a deep torpor.

Too bad that I didn’t have a pair of scales to weigh what each of us had taken in! I would have had some exact and interesting data for the “dietitians.” I grant that the temperature and general living conditions in the Great North make it possible to absorb a great deal more food than in our climates. Nevertheless, the fact remains that at the end of my trip I was in a state of physical strength such as I had never known, and without fatigue knocked off 55 miles on foot in twenty-four hours. Whereupon I joined the Saint Roch at Cambridge Bay, where I was welcomed by the Mounties. As I looked tired, they said to me, “Rest here. Catch up with yourself!” And they began forcing cans of tuna fish on me, and pork and beans, which the men of the North finally get so sick of that when two men meet and one of them says, “How goes it?” the usual reply is to scowl and answer, “Just pork and beans!” The result was that in three weeks nothing remained of the husky I had been! It was a brutal transition from raw frozen seal (so rich in iodine and vitamins of all kinds) to those dreary

"You may wonder why on foot and not seated in the sled. First of all, so as not to overload it, for it is generally weighed down. And secondly, it is not enough to let the dogs pull the sled. You have to direct it. In order to do this, you run alongside the train and push it to the right or left, as the case may be, with heaves of your shoulders so as to avoid jolting the sled lest you damage the runners. Meanwhile, a second man runs about fifty yards ahead of the dogs. The advantage of this method is that the dogs strain with all their might to follow the man and do not have to be constantly whipped in order to keep going in the right direction. When an Eskimo travels alone with his wife, it is usually she who runs ahead."
canned goods. And what did I find on the Audrey? More pork and beans!

But at least, were my relations with the Two improving? Not in the slightest. They remained exactly what they had been at the start. As there were never more than two of us on our feet at the same time, and as we were busy on different parts of the ship, we hardly ever saw each other. Those wonderful moments of indolence when the watch is over and you indulge in the luxury of a cigarette or a chat did not exist here. When it was finally time to rest, we wanted nothing except to go to sleep.

But even when we found ourselves face to face, whether in the pilothouse or the messroom, there was no conversation. Not that my shipmates were completely taciturn—that wouldn’t be quite accurate—but they kept me out of their discussions. They kept me at a curious distance. Art might come up from the engine room and, resting his elbows near me at the porthole, let fall some remark such as “Lousy weather! It’s always like that in these parts!” or “There used to be a policeman there in the old days—a queer duck!” But it was not so much to me that he was speaking as to himself or the sea. Nor did either one of them ever linger in the messroom. Usually that’s the place where seamen relax, where they come snorting in and yell out good-humoredly, “What’ve we got to eat?” And because you’re in a warm place, you become talkative. But Art and Slim remained no longer than necessary, as if lingering behind might have

3On the basis of my own experience, I am entirely in agreement with Steffanson, who has always maintained that a man can live in the polar regions “on a straight meat diet,” and that not only will he not suffer as a result but that he will be the healthier for it.
involved them in an intimacy they didn’t want. No sooner had they satisfied their appetites than they folded their knives and went back up the ladder. And they displayed the same harshness toward everything on board. If the *Audrey* didn’t behave as they wanted her to, they’d yell at her, “Come on, you bastard!”

I have been at sea with men of all races and all kinds. Invariably, after a longer or shorter time, contact has been established. I’ve campaigned on a Spanish fishing trawler with a “red” crew—the skipper of which was head of a communist cell and proud of it. But twenty-two days on a heavy sea had smoothed over our political differences, so much so that when we got back to Cadiz we were inseparable and made the rounds of all the cafés in the port together. I’ve knocked about in the Pacific on schooners with Chinese crews, and, though not speaking their language, I got along with them wonderfully. Why were the Two setting up a wall between themselves and me? Their business was perfectly honorable. There was no need for mistrust. Besides, a man’s occupation has nothing to do with being cordial, judging from my personal experience. I’d even go so far as to say that gangsters and racketeers of all sorts have been most affable with me. Take the bootlegger—a perfect gentleman—who had taken me from Saint Martin in the West Indies to Puerto Rico on his private yacht, which was carrying a cargo of liquor. And when we got there, he regaled me with stories that were as full-bodied as the stuff in his bottles. And there was also Captain Ruas, skipper of a schooner that, in addition to its

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16Up North, anything troublesome—whether man or object—is invariably called a bastard.
usual cargo, was carrying some prostitutes up the Panama coast so that they could finish out their long careers in Cristobal. Ruas, who, with his strikingly white teeth and his long sideburns, looked like a pirate in a movie, hadn't felt any embarrassment about explaining to me how, and with what finagling at customs, he would “get them in” and how much he would receive per head.

Was it because they’d had ten years in the Great North that Art and Slim were so secretive? Here, too, the explanation didn’t hold. Because not only were most of the old-timers I met up there neither contemptuous of nor aloof from the mere transient I was, but they even seemed to regard my arrival as a windfall (they don’t often have a chance to see people!) and had given me a royal welcome. “Take a look at old Krattierk there in the corner,” Father Delalande had said to me, speaking of the physical resistance of Eskimos. “Her people abandoned her on the trail because she was a burden. You think she’s dead? Not at all! She chewed the skin of her clothes in order to suck out a little juice, until I happened by and picked her up. Isn’t that so, Grandma? She hasn’t left me since. She’s my number one chambermaid!”

Paddy Gibson, the philosophical manager of the King William Land post, pointed through the window one freezing winter day at old Tutiak, who was standing motionless, doubled over above the hole he had dug in the ice of the bay. “Look at him! He’s been there for four hours, in forty below, shaking his jigger. He can come in here where it’s warm and help himself to my tobacco. But no! The old instinct is there. He has to go through the motions!” And Angus Gavin, the Perry River manager: “Those Eskimos
are a funny bunch! Comes springtime and they all fornicate. Because it’s the season for it, and also it’s in keeping with the rules of good breeding. They come to the post, just long enough to smoke a pipe and let me have exact details about what’s going on, and then they tear off again. They’re made of iron!”

I can still hear Father Buliard, the former light infantryman who became a missionary and who was continuing his forced marches in the North, saying to me: “Last winter, I knocked off only seventeen hundred miles, but wait until this winter! With the dogs I’ve got now, I’ll set up my mission in the north of Victoria Island, where no missionary has ever yet penetrated. I’ll call it the Mission of Christ the King. It’ll turn the Protestants green with envy!”

And Charlie Levine, the garrulous old Swede, who, with his mosquito netting on his hat, looked like an old Englishwoman who had come for tea. They had all found in the Arctic an appeal that was beyond language. Despite the fact that the cold had hollowed out their features as with a chisel, it had not embittered them. On the contrary, it had heightened their spirits. . . . But for Art and Slim the blizzard was just “a goddamn pain”; and the Eskimos just sneaky bastards, repulsively filthy, in short, an inferior species whom they had had to put up with for ten years. So that a country looks like whatever you want to find in it.

I myself had carefully avoided the natives about whom they spoke, who, whether out of laziness or because they have been repudiated by their tribe, come to the trading post, hang on there and, finding it simpler to sponge on the white man than to go and hunt seals, very quickly become shifty and scrounging. Quite different from the real Inuit—
the "men to the core" as they call themselves—who, if they came to the post because they needed tobacco or leashes for their dogs, remained there only as long as was absolutely necessary and let you know politely but firmly that they wanted to have as little as possible to do with the white man, and as soon as the business was concluded, whipped their dogs and went back to their apartness and their pride. But Art and Slim did not see this aspect of the Arctic. It was better not to talk to them about those things.

Suddenly, on our seventh day out, Tuktuyaktuk hove into sight. Thus, in the Arctic, you shift without transition from the absence of life to life. You fly over the semi-lacustrine desert stretches of the Barren Lands and see no signs of life. All is emptiness. It's an uninhabited world. Suddenly the pilot nudges you with his elbow. A spot of color has just sprouted way off in the distance. It's just a dot, but already it's beginning to swell. It's the red roof of a house. The pilot looks at you. You look at him. And you both burst out laughing.

Or else you're haunted by the specter of hunger. You had gone southward, hoping to run into caribou, and had found nothing. Suddenly, in the hollow of the valley that you're anxiously scanning with your field glasses, something moves. The caribou! Just time enough to grab your rifle, load your magazine, and three of them are laid out on the ground. You throw yourself on the nearest and rip open its belly with your knife. And the sight of such red, reeking meat makes your mouth water.

Or else you've been caught in a blizzard. You're lost and hopeless. Suddenly the blizzard clears, and you're restored to life. The transition has been so abrupt and the resur-
rection so sudden that you’re knocked completely out.

We had been looking for Tuktuyaktuk for a week, scanning the bleak lands with our field glasses—which were quite worthless—when suddenly from behind a sandspit, there rose up at least a dozen masts! Five minutes later, we were in port. A simple pocket, in actual fact, just about enough to give shelter from the waves, but not from the wind. But in this pocket would accumulate, if they weren’t already there, all the provisions of the western Arctic, all the merchandise coming down the Mackenzie River on its way to the trappers, merchants and missionaries of the coast.

The Mackenzie, which too few people know about, is the Mississippi of the North, the only waterway—almost as long as the Mississippi and much more epic—by which the Northwest Territories and, farther north, the western Arctic, in other words, about 400,000 square miles of territory, can feed themselves and live. In a still world, it is the only artery that beats, and it beats violently. For the Mackenzie is brutal. The year before, I had taken off in a Waco seaplane with a seventy-one-year-old missionary bishop and a twenty-year-old pilot. We bumped up and down amidst the eddies and took off a second time. Then we had just about risen when we were caught in the wind that rushed between the steep banks of the river and almost hurled us against the cliff. This wasn’t transportation, it was an epic! Epical, too, is the saga of the tree trunks which are ripped from the banks by the brutal melting of the ice and dragged toward the Arctic Ocean. After drifting 600 miles in the direction of the pole, they turn off to the east, driven by the currents of the McClintock Channel, and land in shreds at the northern point of King William Island, where the Es-
kimos welcome them as a precious commodity, for wood doesn’t exist in their part of the world.

And an epic, too, is the story of the merchandise that is put into the water at Fort McMurray, hauled down the river in trains of barges by the most incredible-looking paddle boats, and unloaded at each rapid, meeting the river again a little below and finally reaching Tuktuyaktuk after a voyage of several weeks. Nor is this the end of their voyage, for some of them have to do an additional stretch of at least the same distance—by boat, Eskimo schooner and sled—to get to Fort Ross, above the Magnetic North Pole.

Just think of the piece of coal worth eight dollars a ton when it leaves the mine and two hundred when it finally arrives. For the northern trapper, it’s rarer than a nugget, more precious than an ingot. And how impatiently and anxiously it’s awaited! I’ve seen a man from Inman River to whom food was brought, and tobacco, the lack of which for months on end must have driven him delirious. He was seized with a half-mad laughter, a physical overexcitement, like that of the man dying of thirst who is given not a glass of water but a tankful. Anyone who hasn’t seen that hasn’t seen life!

This may give some idea of what a pole of attraction Tuk becomes as soon as the post opens, and of the haste and feverishness with which the white men of the coast, without waiting for the merchandise to come to them, go to it, converging from everywhere. No sooner is Tuk in view than a transformation occurs. The human in them awakens; the instinct of sociability which has lain dormant too long breaks out. Even before reaching land, they yell and ges-

"Whence the famous "portages.""
ticulate. These reserved and taciturn creatures are suddenly noisy and frenzied. They jump ashore. They explode at the sight of their fellows: “For Christ’s sake!” They laugh and sputter, they seize and crush each other’s hands, shaking the same hand three times. The result of protracted frustration.

Take the case of the man who has lived all winter long ensconced in his igloo. At the first sign of spring, he emerges. He pitches his tent when the weather is twenty below. Claustrophobia! He hadn’t felt it all winter long. But now he’s suddenly stifled (after all, he’s not just a hibernating animal). Perhaps you may even see him lying outdoors where the snow has melted and sleeping with his face to the stars! Utterly mad, but aren’t we all? Don’t we also see, not only in the bush, but in big cities as well, perfectly normal people whose behavior suddenly becomes odd and unintelligible to those who are unaware of the inner pressure from which they’re trying to free themselves? Don’t we often see big businessmen, who elsewhere are mighty potentates, behaving in the evening at night clubs like schoolboys or squatting on all fours and amusing themselves with their sons’ toys? You may call it a simple need for relaxation after a hard day, a temporary escape from constant and weighty responsibilities. But isn’t it often really a matter of something deep down in them that yearns to be satisfied? One may be an old man who has never had a chance to play, or a perfectly respectable middle-aged gentleman who asks a girl to rock him in her arms because he’s still waiting for the gentle rocking he never had as an infant.

In Bordeaux, I’ve seen the captain of an English cargo boat slip off to one of the “houses” of the city every time
the boat stopped there. He would come in and greet the
girls with a merry slap on the behind and order "champagne
for everybody"; that was all. The pleasure of letting him-
self go once in a while and shaking off his British rigidity
was enough for him. He would be there every night during
the entire stopover.

But as a farsighted man who never lost his sense of duty,
he would bring along his fox-terrier so that at dawn, when
he was completely drunk, the dog could lead him back
to the ship. One moonlit night, the dog was guiding him to
the docks. Suddenly, in the middle of the square, the dog
began howling at the moon. And the old sea dog himself,
just because he was feeling good, joined in the chorus. As
they were howling away, a policeman, who was probably
also under the influence of the moon, came up to the Eng-
lishman and asked him somewhat gruffly what he was
doing there. "Me?" said the captain. "I'm barking. No ob-
jection, I suppose?" And leaving the policeman standing
there dumfounded, he strode off toward the wharf.

In like manner, for the men of the North Tuk is the place
where they relax, where they kick over the traces. One
fellow, just because he hasn't smoked a cigar for a year,
buys a whole box of them and puffs away until he gets sick.
A second, because he was without a saucepan all winter,
buys half a dozen. Another, who has been dreaming of a
spot of rum, roams around the settlement sniffing like a dog,
and if he's lucky enough to find someone with a bottle,
yells out "Lemme have it!" (as if he were having a fit of
madness). Unable to wait, he smashes the neck on the edge
of the table. The men indulge in a general orgy. But it's
quite harmless. Don't go thinking that there are any women
in Tuk, or poker games such as you see in “Westerns,” with Colts lying on the table. That’s all right for gold seekers, for frontiersmen. The men in these parts are beyond frontiers. It’s not “hostesses” or saloons that they need, but a nice homy place where they can do the things that have become incredible to them: sitting down at a table covered with an oilcloth—that symbol of domestic life—in a place where they’re no longer cold; reaching out to a shelf to get some jam, and in a jar besides! No longer having to go outside and get a block of snow to melt if you’re thirsty. To be able to go into the next room where a bed with sheets awaits you. Things like that seem so miraculous that they don’t dare believe them. Like a street urchin who usually sleeps on a park bench and hunts for food in garbage cans and one day suddenly finds himself at a reception center with a piping hot plate of soup in front of him. “A plate!” (He shakes his head.) “It can’t last!”

How explain the value, for certain men, of acts which others take for granted? Such as writing a letter. They’ve lost the knack. How the devil do you squeeze a letter out of your head? In those parts, it takes them a whole day. They sit and ruminate endlessly at the corner of a table. If they write, it’s not so much to give news about themselves to some distant relative, whom they otherwise don’t care a rap about, as for the sake of the letter itself. A letter box! The same thing happened to me when I was on my way back from the New Hebrides where I had been living among cannibals. When I found myself in front of a letter box at Port Vila, I was seized, at the sight of the slot, with the kind of fright one feels in the presence of mystery. What was behind it? Was there some force that
would draw my missive by pneumatic suction to Australia or Europe? And similarly, for the men of the Great North, there's something miraculous about the sight of a store or a postman or a policeman. A police station for those who live so far from all law? They present themselves there very gravely. Their eyes linger over the registers. What can be written there? They’re like the Eskimos who were taken to Aklavik to answer for a murder and who grew so enthusiastic about the experience that all they could think of was committing another one so as to make the trip again.

But Tuk doesn’t even have the dimensions of a village. The sandspit is not much more than 300 yards long. The round of visits is quickly over. So the men begin again. They enter the store for the sixth time that day, “just to look around,” they say, excusing themselves like kids. Or at the telegraph operator’s: “It’s us again!” (with a hearty laugh). They’re bent on getting the very maximum out of their vacation. They no longer sleep. At most, they doze in a chair. Or else they stretch out beside the water for an hour or two and then are off again. Since it’s more exciting at night than during the day, they stroll about particularly at night (you can see them outlined against the redness of the horizon). They’re simply playing. Out of a need to delude themselves, to convince themselves that they’re men just like everyone else—though they know very well that they’ll never again be that; out of a need, too, to deceive themselves, to forget that one of them has failed to turn up, that the feet of another froze and that he was saved only because a plane came to “get him out.” Out of a need to forget that here news is bad. The Mackenzie River, which was supposed to bring supplies, hasn’t arrived. And fur?
Prices have dropped again. The situation was alarming enough last year. This year it’s worse. Ten dollars for a white fox! If this goes on, the Arctic will die of hunger! But white is no longer being worn. That’s what has been decided by the makers of fashion in Paris or New York. The life of a continent hangs on the fancy of a dressmaker.

But for the moment they refuse to worry about it. Take “Scottie” Goll—a bruiser if ever there was one, who once swam out through the ice to save a crew that was in danger. All that’s left of him now is a somewhat frail-looking man who chuckles as he listens to the gossip. And Captain Pederson, one of the whalers of the great days, who had “gone up” to the Arctic in his boat for twenty-two consecutive seasons; on his doorstep, he’s just a placid middle-class gentleman.

Take Frenchy Chartrand, that colossus of the police, who travels so fast in winter and no sooner does he hear that someone is in difficulty than he hitches up his dogs and off they go. Here he’s just a newsmonger, with a bagful of gossip: “On Banks Island, Fred the half-breed caught 1,350 foxes all by himself. Without a sled, just imagine,” he says, with a terrific Canadian accent. “Had to lay out his line of traps on foot, because his dogs came down with meningitis. But his beat was so lousy with them, that all he had to do was set them, without even baiting. The next day there’d be an animal in every trap! I’ve never seen the likes of it!” He sends another shot of Bourbon down the hatch, and adds: “Well, I think I’m expected elsewhere.”

For this giant, the best man when it comes to going out

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18 A common disease among Eskimo dogs. They are said to catch it from the foxes.
alone in a raging flurry, is also the most sociable. He has a touching need of his fellows. And ten minutes later, there he is on the Lady of Lourdes, the schooner of the Catholic mission, deep in conversation with Father Buliard, who, dressed for the vacation in cassock, is only a quiet ecclesiastic reading his breviary. Father Buliard is a great pal of Frenchy. Frenchy is the only Catholic up there and, like the Father, an indefatigable traveler. “Say, Father! Do you remember the leader I had two years ago? Boy, that was a dog!” Father Buliard smiles mysteriously: “Wait until you see the one I’m going to have this winter. He’ll put it all over yours!” “Boy!” (with a bang on the table) “I’d like to see that!” And they’re off on an excited discussion of the value of their respective dogs: the big subject.

But the Father has nothing to drink. So Frenchy doesn’t linger. He makes for the next boat, the Fort Ross, which belongs to the Company. A brand-new boat, which, compared to the others, is quite impressive. For the others are just old tubs, schooners that have been slapped together, belonging for the most part to the Eskimos. They, too, have turned out in full force for the holiday. With their raggedy kids, their patched tents set up haphazardly—each with its piece of piping for evacuation—their skinny dogs, full of vermin in their summer fur, all howling and fighting, they give Tuk a certain gypsy quality which rather heightens its picturesqueness.

And still no Mackenzie River! Since the wind was in the east, it had probably been blocked somewhere on this side of Aklavik, at the mouth of the river. An atmosphere of anxiety began to settle over Tuk, though everyone pretended not to notice it. Another two weeks of free sea was
all that could be counted on; so the delay of the boat meant danger for everyone. But there was nothing for us to do but wait. Like everyone else. Because the boat was supposed to bring us some spare parts for our motors. And also we were hoping to get some eggs.¹⁹

To make matters worse, a warm wind started blowing, bringing with it an invasion of mosquitoes. Mosquitoes on the ice—that’s one of the oddities of the Great North! Suddenly there they were, clouds of them. We had just time enough to take refuge in mosquito netting.

The night we got to Coppermine, the year before, the pilot of our Waco had to fill up—at midnight—and in order to do it he had to wrap himself in a cloth that made him look like a ghost. (And the Eskimos who stood watching the scene probably felt that what they were seeing was no longer a man, but the Spirit of Flight in the act of consecrating his strange machine.) The mosquitoes there were vampires rather than insects. They rose up in a surprise attack. They swooped down on anything they could find, men and animals. They gorged themselves on fresh blood. And then, when they had done their dirty work, they withdrew as abruptly as they had come. In order to escape them, the caribou stay in the wind. Despite this, they’re victims. The mosquitoes stick to them in sheets. They’re found dead in the tundra, drained of their blood.

Here, it was chiefly the dogs they went after. The dogs,

¹⁹The egg problem in the Great North: when you get them, you eat as many as you can while they’re still fresh(?). Those that you put into the porch begin to smell. But since you have three cases of them—and they’ve cost you a king’s ransom—you continue eating them . . . until you get so sick of them that you fling the lot into the snow.

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attached as they were by chains, thrashed about as if they were possessed, spun madly around, leaped wildly in the air. All night long they filled the bay with their howling. A long sob on a single note.

In the midst of all this, I had an unexpected diversion in the form of a shithawk\(^{20}\) pursuing a gull across the bay. The gull was screaming shrilly but refused to drop ballast. Was it ill will or constipation? It kept zigzagging in all directions and turning its head as if to say: “You can see for yourself that I can’t!” The hawk finally gave up in disgust. What could you do with a bird that refused to drop its load!

We were beginning to get more and more worried about the fate of the Mackenzie River—with an unexpressed anxiety (we were most careful not to talk about it) that affected each of us in a different way, some talking louder than usual so as to deafen themselves, and others saying nothing at all. I remember that Frenchy Chartrand, who had been talking so loudly and noisily, grew still as a mouse.

Suddenly a commotion broke out at the headland. Some Eskimos, moored at the very extremity with their spy-glasses—wherever they are, they never stop spying and peering—gave the alarm. The first thing we saw, in the guise of a pilot boat, was a schooner bristling with natives. Then came a three-story houseboat, with smokestacks as straight and thin as tapers, a real showboat out of an American movie. The apparition of this prehistoric monster right in the Arctic Ocean was unbelievable.

The houseboat disappeared behind the point—we could

\(^{20}\)A species of hawk that feeds on excrement.
see only the tapers—and reappeared a few moments later puffing and pushing as well as she could. Now we could see everything. There was a crowd on the mezzanine and a crowd in the balconies shouting and waving their arms. We sent up a cheer. The smokestacks replied with gay little jets. It was a historic moment. For the first time in history, a paddle boat had sailed into the Arctic Ocean. The “quest for the Northwest Passage” had been surpassed! With big slaps of its huge paddles, the houseboat entered Tuktuyaktuk.

Gesticulations and welcome! With clever maneuvering, the *Mackenzie River* was brought to a little landing stage so that the passengers could disembark with the dignity befitting the circumstance. There they were, rather clumsy (they were held under the arms) and also a little shocked by the primitive character of the place—maybe they were expecting a hotel?

There appeared in succession the head of the Water Resources Branch, a deputy sheriff, a newspaperwoman who had come from Toronto for the express purpose of recording for posterity the various phases of this great event (and who would probably relate with abundant details her meeting with “the famous Eskimos”), and even an American couple on their honeymoon who stared popeyed (she was a bit frightened and clung to her husband’s arm).

Toasts were exchanged in the company’s quarters. And then the “visitors” were shown around town. For a few hours, Tuk became a seaside resort! In the evening, there was an improvised gala on board the *Mackenzie River*. Scottie Goll acted as master of ceremonies, offering his arms to the guests and leading them into the saloon. But sh! not too...
much noise. The captain, after sending a cable announcing his exploit, had retired early and was sleeping up above like a great seaman!

At dawn, everything vanished. Reality returned. The merchandise had to be unloaded quickly, and the trappers had to find their lots among the pile of stuff. No more friendship, no more politeness! Now it was every man for himself!

The quest went on anxiously and brutally. The next day it would be over. As soon as the last sack of coal was delivered and the last bottle of rum put into the hands of its happy recipient, Tuk would close up. Until the following summer, it would be merely a neck of sand wretchedly beaten by the winds. The men of the North would return to their solitude. And it was better that way. For they were already tired of it. Their eyes were getting bleary and their cheeks flabby. The soft life was not for them, and they knew it. But as soon as they got back to their blizzard, their eyes would clear up. They would whip up their dogs and take on their own faces. At least until the Arctic finally "got" them. For each year the Great North takes its tithe, in frozen lungs, in hands that have to be cut off before gangrene sets in, in eyes that slowly vitrify with snow blindness.

Our next stop was to be Hershel, the former base, now deserted, of whalers who used to take off from San Francisco and Seattle to hunt bowheads in the Beaufort Sea. An entire past, an entire legend! The mere mention of the name Hershel up there evokes something fantastic. But those who have known it don’t dare talk of it very much. Though they may be glad to chatter endlessly about whaling, when
it comes to talking about the men, they’re as silent as the grave. Hershel is not only a bone yard for whales, but also for men!

But we weren’t there yet. It would take another twenty-four hours rounding the north of Bullen Island. We were on the seas again. We hadn’t been out long when I went to heat some coffee on the Primus and almost set fire to the lookout post.

The deck of the *Audrey* was being swept by spray and Mrs. Watson appeared—she probably wasn’t feeling well—and went forward with her little girl. The nickname Tiny fitted her. She was so slight that at any moment I expected to see her carried off by a wave. And she was as shy as she was frail, and very easily startled.

I knew nothing about her. If I have not yet spoken of her, it is because she appeared only at rare intervals. Her job on board was to prepare the meals, but immediately afterward she would slip away and was no longer to be seen. Nevertheless, the little I saw of her was enough to reveal her. Tiny was a half-breed. She had the two faces of the half-breed and could change her expression without transition. In front of her stove, she wasn’t very different from the average housewife, except that she walked pigeon-toed and moved with the nimbleness of a native. Yet when she stood motionless on deck in her *attigbi*—which was edged with *sik-sik*—she became a savage again. But in her case, savageness expressed itself by shyness. At the slightest sign of bad humor on our part, she seemed ready to flee,

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21A fur garment worn by Eskimo women.
22A winter squirrel of the North, whose fur the women wear as an adornment.
to disappear. Unlike Lucy the Eskimo, she had not gained the upper hand over the white man. Quite the contrary. She was submissive to him, in the most touching sense of the word. Nevertheless, she was obviously frightened by the voyage. Her way of abruptly raising her eyes made this clear.

Nobody paid any attention to her. In this adventure, she was the sacrificed victim. In addition, she was often seasick. She would come out for a breath of air when she was feeling really bad. For a moment, she would stand facing the waves, and then, with the nimbleness of her race, would slip away.

Muriel was quite different (I might even say that the sicker the mother got, the heartier the child). Muriel was

23 When it comes to seasickness, nothing approaches that of the Chinese. I remember a voyage from Australia to Hong Kong during which we picked up, in the Pacific Islands, some Chinese who were on their way back to their country upon the expiration of their work contracts. At first, all went well. The Chinese—there must have been two hundred of them—lived crowded together in the forecastle and emerged only at mealtime to lap up their bowl of rice on deck. But as soon as the sea got a bit rough, there was a regular epidemic of seasickness. We were obliged, out of sheer disgust, to lock them up in the hold, where the only sign of life was their groaning and the sound of struggle (in their terror, the poor devils must have been fighting among themselves for air, or else they must have been trying desperately to catch hold of the sandal-wood chests in which each of them had locked his valuables and which, as a result of the rolling, were sliding all over the place) and a ghastly smell of vomit. When the ship arrived and the hold was opened, the disorder was unbelievable. So was the smell. The place stank of a mixture of fear and puke. All that remained was a shapeless heap of haggard-looking individuals, raising their eyes to us like condemned men who had finally been granted a pardon and who dared not believe it.

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all joy of living, the wonderful unconsciousness of everything. Her reply to the waves was a succession of mimickings of which the following were the most frequent:

Rolling over twenty or thirty times in succession.

Calling out to me from a distance: “Where’s my mister?”

I belonged to her, like everything else on board. I was just another amusement that life offered her.

Eating the apple I had gone to the trouble of getting for her mother.

Falling on Tiny with all her might in an attempt to awaken the spirit of play in her.

When she had exhausted her mother’s patience, she would get a slap on the cheek. Whereupon, the child would suddenly stop short in amazed surprise, would immediately grow calm as if by enchantment and then fall asleep with her head down, as children generally do.

There was Hershel: a table laid on the water, joined farther on by a sandspit with red-roofed buildings. As the wind was blowing from land, we were unable to approach it. We anchored in the bay—at the foot of the plateau—and went to sleep.

The next morning I was on deck early. We could now see Hershel’s creviced flanks and such an English-green surface that I half expected to see cows (but the Arctic has never seen a cow, except the one brought by the Mackenzie River which was sacrificed the following morning for the needs of the ship and so lived there only a single day). We brought up—still with the crank—twenty-six fathoms of chain. At eight o’clock, tied the Audrey to an old anchor that was bogged in the sand.

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Tuk was life and bustle. Hershel was death. The settlement was petrified. And the general aspect was even more petrified because of the whalebones that lined the shore and pointed up at the sky. Also petrified was a whaleboat, whose bow, which had been worn through by the sliding of the rope, showed clearly enough what used to go on in the old days. There were also a half-dozen shacks whose white clapboards and red roofs gleamed in the sun. The doors were wide open. Here and there on the grass were the remains of a wheelbarrow, the hoop of a barrel, vestiges of a past that was gradually being covered over by the leaf mold.

Fifty years before, Hershel had been a boom town, thanks to the whalers. The Hudson’s Bay Company had done a land-office business; so had everyone else. It was the time when the Eskimos treated themselves to schooners and sewing machines. “Ten thousand dollars,” one of them used to say, “to me same thing as nothing!”

Today, their houses, which are adjacent to those of the whites, smell of mildew and rancid seal fat. Gillette blades and American instruments are strewn all around. There used to be a school for the Inuit. The blackboard was still on the wall, and on the floor was the roll book where the attendance used to be recorded. Apparently, the teacher was a man of varied talents for I found a pair of forceps in his cottage.

Nearby was a field of half-fallen crosses, each with a name and a date:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Died in</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Louis Mahoney</td>
<td>1916</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fred Morand</td>
<td>1917 at 51 years of age</td>
<td>65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<td>Frank Schwartz</td>
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<td>1904</td>
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<td>Harry Cruz</td>
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<td>John Wilkie</td>
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<td>&quot;Arthur&quot;</td>
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<td>Robert Hansen</td>
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<td>Joe Peters</td>
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<td>August Arnike</td>
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<td>C. Santos</td>
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<td>William Mosher</td>
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<td>Edwin Isler</td>
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<td>Chas Morton</td>
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The average age was twenty-nine. And better not to know how they died. Yankees, Scandinavians, and even a Polynesian. All in the same boat. Probably with the cat-o’-nine-tails as mascot. Volunteers? Shanghaied? God knows! There are probably still Storensons in Denmark and Cruizes in some other country wondering what ever happened to their sons.

A little way off from the others, I found three crosses. They contained a single word: *tokoyok* (he is dead). Eskimos this time. Probably the “gallows birds of Hershel.” Theirs was a curious trial. In order to do things right and to give the Inuit a demonstration of justice, a whole judi-
ciary apparatus was brought up, at great cost. District attorney, judges, two lawyers.

The trial opened in Aklavik with solemnity. But something happened on which no one had counted. The accused, like good Eskimos, persisted in saying throughout the trial, despite the defense, "But we did kill! Look, like this!" And they would grin at each other. They were therefore convicted. For the sake of convenience, they were made to dig their own graves in advance, while the ground was still loose.

That was Hershel, an epitome of death on a neck of sand at the foot of an island, itself a frozen block whose shores collapse in summer with a "plop" which disturbs only the silence. So that the Arctic, geographically uniform though it may be with its immense, flat gray stretches, infested with winds and blizzards and relieved only by an occasional rise, has, nevertheless, many faces, depending on the way men live there.

Let us take a look at what goes on at the same time for each of them: while I and my companions, who have just ended a long trip, are hastily digging in the snow with the points of our harpoons, trying to find a thick enough spot to cut out blocks with which to build our igloo, elsewhere, at his Hudson's Bay Company post, the manager, snug in his slippers, which he has cut out of the company's "three-point blanket," is sitting in his chair by the stove, in a room which certainly looks more suburban than anything else. His big ledgers are lying on a shelf, as in any city office. On a neighboring shelf—adorned with a paper doily—sits a pot-bellied teapot, lording it over a row of neatly arranged cups. The manager dozes. Not a single Eskimo has got round
to the post in two weeks. He has had nothing to do but make his daily inspection and take his little walk to keep fit. A life of solid comfort!

His larder is well-stocked—he has a two years' supply of provisions. A barrelful of powdered milk, more eggs than he knows what to do with, jam galore. He is as well off as if he were living in comfortable retirement. He has smoked so many cigarettes that he's completely sated. For a bit of diversion, he turns on the radio and listens to some music. . . .

At the same time, a man in his seal hole, supported by a few planks which have been brought with great difficulty from three hundred miles away, is in solitary meditation in a temperature of fifty below. He is Father Henry, the hermit missionary of Pelly Bay. He has no possessions—except an old pipe, which he can't fill because it's a long time since he's had any tobacco. As for comfort, less than nothing. His bed is composed of three rotten planks on which he sleeps in all his clothes because of the cold. For six years now, and under frightful conditions that only a missionary could endure, he has been living his monastic life among the Eskimos, whom he is trying to evangelize. . . .

Elsewhere, a man in the oncoming darkness is whipping his dogs and hurrying to cover another mile or two before nightfall. He is the indefatigable Father Buliard, who has decided to colonize hitherto unexplored areas of Victoria Island. Meanwhile, in the sky, an aviator, protected from the cold by his electrically heated flying suit, soars over these same regions and wonders whether this is where the Russian attack will come from.

And there are any number of other aspects! To the pros-
pector, the Arctic is a possible lode of copper, even of uranium. To the scientist, a field of observation for verifying the notion that that's where the world's weather is "made."

But to us, for the moment, the Arctic represented crude oil, fuel for our engines. There was a supply of it around, unusable for the Hudson’s Bay Company, but not for us. For the Audrey— I’ve got to give her credit for that— consumed whatever we gave her.

We got into our overalls and went looking for logs to roll the barrels. Then down to work! Seventy-five-gallon drums sunk in the sand can put up tough resistance! Slim and I couldn’t get them out. “Hey, Art!” Art came running up and started showering us with sarcasm.

Slim wasn’t the joking kind. With his dried-out arms and the skin that stuck to his sinews, he looked like a skeleton trying its hand at strenuous work. What an odd contrast between the two men! When did their friendship date from? From the First World War, as I learned by chance. They had met in the Argonne trenches. Later on, Art went up North, while Slim became a miner somewhere in Canada. That was all they let slip in my presence.

The rest I can imagine. The Two meeting ten years or so later in some frontier town. “I’ll be damned!” Slim must have said, being the more demonstrative of the two. Whereupon, Art, not the man to let his emotions run away with him, must have answered, “It’s me all right.” Then a pause, while they just looked at each other. “So you’re a miner, eh?” said Art in his typical half-banter, half-inquisitive tone. “Yeah!” replied Slim, with a snort, the way people who aren’t very ready with words snuffle and scratch the
back of their necks. Whereupon Art must have taken Slim to a saloon and ordered “two glasses of beer.” There, Slim, loosened up a bit by the presence of his old buddy, probably started talking: “You remember the Argonne?” . . . “Long time, eh?” . . . “Sure is!” said Slim in a somewhat abrupt tone which made the other feel that things weren’t going as Slim would have liked.

The rest of it must have happened rather rapidly. Art let Slim do the talking. Then, when the time came to leave him, he said, “S’pose you come along!” Slim was caught short, but seeing that the other meant business, he finally said, “Might as well!” And that was probably how the partnership was cemented. And cement stands up! But no sentimentality about it. “Clear out of here!” Art would say, getting up from the table. And Slim would “clear out” without a word. They knew they could count on each other. “Hold on!” Art would say during the rigging. And Slim would hold, with all his sinews. “Gimme the starboard!” he in turn would yell from the helm to the engine room. Art would give it to him, only to mutter the next second, “Pass the screwdriver!”

By midnight we had pumped aboard 2,000 gallons of crude oil and had stowed a lot of extra barrels on deck. I took advantage of the break to stroll about. The sky was full of the most delicate tones, from pastel blue to mother-of-pearl pink. But this delicateness is deceptive. Hershel has no fresh water, nothing but streamlets of cold mud trickling down from the plateau. Easiest thing in the world to die of thirst there. And hunger.

A while before I had spotted a wolf’s prints on the sand. He must have come from the mainland during the winter, but now he was shut in and was probably prowling around.
The prospect of death was all about. And the death that takes on charming tones, those desolate regions which at times have such a winning look, might, in the last analysis, very well be the deepest image I've carried away from the Great North: something infinitely brutal, over which there stretches, at the most unexpected moment, the web of the Marvelous.

I had just seen the Marvelous entering the bay in the form of white whales, at least sixty of them rolling over and frisking. I ran to get my camera, wondering whether these forms that were advancing like sylphs weren't a dream and whether my film would show them. I was just about to click when Art took a shot at them from back aft with his .30-.30. Devil take me if you would have thought the bay was full of white-robed nymphs! Would they rush off to the edge of the bay? ... Just about! There they were, playing again.

However, we had to get going. Somewhere, as sure as fate, the ice was waiting for us. We had to hurry. The weather was all right for the time being—leaden murky with a bit of mist overhead—but there was no telling how it would turn out. As I've said, the weather in those parts is unpredictable. My log for that day shows the following:

10 A.M. — Cloudy, visibility poor
2 P.M. — Clear, luminosity excellent
5 P.M. — Gray
7 P.M. — Mist, visibility about 200 yards
7:30 P.M. — Visibility 30 yards
8 P.M. — Seems to be clearing. Can make out the houses on the sandspit again
8:15 P.M. — Thicker than ever
10 P.M. — Stars in a clear sky

It was 10 A.M. when we lifted a muddy anchor and left the bay. A half hour later, we were back. Our motors were sputtering. Art and Slim preferred to wait for the wind to turn.

We took advantage of the delay to lay in another eighteen barrels. Pumping them on board produced geysers which sprayed us and made the Audrey’s deck look perfectly vile. Our canvas gloves got our hands all sticky. Slim, who was in the water up to his waist, looked like an oily Mephisto. Art was chewing fuel oil. Suddenly the pump stopped. We took advantage of the break to make some coffee. Then the pump changed its mind, and we got back into harness. It was 4 A.M. when the operation was finally over.

Four hours later, we were up and about. We had to get going at any cost. Once again we gripped the crank. Slim, who was mounting the chain in the forward hole, slipped and split the ridge of his eyebrow. All work stopped. Watson grumbled. What curious hardness! Finally, we got under way. We sailed around the north of Hershel and set our course.

Hershel is seal country. So far, we had seen only an odd one here and there, but now they were all around us. What had brought them up—within two hundred yards of us—was the noise of our motors, or rather their vibration. For though seals are nearsighted, they have an extremely fine sense of hearing. And they always have that comical way of turning their heads as soon as they’re out of the water. My
Eskimos of the Magnetic Pole were just like them (the men and animals of the same region eventually come to resemble each other). The same round skulls, the same close-shaven heads, the same hairiness (the Eskimos’ sparse mustaches, which in winter were all bristly and rimy, were exactly those of the seal). The same oily appearance, the same suppleness, the same rapidity of movement. Mentally, too, the same wiliness. Like the animal, the man was slippery, difficult to take hold of and always ready to about-face. And just as the pantomime of the animal became human at times (I wouldn’t have been particularly surprised to hear him grumbling in Eskimo before returning to his watery deep), in like manner the man, motionless above the breathing hole, but ready to spring, would become animallike, until you wondered which of the two was more like the other.

In the spring, when the man had to display great craft in approaching the animal as it lay near his hole, the resemblance became even more perfect. At the distance from which the nearsighted seal begins to distinguish a blurry form not far away, the Eskimo behaves exactly as the animal does. And just when the seal, awakened from its sleep—of a few seconds—sits up and looks about, he, too, turns his head with the same bewildered and highly comical air—so that you no longer know which is the original and which the copy!—and strikes with his foot as with a fin. And keeping up his mimicry, with every now and then a bound forward, he finally succeeds in grabbing hold of a fin with one hand and plunging his snow knife into the seal’s body with the other. And as I watched this scene from a distance, I admired not only the man’s art but also his “sporting spirit,”
the elegance with which he gave the animal its chance instead of simply killing it from far off with a rifle.

I wondered whether I was losing this spirit, which I had finally caught among the Eskimos. Just before leaving Hershel, I had killed a summer ermine and the murder still preyed on my mind. It had been standing four yards away from me, not the least bit afraid, simply curious to watch the movements of this biped, the like of which it had never seen. Its belly was saffron-yellow. At the tip of its tail was a little black tuft. I had suddenly a violent desire to have its fur. I raised my rifle—instead of fleeing, it stood up in order to see better—and no sooner had I pulled the trigger than I felt deeply ashamed.

No doubt but that I was deteriorating. I hadn’t been on the *Audrey* two weeks and already my gestures were more brutal. And more brutal, too, were the ideas behind the gestures. Could it be that the Two were contaminating me? The same thing had happened to me before—at the age of twenty, when I was on my way to the barracks with a bunch of other young conscripts to put in my military service. In less than two stations, I was behaving like the others, putting my feet on the plush seats and yelling out impolite comments to the stationmaster every time the convoy stopped.

Later on, too, when, owing to the various trades I practiced, I lived with factory workers or gangsters, I found myself not assimilating them, like the writer I am, but being assimilated *by* them. Not in order to get them to accept me—which would have been a bad tactic—but out of a kind of curiosity which made me try to get into their skins until I finally came to resemble them.
Probably that's what was happening in this case. But I also suspected that the *Audrey* had something to do with it. With her never-washed deck, her gashes, the rags lying all over the place, she had a most uncouth look. It was perfectly obvious that the only thing that had concerned her builders was the job she had to do, namely, to stick to the sea in all weathers, to do her fifteen knots whenever necessary and to take on a maximum load of rum. The rest hadn't interested them in the least. Nothing was trim or well-finished, neither the hull nor the berthing—and yet these things were utterly rudimentary! The two funnels had been stuck on, as on a shanty, as if for evacuation rather than exhaust!

Polish a boat like this? The idea never even occurred to us! On any other boat, whether it be a tug or an old coaster, you're anxious to do the coppers and clean the compass and wind the gear, in keeping with a code that every seaman respects and of which he's proud. But on the *Audrey* we weren't proud of anything! It wasn't that the *Audrey* was old—for age and dirt can be decent—it was rather that she was shady, though I couldn't quite put my finger on the reason why. Was it her gangster past? In any case, there was something hangdog about her. I felt it in everything. What kind of men had lived in the forecastle? How many dubious cargoes had filled the oozing deck? And hadn't the casemate been riddled with bullets? (I could imagine her being chased through the fog, and the oaths of the men.)

Everything about the boat suggested a past that I knew nothing about. She was just a shameless hull. And as a result of my contact with her, I was falling into low ways.
No doubt about it. My speech was getting vulgar. I was becoming more bitter (just as, when I was a factory worker, I used to sit on the curb eating my lunch and feel hostile to the “bourgeois” who went by). I was growing more indifferent, too, more cynical. I could tell by a host of details. At the beginning, each of us had had his own towel for wiping his face. We used to put our cigarette butts into a saucer, for want of anything better. But now butts were strewn everywhere! Rusty rifles in the pilothouse. Door-knobs that had turned green.

Nothing thrilling about that. But are voyages ever what one imagines them to be? Does Adventure—at least as romantics conceive it—exist anywhere but in the imagination of those who say, “After all, I can’t have ‘done’ the Bering Strait and say it was nothing!” Or of those who manufacture epics out of whole cloth in order to satisfy a public eager for thrills.

Polar bears dangerous? They’re utterly harmless! Their only defense when you close in on them is to turn around and kick at the dogs that are biting at their legs. Vampires terrifying? They’re the gentlest of animals, the easiest to tame! The San Blas Indians aggressive? I can still hear the High Commissioner who governed their islands: “If you go out there, I won’t be responsible for anything!” A week later I was circulating among them, accompanied by a swarm of kids all shrieking: “Money, money!”

I once expressed a desire, in the presence of a chance acquaintance, to go to Lhasa, “the forbidden city.” “In that case,” he said, “go see a friend of mine who lives there. He’s the Coty representative. He’ll show you around.”

I also remember the case of the civil servant who got fed
up with his office and decided to take a bicycle trip around the world with his wife. When he got back he was assailed by reporters. “You must have run into fantastic difficulties!” “Not at all! The only difficulties we had were at the borders. The customs men refused to believe that my wife and I were simply taking a jaunt. As for physical suffering, I had a boil on the lower part of my back which was very painful because it kept rubbing against the seat of the bicycle.”

Go into the so-called impenetrable jungle, and what you’re most likely to find is not horrible-looking cannibals but a respectable medicine man riding around in an old Ford and distributing his charms. At Papeete, in Lotus Land, what you’ll see is not lascivious slaves dispensing pleasure amidst the fragrance of the tiaré-tabiti while others fan you with palm leaves, but rather old Buicks lined along the docks, shady characters offering cocaine, saloons covered with corrugated iron, and whores with dirty feet, most of whom have a disease as old as it is universal, that they caught from the tax collector, who himself got it from a whore in Marseilles.

To be sure, I’ve seen primitive Eskimos in the North. I’ve also seen some who owned Mannlichers with telescopic sights and cameras. And one of them nonchalantly turning the pages of a Sears Roebuck catalogue and saying to me, “What do you think of the latest model outboard kicker? I feel like sending for one.” Time and again I’ve had some such conversation as the following with a thrill-seeking reader:

“You must have seen some magnificent spectacles up North!”
“Madame, most of the time I didn’t see a thing. A good part of my winter was spent groping my way in the haze.”

“Still and all, the snow . . .”

“You’ll find that in Montana and Wyoming. There’s hardly any at all in the Arctic. As for its being white, that’s all right for Kitzbuehl or Lake Placid. Up north it was gray.”

“But the Great Ice Barrier?”

“It was impressive to the people who used to take the Spitzberg cruise on the Stella Polaris before the war. But where I was, it was just a shapeless chaotic mass of blocks. There was nothing glorious about it. It was simply a tough obstacle.”

“But what about the aurora borealis?”

“Sorry to disappoint you here, too, but those I saw in the area of the Magnetic Pole were colorless and far less beautiful than the green and red ones you can see around Quebec, and even less beautiful than the ones I happened to see one night when I was driving back to New York from Rhinebeck!”

This doesn’t mean that Adventure hasn’t provided me with joys and excitement which, though not what I had been expecting, were any the less intense. But where was the compensation here? There wasn’t even any danger! So far, my job consisted for the most part in standing at the helm until the soles of my feet ached!

I forgot to say that our wait in Tuk had been in vain. We couldn’t use the gear wheels because they didn’t have the right number of cogs. As for the spare compass which we’d been looking forward to getting, we never managed to locate it on the Mackenzie River.
When we had gone about ten miles, the seals disappeared as suddenly as they had come. Again solitude, absence of life. I would check the log three or four times a day. We were doing only six and a half miles. Art was having trouble with the engines. But since he didn’t know what it was due to, it was better not to mention the subject.

We had passed Demarcation Point—the limit between Canadian and American waters—without seeing land. Still, it could not have been far off because four terns dropped by for a visit. But after escorting us awhile, they left us. What kind of a story am I telling, anyway? When I started it, I thought I was going to be telling about Adventure. It’s turning out to be just one big frustration!

Two hundred forty miles by the log since Hershel, and still no land in sight. Had we been misled by the compass and gone too far north? In order to know exactly what was what, I climbed up to the crow’s-nest and saw two thin streaks on the northwest horizon like two pillars of a porch. I yelled out to Slim who joined me with the field glasses. They were ice floes.

There were ten of them, then a hundred. They were approaching, mean and nasty-looking. I was tempted to call out to them as they drifted by: “Hey! Did you happen to see land?” My word! The continent had changed its place!

“Can’t you get something on the wireless?” I said to Slim. He got red and angry.

“What do you mean! Only yesterday I had San Francisco!”

“Well, try to get it again. And for God’s sake, find out where Alaska is!”

A while before, I’d been joking about the fragments of
ice. They had been only precursors. Behind them came others. And still others. I climbed up to the crow’s-nest again. The whole horizon was streaked. We had to “go in,” and fast!

We’d been going in for a quarter of an hour. Since 180 by the compass wasn’t enough, we pushed on to 160. The floes kept moving toward us. We were three men who had stopped talking. For the time being, we were still using our wits. But if matters got worse, we would have to flee.

That’s the danger of floes. They give the impression of not advancing. They drift along so nonchalantly, that you say to yourself, “I’ve got time!” And before you know it, they’re on top of you, banging you. A while before, the route had been clear at 160, then at only 140, and then at 120. Now it was blocked everywhere. The barrier had encircled us without our being able to know how thick it was or where it opened. If only we could see land. But it was getting dark. We had to moor to one of the blocks.

We tossed a hook and heaved. The hook slipped. Slim fell over backward and hurt himself on the winch. He swore horribly. We repeated the operation. This time he jumped on the ice and dug the hook in with his heel. It was half-past one when we stopped the motors. We were all tense. The atmosphere was sinister. Around us, in the darkness, the floes were bumping into each other. Not only were they moving in a definite direction, but they would also sweep around and clash together. And we were in danger of being crushed by these rotating millstones. Moreover, the submerged part of an iceberg is four or five times larger than the part above the water and, in addition, is armed with a sharp spur just below the water line. With

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an icebreaker, there's no danger because it's armed at the bow and with its round hull the worst that can happen is that it gets lifted by the ice. But that kind of thing would disembowel us. As for being hit by one of those blocks, you might as well run into Gibraltar.24

The *Audrey* was sweeping around with the floes. And we, with our gaffs, were struggling to pull up to one block and push away another. It was like trying to move a mountain with a toothpick. Seeing this, we changed tactics. We yanked our grapnel from one block and anchored it in the next one, so as to avoid the constant danger of being ground to atoms.

24For those who have never seen an icebreaker operating in the barrier—I mean in ice too thick to be broken through by a boat—I should like to explain what goes on, at least as I saw it on the *Saint Roch*. The boat, whose stem was rounded and solidly armed, backed up and, with its engines racing at top speed, attacked the ice and literally rushed up on it. I felt each time that the boat was going to split in two beneath the impact. But no! It climbed up the ice at such an angle that the bow literally pointed at the sky, until two thirds or more of the ship weighed down on the ice, which finally cracked with a tremendous roar. Thus, with each run, the boat opened a breach corresponding to about two thirds of its own length. It would then back up and tear in again, and so on. Sometimes, it wasn't enough to crack the wall. The men then had to get down and place dynamite at a number of points in order to blow up the ice. In addition to the terrific din, this operation also produced a star-shaped cracking. . . .

The reader can imagine the work involved. Moreover, when a boat lies up in the ice, even if the boat is built for that kind of thing, you have to saw the ice all around the hull with a huge crocodile saw that goes up and down and that has to be handled by two men, so that the weight—hundreds of tons—of the ice on the hull doesn't crush it. And even when the ice has once been opened, it has to be reopened with the saw every day, for in low temperature the ice freezes eight to ten inches thick overnight.
Finally, worn out with these acrobatics, we decided to try to get to land. But how far away was it? The ten-fathom line on the map was at twenty miles offshore. Could we have been farther “out” than we thought?

We were hardly under way when we got mixed up in a mist. Once again we had to moor to the first ice floe that came along. Our navigation was sad to see. I had been asking for danger, and now that it was present, our seamen-ship was pitiful to behold. Slim was giving orders with a dramatic air. Art was going up and down the bridge that led to the engines. And I, very brightly, left the pilot room at the very moment I should have been going back to it. The result of it all was that the Audrey started carrying on like a drunken slut and bumping into everything in her way. And everything on board became grotesque. Watson looked like an old woman hunting for her teeth; Slim, like a miner about to blow up a mine; and I, like a chicken running around with its head cut off!

Slim had dropped into bed. Art and I kept watch. We decided to make some coffee. We sat facing each other in the messroom without a word. Every ten minutes I went up to see how things were. Mist all around. And thick!

At six in the morning, I was still in front of the stove, shivering like a tramp. And I had an odd feeling of loneliness. Everything suddenly seemed hostile, with a hostility and indifference that nothing mitigated. With all its harshness and even its occasional pitilessness, my Arctic had at least had its kindly moments, even if they were only a letup in a blizzard or the caress of a dog or the humorous comment of an Eskimo. Enough, in any case, to bring a breath of warmth, of humanity. But here it was as if the universe
were drained of all decency. We were moving in a barren
and sinister world, carried along by a glaucous and crafty
sea, which at times would rise up and lash out as if it had
been poked by some evil genius, among ice floes that looked
like detritus. And there we were, staggering along a coast
which, most of the time, was invisible. And when we did
see it, it was all black and desolate, even more deserted
than the Canadian coast behind us. According to Art, there
were only three trappers between Hershel and Point Bar-
row, one at the mouth of the Colville River, another at
Cape Halkett, and no one knew whether the third, an old
Dutchman, was still alive. It was a part of the earth where
you could call for help and be shipwrecked without any-
one’s ever answering your appeal.

And the total indifference of the Two made this isolation
even more palpable. Take Art. He had been at my side for
two hours, as remote and foreign as if I weren’t there! Once
he did actually mumble something: “If only we’d gone
round the bend,” meaning Point Barrow, but it was to him-
self that he spoke, just as if I didn’t exist!

Around nine o’clock, the fog lifted and we got going
again. Due east, that is, in the direction of Coppermine! As
far as we could judge, there was a free channel northwest,
but that was the direction not to take. In these parts of the
Arctic, there’s an absolute rule: never “out,” always “in.”
The reason is simple: if ever the winds start blowing from
the land when you’re out, the ice will carry you as far as the
North Pole!

We therefore tried to go back. An hour later, the situa-
tion improved. The waves cleared. . . . We sighted a flat
land... no, a simple islet, with a pole sticking out of it. Quick, the map!...

It showed a dot marked Beacon Pole, off Flaxman Island. Could it be that we had covered only 170 miles in a straight line from Hershel? And my spirits weren’t restored by the returning mist. The Two were also in a sullen mood. Art was still having trouble with the engines. They would cough and then stop—plunk!—with that dry cough of Diesels. The wind had shifted to the northwest. If only the floes would keep away!

Alarm! Slim had sounded three fathoms, then two-and-a-half. Hard-a-starboard! All day we’d been drudging to find shallower water, and now it was too shallow. And still no land in sight.

We had to keep sounding. . . . The rope was killing my hands; the icy water was flowing into my boots. Finally Slim relieved me. I went down to the messroom to make myself eggs and coffee. I was dead on my feet (I had taken only seven hours of rest in four days), but I didn’t dare stretch out for fear of succumbing to fatigue. I lit a cigarette. Smoking was the best way to keep awake.

Land at last. We sailed into it, but very gingerly on account of the shallows. There it was, a mile and a half off. Was it Point Attigaruk or Cape Halkett? No way of knowing. The sounding line plunged. The floes were still there, but now we were sailing between them and the land.

The sun was having such difficulty rising that I wondered whether it would make it. The entire west was indigo blue. It looked as if everything had been stained by a giant octopus. The ice was still floating by. Here and there was a seal. . . . I was terribly sleepy.

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I finally slumped down. While I was out, the *Audrey* kept hitting into the floes. Whereupon she drifted toward the coast until she got to a point two fathoms deep. Before us, at the horizon, lay a stretch of flat land. It was Point Barrow. We had finally made it as a result of just drifting!

We advanced cautiously, for we could see sandbanks under the water. The cape was shaping up. We could make out some bumps on the ground. Probably native huts. . . . It was very chilly. Flocks of eider ducks were skimming along the water. A bay. . . . The Two decided to drop anchor, if only to inspect the motors. We had just started to enter the narrows leading into it, when we heard a scraping under the hull. The *Audrey* was immobilized. Back full! A yellowish mud rose up about us. We were aground! We dropped the sounding line. It didn’t surge an inch. We were stuck, all right!

After a quarter of an hour of struggling, to the accompaniment of a volley of oaths, the *Audrey* finally got loose. Immediately we let down a boat in order to inspect the channel. Then we got started again. Three fathoms, then five—all right! We drew in a bit more so as to be sheltered from the wind, and then we cast anchor. It was 4 p.m. “Let’s have a bite!” said Art, who didn’t care a hoot about being at the northernmost point of America.

There we were in the messroom. We didn’t feel the least bit heroic. The *Kon-Tiki* was really something! Bearded men on a raft, struggling against the unleashed elements, surrounded by fish whose size throws the setting into gigantic relief—that’s what I call an epic! But we? Tramps on a dirt road, that’s what we were. Art, munching porridge with his toothless jaws. Slim, looking like a smoked herring.
As for me, I was so depressed by the whole adventure that I wanted to set foot on land, if only for an hour or two.

I jumped into the boat. Just as I was about to pull off, Art’s head leaned over the side of the ship. “You’ll always be able to say that you went rowing at Point Barrow!” he jeered. I didn’t answer. I kicked off furiously and pulled for land.

On the shore was a thin strip of sand strewn with whale-bones. I hitched the boat to one of them, grabbed my camera and jumped ashore. Just having firm land beneath my feet was enough to make me feel better.

Plovers were foraging busily at the edge of the water. I approached them within about three yards. I had been amazed time and again at the absence of fear among birds of the North. Why do these species go so far north? They come from the very south of Canada, from Mexico, sometimes even farther. Is it to build their nests in peace? But only about 125 miles north of Edmonton there’s not a living soul. Then why? . . .

Why does the hummingbird fly as far as the Yukon? It’s a fantastic trip for a bird hardly bigger than a butterfly. But that’s not all. The Arctic tern is said to make a round trip from the Antarctic to the Arctic every year. What reason can there be for these astonishing flights? Neither the need for food nor the quest for a better climate is a valid explanation. In King William Land, I once saw white foxes go south while the island abounded in lemmings, which is what they chiefly live on. One fine morning they all took off. So imperative was the call, that not a single one turned off, not even for a few yards, to sniff around the traps for the smell of rotten fish, which is usually irresistible.
As soon as they got their bearings, they moved in a beeline as if they were being pulled by a thread.

An Indian from the Great Slave Lake once said to me, “Do you see the space between my tent and the next one? That’s where the caribou went by. I shot at them from my tent. I kept shooting so long that I finally got tired and fell asleep. When I awoke, they were still going by. So I started shooting again.”

What explanation is there for this absence of fear which is found only in the Great North? In the spring, I’ve seen ptarmigans fly up to me and parade by my feet with their comical little march. As for the water birds, except for the swans, they let you approach them so easily that I very soon abandoned my rifle for my camera. It was the same with the plovers. When they heard the click, off they flew, lightly and gracefully, only to land a few yards away. The momentary flutter gave way without transition to the most perfect tranquillity, and they began to forage again.

While I was fiddling with the camera, I caught sight of some Eskimos observing me away off. I went up to them and talked to them in my eastern language, which they understood. “Come to our homes,” they said. “The white men’s houses are a few miles away, but we’re nearby.”

It was a wretched-looking settlement of turf huts propped up by whale ribs. Other whale ribs, stuck into the ground, were used for drying fish. About twenty raggedy individuals appeared. They smiled, but they were painful to look at. It had been a bad year, they said. The ice had drifted too far out, and so it had been difficult to get at the walruses, which were their chief article of diet.

As we chatted, I noticed a pipe that was a triumph of
Eskimo ingenuity. The bowl was of soft-stone; the bit was a walrus tooth that had been split in two and hollowed out in the middle; the two parts were joined by a spiral-shaped copper stem.

Speaking of ingenuity, that reminds me of a trick of the Eskimos with whom I had lived. In order to get rid of the wolves without hunting them, they used to take the wishbone of a big bird, squeeze the two branches together in a piece of meat, tie the two together and let them freeze. Then they would remove the attachment and put the meat into the tundra. The wolf would find it and eat it. No sooner was it in his throat than the wishbone would expand and strangle him.

I bought the pipe and a few other objects. Then I noticed that it was time to get back to the Audrey. The Two might have needed the boat.

The Inuit escorted me. Out of politeness, and also because I owed them tobacco in exchange for the objects I had bought. They put an umiak into the water, and there they were, paddling along at top speed. These umiaks were another one of their ingenious constructions. The rudder was a simple paddle held by a man standing in the rear. And how light the boats were, and solid!

We were arriving in triumph. But the triumph didn’t last. “We’ve been waiting for you,” said Slim. “We’re starting.” The Two had a glum look. One of the motors was definitely off. Bad circulation, it seemed. There was only one left to do the 1,000 miles to Dutch Harbor.

Four miles away, we saw a boat take off from the coast.

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An open boat for eight to ten persons made of the skins of big seals sewn together, without any other ribbing.
and come toward us. Probably the police, since the white post was nearby. We brought the ship to. The boat was packed, but with natives only. They had barely time to ask us—in pidgin English and with lots of gestures—whether we had seen any walruses, than Slim, who was furious at having stopped for "monkeys," got the ship under way again. The Eskimos just looked and scowled. Try to understand anything about white men!

We streamed the log. Four and a half knots an hour. Things looked promising!

It was 8:30 p.m. when we found ourselves due north of Point Barrow. All we could see of the post was a tower rising up from the dark land. As for the cape, it was just a promontory that stopped short. It really looked like the end of the world, in every sense of the word. No other place was so dreary, or had such a low sky. That was the outermost point of the American continent, the northern counterpart of Cape Horn. But Cape Horn has its legend, its glamor. The mere name resounds like a conch in the wind, the kind with which sailors of old used to blow a blast to warn each other. How many writers have sung its fame! It was the glorious route of all the old-time windjammers that carried their Norwegian wood to Chili and Valparaiso and brought back nitrates. The rounding of Cape Horn was the supreme test. It meant coming to grips with the sea at its most violent. The rounding of the Horn confers a title of nobility. And I know a club in Paris that gives a bang-up cocktail party every year for all those who have done it. But there is no glory in having rounded Cape Barrow. No toast will ever be offered you if you say you've done it. At most, your statement will be received with a
polite silence. The reason is that Cape Barrow leads nowhere. It leads to the ice barrier, in other words, into a blind alley. Only a whaler will take it, or a coast guard on duty, cursing the thankless job that's been assigned him.

Nevertheless, I'd have liked to set foot on it, if only for the sake of the record. But the mood of the Two held me back at the last minute. And we moved on.
II
To those who've been there, Point Barrow is the place to keep away from, the "doldrums" of the Great North. If ever I had to punish anybody, I'd say to him, "Get yourself a boat and then round the north coast of Alaska, without instruments and without help. Then maybe you'll feel better!"

We'd been at sea for twenty-two days. I had been hoping that after Barrow it would be easier going, the way you feel relieved when you've reached the top of a hill after a tough climb and see the other side. We had, to be sure, changed zones in changing from an east-west to a northeast-southwest course. But all we had done was swap bad for worse. For though the ice had left us, we were now caught in mist. And the sea wasn't any the less calm. We were shaken by the same short waves.

In the messroom, Watson asked me point-blank, "How does the coffee taste to you?"

"As usual."

"Ah!!!"

Putting his false teeth on had got him irritated. For him, too, life had a somewhat bitter taste that morning.

I can't say it was charming for any of us. The prospect of
doing a thousand miles at an average speed of five knots wasn’t in the least thrilling. Nor was life on board, either. I thought of how picturesque some of my voyages had been. Of those Tahitian sailings on a decrepit schooner, loaded to capacity with the most heterogeneous cargo, Tahitian pigs that were attached by their paws on the upper deck because of the rough sea, natives wearing loincloths, a missionary with his helmet. And the pigs howled shrilly while the Tahitians sang softly in the night, and the missionary, sweating in his headgear, mumbled his prayers.

I thought of that cargo boat on which the crossing of the Equator had stirred up a wave of madness and created the most fantastic rumors among the passengers. “You know what I’ve just heard? The stuffing box of the propeller has come off. We’re drifting! . . . My God! We’re going to die of thirst! . . . And a member of the crew has gone crazy. They’ve locked him up in the hold. I heard him screaming.”

There was also the steamer on its way to Marseilles from Indo-China with a cargo of tired civil servants and their skinny, shrewish wives, all reeking of boredom and frustration. Until the moment the ship stopped at Port Said and a young and pretty passenger came on board. And the woman’s presence suddenly transformed the ship and awoke the males—not only the passengers, but the whole crew and even the scullions. If she happened to be on the portside, everyone else headed for it, so that the boat would begin to list. The frustration was followed, without transition, by an insufferable odor of rut!

Then there’s the more brutal case of the escaped convict who, in the teeth of the Venezuelan authorities, was taken
on board a French ship dying—because the poor devil wanted to die on a ship flying the tricolor. The ship’s doctor, who had been exceptionally attentive to him, asked him at the last moment, “I’d like to make a request of you!”

“Go right ahead, doctor.”

“This is it. When you die, I’ll have to make an autopsy. It’s regulations. That means I’ll have to remove your inner organs. Would you mind if I used them to bait sharks? I’m mad about fishing.”

“If a little thing like that’ll make you happy . . .” replied the old thug.

And the doctor shook his hand warmly.

But I’ll tell you what we were doing on the eighteenth of August in the Year of Grace 1939. We were shivering! In the messroom, we were soaked through and through by the humidity. “We’re going to have to get used to the cold!” For men of the Great North that was quite ironic.

But in the Arctic I hadn’t shivered a single time all winter long. To be sure, I froze, and at the most unexpected moment. As we were speeding along the trail, my Eskimo companion signaled that something was happening to me. Without my realizing it, one whole side of my face had become as white as wax. I immediately had to stop and rub the frozen part gently with my finger tips and continue the operation alternately with one hand and then the other—lest they freeze, too—until the circulation started again. In short, I was freezing, dry as I was! Not outside but inside. In bitter weather, I would even feel my spinal column chilling. But as for humidity—none! It was as dry up there

"It is commonly said that the frozen part should be rubbed with snow. I never saw this done in the North."
as in Arizona and therefore extremely healthful. It's the humidity that pierces you and makes you shiver, that spreads illness. When the winter is damp, the doctors rub their hands and think to themselves, "It'll be a good year!"

In New York, I never stop coughing. The same thing always happens to men of the Great North if they return to the City. They're sure to fall ill. My cough begins around the end of October and doesn't let up until March. Whereas up North, I hadn't had a single cold all winter.

After Point Barrow, our navigating by sight came to an end. Owing to the increasing distance from the Magnetic Pole, our compass began to act normal again. We had headed for the first cape marked on the map: Cape Franklin. In that way, without getting too far from the coast—so as not to get lost—we would gain time.

But that's where the difficulties began! In order to set the course, I had to confer with Slim. As I've said, when Slim wasn't relieving Art in the engine room, he shared the wheel with me. I therefore needed his consent.

I let him study the map and make his calculations, which he did with the utmost seriousness.

"What do you get?" I finally asked.

"Two hundred seventeen and a half."

The exactness was particularly funny because in setting the course we simply placed the parallel rulers in the desired direction and then walked them up like a pair of stilts to the compass card. We then read the angle and deducted the approximate variation. But with Slim, who was rather unversed in such matters, the operation took on trigonometric aspects. I let him work things out and, when he had finished, bent over the map myself.
"That's funny!" I said. "I don't get the same figure. No-
where near it!"

"Ah!" (a bit huffily). "And what do you get?"

I pretended to check my calculations.

"Two hundred thirteen and a half!"

I was delighted with the game because he always bit. But
Slim was humorless and so we got into a long argument. It
took a good twenty minutes to straighten the thing out. I
yielded three points. Slim, with ill grace, gave up one and a
half. And we ended by adopting an intermediate course.

But that didn't get us much farther. For we were still
catched in the mist. And the mist took on every possible
form. Sometimes it was cotton that was so thick that we
couldn't see a thing at sea, at times not even the fore part of
our own ship. We would then have the impression, not that
the curtain of mist had thickened, but that our sight had
grown dim and that we were blind men always about to
bang into something. At times, the mist became a kind of
practical joker. It would settle on the left, or the right, in
solid layers which transformed the setting. It would stretch
a curtain along the coast and produce the same effect as
small white clouds on the horizon, which would dissolve
just as we approached, leaving before us only the empti-
ness of the sea. But the joker would have already planted
his sets elsewhere. And there we stood, frightened out of
our wits. We would hurriedly tack, only to return to the
same course ten minutes later. We were being forced into
a grotesque pantomime. And so irritation was added to our
feeling of impotence. Navigating under such circumstances

\[^{\text{9}}\text{It clung to us, except for an occasional break, as far as the Aleu-} \]

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required neither seamanship nor courage. It was a simple
test of nerves. If only we could just “get out”! But we
didn’t dare, because of the ice. And as for land, only the
sounding line could indicate how close it was, since it re-
mained invisible.

We therefore took soundings every half hour—when we
weren’t at it for three and four hours at a stretch. We were
just an arm swinging the pendulum. As a result of being
drowned in the mist, we were turning into mist ourselves.
Our clothes were like a wrapping of fog.

We hadn’t seen land since Cape Barrow. I was beginning
to worry. Probably Watson was, too. He came up and
sniffed the air.

“Well, what do you think?”

“I think,” I answered, “that if this keeps up, we’ll land in
Siberia.”

I felt that we were going dangerously far west. It was
Slim’s fault. He was always wanting to “sail out,” for the
sake of prudence. It was no use my correcting the course
when I was at the wheel because he always “set it back”
when he took over. But he must have thought that I was
overdoing things, too, with my ideas of “going in.” That
gives you an idea of our teamwork. There wasn’t any open
hostility but rather a constant undercurrent of mistrust.

People say that mist has a calming effect. But it didn’t in
my case. It exhausted me and set my nerves on edge with
its craftiness and impalpable movement. There was noth-
ing to be done about it. You can’t fight fog. You have to
grit your teeth and bear it. What the blizzard had failed to
do—probably because I was used to it—the mist succeeded
in doing. It aroused animosity in me. I was ready to explode.
I was irritated with the world in general and every single object in particular, with the cigarette that was always going out, with the loose board on deck, with the piece of rag over which I was constantly tripping. I was irritated with the Two, as if they were responsible for these things. In short, I was sick. I was ready to scratch and bite at the drop of a hat. If I controlled myself, it was the way animals do when they start circling around each other without daring to get too close lest they start a fight, which they fear even though they’re in the process of picking one.

I had had the same reaction some months before, in the presence of Paddy Gibson when I was forced to remain with him at the King William Land post because my fingers were frozen. This charming man has since died, and I can only beg pardon of his memory. But the fact is that his finickiness and his mechanical gestures, which he repeated every day, at the same hour and in the same order, had brought me to a pitch of exasperation that his imperturbability only aggravated. Where I had expected romanticism, I found a bourgeois. And he went on with his routine as if he noticed nothing.

Isn’t this reaction common to many people who remain face to face with each other in a state of confinement, unable to get away? I have seen conflicts of this kind in the North. I have seen them among lighthouse keepers, who were hastily relieved of their duties before they got into trouble. I have seen it between friends who had gone off gaily on a long trip. I remember particularly the case of the Spanish doctor who had left Europe with a friend on a small cutter and who landed alone on one of the Virgin Islands, having killed his friend on the way. He was found
wandering about the beach, half-naked and muttering incomprehensible words. People concocted all kinds of romantic theories about what had happened, one of them to the effect that the doctor's friend was his wife's lover and that the husband had known it, and that he had waited until they were in the Atlantic before having matters out with him. . . .

But isn't life simpler than that? Don't we all know how hard it is to remain in anyone's presence for too long a time? Does this mean that human beings are so vicious? I don't know, and I'd like those who know more about psychology than I do to explain this to me. But I do know that what sets people at odds with each other most often is not big things but little ones, the peculiarities, the everyday gestures whose repetition is at first irritating and then unbearable and finally hateful. How many couples have broken up because the husband whistled in his bath or was constantly leaving his dirty shaving brush on the shelf without drying it. Little things like that can drive people to murder. Explain it how you will!

One day, just in order to do something, I padded a stool with an old sack and a moosehide so as to be seated more comfortably. Art watched me.

"Would you like an armchair?"

"Meanwhile," I answered in a fury, "I'll use my own furniture."

At the rate we were moving, it would take us more than a month to get to Vancouver, if we ever got there. But what could we do? We simply had to accept the situation. We decided to take regular watches: six hours on duty, three hours of sleep, and so on. For once we were all able
to agree. It was a matter of prudence, in view of the state of our relations, though "relations" is hardly the word. The mere thought of their behavior drove me wild. I was so frustrated and humiliated by the situation—which I had not only been unable to improve but had allowed to grow worse—that it maddened me. "What am I to them?" I asked myself. A friend? Of course not! A neighbor? Not even that! There wasn't even the same relationship between us as there is between next-door neighbors who as a result of passing each other on the stairs finally exchange a few words: "Good evening, Mr. Paul." And you know that Mr. Paul is a retired bachelor who has a small pension and lumbago. And if you haven't seen him for two days, you start worrying and you knock at his door to see whether he's not ill in bed, whether he doesn't need something.

Here the only kind of exchange was: "Hold on to the wheel a minute," or "Wake me at midnight." I wasn't annoyed with them for being silent, for there are silences that are meaningful and even more eloquent than conversation. Friends can remain silent at each other's side for hours without thereby ceasing to speak. The same with lovers. Which means simply that words are inadequate for expressing the deeper thoughts and that true conversation often begins where words end, with silence. But in the case of the Two, it wasn't a matter of silence, but of muteness. It was the wall behind which the man who doesn't want to talk takes refuge. It was something shut in and sullen, from which nothing emanated. I didn't interest them. My life didn't interest them. Never once did either of them ask me the slightest question about my past.

I might even say that they were suspicious of it. Once
when Art saw me noting the day’s little incidents in my notebook, he said, “Are you putting down all that crap?” Not only was the word full of contempt, but the tone expressed the mistrust people feel toward those who mingle in other people’s affairs. The rule of the North was “mind your own business.” Could it be that I was transgressing it? Maybe the word ethnographer was just an alibi, a front. In the isolated and protected world of the Arctic, every outsider is suspect. Fear prevails everywhere; fear of the journalist who might tell too much; fear of the scientist who, in exchange for his explorer’s license, without which he may not proceed, is expected to make a little report, at the end of his trip, to the government in Ottawa; fear of the foreigner who comes nosing around in Canadian affairs.

It was for one or another of these reasons—or maybe for all of them—that I was kept at a distance. Only one thing bound us, and that was danger. Only the threat of the sea brought us together. But as soon as the sea fell, as soon as the danger moved off, I became the outsider again.

Which didn’t prevent me from being curious. Because a voyage of that kind gives you time to muse and think. And besides, the barrier that the Two erected between themselves and me was a challenge. So my imagination was busy all the time. . . .

For example, how would Slim, who had never been known to live with a woman up North, behave in the arms of a female? It tickled me to imagine it. And how did Art act when he was alone with his wife? He never bothered about her when there was a storm. He never went to see her the time she was sick and alone all day in the after-cabin. When he saw her reappear and walk unsteadily to
the kitchen, he followed her with his eyes. But his face (which I was watching) was without expression. At meal-
time, he went down to the mess room, took his seat and said, “Well, woman, what about it?”

Art was brutal, not in appearance—his body was rather soft and round—but internally. His brutality was due to his notions about men and life. The occasional reflections he let fall and his continual sarcasms were sufficient proof. Something inside him had hardened. Life, to him, was not an old bitch—which would have implied some lingering sentimentality—but “a dirty bitch.” If I had fallen into the water, he’d have jumped in after me—that was part of his moral code. He would have saved me, would have mumbled some such thing as “Goddamn fool” and that would have been all. At the table, he would push the food toward me—feeding me well was also part of the code—but if I said no, he wouldn’t worry about why I had no appetite. He would pull the platter back for another helping. “Anything else?” he asked his wife. And when, somewhat anxiously, she said no, he snapped back: “Coffee!” in a tone that allowed neither reply nor discussion. But what reply was there to make to a man like that? You obeyed, or else you picked up an ax.

Art allowed no weakness. Had I got sick, I’d have read on his face: “What’s he doing here, if he can’t take it?” When Slim was injured, Art didn’t conceal his ill humor. Nevertheless, they had been friends for ten years. But that’s how Art was built. And he was just as tough with himself. When he got seasick, he felt the same contempt for his stomach because it had let him down.

No doubt but that the Arctic had had something to do
with it. It’s all right for the person sitting by the fire in his slippers and reading about the Great North to be thrilled by the suffering. But the man who’s “in it” hates suffering. I remember when I was lost in a blizzard, just a few yards from camp, declaiming to myself, “Why’d you ever pick a spot like this to die in, you damned fool!” And I can still hear the striking remark of the missionary bishop just before I left: “It’s not that you’ll be cold. You’ll be enclosed in the cold. There’ll be a wall of coldness all about you. And it’ll be a wall without a door!” I grant that, when their sufferings are behind them, some men look back to them with a certain satisfaction, because their trials showed what they were really made of. But even this is true only for idealists. Art was far from any such state of mind. If he spent fifteen years in the North, it was because that was where he earned his living, and if ever you’d spoken to him of the “Great White Silence,” all you’d have got was sarcasm. To him, the North had been just a brutal stake, a constant menace. Everything and everyone up there was an enemy, until there was proof of the contrary, a proof which was never final.

He would never give you the benefit of the doubt. At times I would be alone below with Tiny while she was preparing the meal. I would watch her from my berth with a mixture of sympathy and pity, for there was something moving about this submissive creature, who was constantly on the alert. I would venture some such words as “miserable weather, isn’t it?” which she had orders not to answer, except with a smile.

When I got back on deck, Art would look at me with a cold, searching gaze. “Making a play for my wife!” That
was what the gaze meant. What was there to say? She was
the only creature on board with whom I could exchange
sympathy. Besides, I felt I had a right to. But the threat was
always there. It hung over me throughout the voyage.
After we disembarked at Vancouver, I once met Art in the
street and invited him for a drink. He remained silent,
which proved that he still had his doubts.

In spite of that I was glad that he was on board. Because
of his stolidity. Art was a force. Against the storm, against
the hard blows of life. If there was any person that life
wouldn’t catch unaware, it was he. He had hardened, that
was all. If ever he indulged in a reminiscence, or even a con-
fidence, that was no reason to think that the ice was broken.
It never was with him. Art no longer believed in Man. He
believed only in deeds. But perhaps I saw only the dark side³ and was unable to make out the real face behind the
appearances. The bishop of the Windwards, who knew
something about men, had a very high opinion of him.

Slim was altogether different. He wanted to be tough,
but his toughness was only skin-deep. I’d swear it was. Art
had toughened in the North, but Slim had dried out, which
is not the same thing. His skin had dried just as certain fox-
skins, which are laid on a form, dry and toughen. But be-
hind this dryness was a gentle soul, a man who would have
liked to be outgoing but didn’t know how to go about it.

Art said what he thought, without shyness and in the
crudest terms. But not Slim. This big lean chap would feel

³If the portrait I’ve sketched of these two men is incorrect or un-
just, I hope they won’t hold it against me. They never gave me a
chance to judge them better. And though I remember them as
eminently solid chaps—an essential quality, after all, on a voyage
of that sort—I’m completely ignorant of what they felt about me.
a constraint in his shoulders, and to shake off his embarrassment would quickly reach out for the tobacco jar and roll a cigarette, or else he would leave the wheelhouse. Art was sardonic, but not he. There wasn't a bit of cynicism in his make-up. I'm even inclined to say that there was something naïve about him, almost romantic. Though he was tough and at times cutting, it was owing to his sense of duty, which was alert to the slightest warning. If he did occasionally bark at me, he did so without meanness, like a sergeant who bawls a man out in front of the captain only to offer him a cigarette a minute later. I'm sure that if he were away from Art, with someone who knew how to handle him, he'd soften up. But he was careful not to. I also felt at times that he had a tendency to be jolly. But he couldn't laugh. The dryness of his skin made it impossible.

Those were the men with whom I found myself, though I had no dealings with them. Not that I tried to have any. A number of times, I brought the conversation around to the trenches in the war, or to the life of a trapper in the Great North. I had my labor for my pains. Their mistrust was like that of Eskimo dogs whom nothing can wheedle. I didn't insist. If the sea was rough when Slim came to relieve me, I simply waited until he had the wheel in his hands. Then I would go to sleep.

As a result of drifting like that through a formless world, a world made up of disappointment and deception, I sank into an odd state of mind. I began to doubt the reality of everything about me. Was Alaska really where the map-makers situated it? Was that sea a real sea? Was the boat real? Were the men?

There were times when I wondered whether I wasn't
dreaming. The adventure in which I was plunged hadn’t
the atmosphere of a Poe story, where the unreal takes on a
fantastic reality, but rather the opposite. Here it was reality
that seemed to be slowly losing its substance and dissolving.
We, too, were dissolving little by little. Though we had
been men of flesh and blood at the start, we had become
ghosts (the boat was now a mere skeleton dragging along
beneath the moon. And we were undertaker’s mutes accom-
panying the body) and then shadows. Before long, the
shadows themselves would dissipate if this went on. Noth-
ing would remain on the sea.

I rubbed my nose to try to bring myself back to reality.
What day of the week was it, what was the date? Devil
take me if I knew! I strained to remember: I had left Cop-
permine on July 28; how many days had gone by since?
Not even the word “day” had meaning any more. Time
was an entirely subjective affair. Time was such that whole
days could go by without leaving a trace, whereas other
moments . . . I began to laugh. To think that there are
computers of time who divide it into days and hours of
equal duration, as if the minute of an idle man has the same
value as that of a man condemned to death! If anyone had
come up to me and said that we’d been drifting through
the mist for only a few days, nosing along the water and
sniffing like dogs, I’d have laughed at him and said, “We’ve
always been here!” Like convicts who can no longer imag-
ine having ever been anything else. Yet I had been some-
thing else! I had run through the snow; I had been almost
an Eskimo. But that had been just a passing phase, like all
the rest. My life was not a sequence of events but a series
of transmutations. It was not a life that I had lived but

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successive lives, among which I could see no connection. What relation was there between the soldier and the artist? Between the student at the School of Fine Arts and the president of a British firm in Manchester? Between the Parisian intellectual and the igloo dweller? Between the shy and gentle child I had been, not at all cut out for hardship, and the life I was living then? I'd like to know. No one can make me believe that they're part of the same life. Through all these ins and outs, all that remains is my body, which, in some odd way, is still its old self, and that face of mine which I can't stand. For though other men may be satisfied with their appearance, I, for my part, am definitely and highly disgusted by mine, and having to look at myself in the mirror has always repelled me. And now. . . . Not only were we old—we had aged ten years in a month—but as a result of smoking endless cigarettes to keep awake, our mouths were parched and twisted. And we had wrinkles almost everywhere. And the rims of our eyes were red. We had the haggard look of convicts. We were convicts of the mist!

Our one motor was sputtering. Its water feeder didn't work well in heavy weather. . . . And still no land in sight! We passed—without seeing them—Cape Franklin, Cape Belcher and Icy Cape. One of these days, I said to myself, I'll write a story about "the boat that wasn't going anywhere." Whose motor bangs, whose pump coughs. The members of the crew play cards to kill time and fill the forecastle with their cigarette butts. To keep warm, they burn whatever they can lay their hands on. They no longer wash or shave, since they're not going anywhere. They play poker. Every month, they scrupulously settle accounts
among themselves. There’s no telling how long this goes on, for they’ve lost all sense of time. Sometimes they quarrel. And then, realizing that this kind of thing isn’t worth sacrificing a good game of cards for, they make up. One day, while playing as usual, they hear a noise outside. They raise their heads. Nearby is a ship which is hailing them through its megaphone:

“Do you need any help?”

Help? They look at each other. They had completely forgotten that they were at sea!

And still that choppy sea which was wearing us out. Slim lay sprawled in his bunk, with one foot dangling. Art would come up every now and then from the engine room, lean at the porthole with an air of supreme boredom and then go down again. I wanted to sleep but couldn’t. Was it nervousness or overfatigue? I didn’t know, but my insides felt knotted. As for the Audrey, when she wasn’t pitching, she was rolling, with a constant creaking of her shaft. And besides, she stank. Not only of fuel oil, the barrels of which were stacked on the afterdeck, but also of wet dog. She was really an old slut. I was beginning to think that Art was right in saying that the only way to handle her when she started acting up was to swear at her. Because she did act up. The day before, at dawn, when I had been at the helm, I noticed right up against the porthole a thick smoke which was immediately followed by little black things flying in all directions like bats. . . .

Fire! The idea has always haunted me. Fire at sea seems to me the most ghastly kind of death. . . . I touched Art’s shoulder. He turned around. He grabbed Slim’s leg as if
he'd touched a live wire. "Hurry up!" And he tore down the stairs to the engine room. Slim jumped up like a jack-in-the-box—I've got to give them their due: they could move fast when they had to—and dashed to deck. The motors stopped. There was the *Audrey* dancing with the waves. The next moment, I hear a loud rush of water. I left the wheel to see what was happening. Slim was on the roof playing a hose over the exhaust pipe, from which a torrent of flame was shooting. It was like a blaze in a fireplace (I've said that the *Audrey* was a shanty). After a quarter of an hour of tragicomic tussling, the fire was finally extinguished.  

Where were we with all that? According to the log, and even taking into account the zigzags, we should have reached Cape Lisburne. But nothing was in sight yet. The only indication that land wasn't far off was a guillemot. It had been circling about the boat for several hours, as if looking for a place to perch. It had a white belly and the head of a parrot and flew with quick little flaps of its short wings.

The waves were followed by a swell, the biggest we had had so far. It was coming from three-quarters aft and was jostling the *Audrey*, which was perched on the water like a duck. What a tub! A damned old rumrunner . . . without even a drop of rum on board.

Suddenly land appeared where we weren't expecting it. An 800-foot promontory. It must have been Cape Lisburne, but there was no way of being sure. Our map—which had been made in 1854—gave it a certain profile from a particular angle. But we had gone beyond this angle, and it looked like

"This happened a number of times during the voyage."
quite different to us. As it pivoted before our eyes like a tailor’s dummy on its base, it kept changing shape. First it had two humps, then three; then it became a frustum of a fissured cone. Still and all, it could only have been Lisburne.

We had hardly rounded it when the sea grew calm. Darkness came on. Amazing how much earlier it got dark from one day to the next. Usually, going south means going toward the light. For us who had left the twenty-four hour sun behind, it was the contrary. Slow as our progress was, it nevertheless gave us an impression of a plunge into darkness.

At night, we were no longer able to distinguish anything at sea. Watson had just lit the riding lights for the first time since our departure. This act was weighty with meaning. It marked the transition from one world to the other. Until then, we had been free, totally free. In the Arctic, everyone can build his lodging wherever he pleases. Could you possibly imagine a one-way street up there? Or a motorcycle cop with goggles reminding you that the speed limit for a sled is three miles an hour? Or a red light that makes you stop your dogs in the empty immensity? Or a tax collector coming in a parka, with his big ledger tied to his sled, to check the amount of business you’ve done? Thank God, people up there don’t have to worry about that kind of thing. But Watson’s act had just brought us back to the world of rules and regulations. The mere idea sent a shiver up my back. Did returning to civilization mean losing both Freedom and Light? The sensation was that of a heavy paw coming down on us through the empty spaces.

How often had I had the same feeling. For example, at the end of a stay among the natives of the Pacific when I
had the misfortune of arriving at some administrative center. The thing that affected me most was not the sordidness of the corrugated iron roofs or the vulgar air of the slipshod whites who watched me approach, but rather the feeling of seeing my freedom torn away from me the very moment I cast anchor. Heavy-footed, glum-looking officials came on board. And everything changed. Instead of the light loincloth, I felt I was wearing the strait jacket of the Law. Why the Law? There had been no need of it where I was coming from. Could it be that civilized men couldn’t be honest without it? This question and lots of others shot through my mind. But I hadn’t time to think before the police were there. Without answering our greeting, they scrutinized our papers as if our identity were false a priori. Meanwhile, the customs officers were rummaging around, poking their big dirty fingers everywhere and upsetting everything. And the less they found, the more they insisted. A boat coming from the islands must surely be carrying merchandise. And I, who had become very candid as a result of months among simple creatures, was now suspect. What? Nothing on board? Could I possibly be honest? It was possible—I looked dumb enough. But if only to justify their wages, they kept searching about until there was nowhere else to look. They finally left, as if to say: “All right this time. But we’ve got our eye on you.”

This is the welcome that the man who comes from far off gets from the modern world. And as a result of being regarded in advance as a delinquent, it occurs to him that it might be a good idea to become one. I’ve seen honest people who wouldn’t have dreamed of cheating customs of a cent so outraged by the way they were humiliated when they

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had to pass a frontier that they swore that the next time they’d smuggle something in.

One day in New York, swept by a wave of nostalgia for France, I decided to make a little pilgrimage to the wreck of the *Normandie*, which was lying on its side at Pier 88. I left my taxi and approached on foot. I was just about there when I heard a galloping behind me. I had barely time to turn around before a mounted policeman was on top of me. Instead of saying, “Move along, please. This is a restricted area,” which would have tickled my sense of humor, since there were thousands of cars driving past the wreck, what he did say, threateningly, was, “Hey, you! Are you a suspicious character?” I was tempted to laugh, and also tempted to answer: “Not so far as I know! But if you don’t stop horsing around me, you may turn me into one!”

This is just to explain what my state of mind was when I got back to my hole at four in the morning.

Around eight, I felt myself being shaken in my sleep. “We drop anchor in a quarter of an hour!”

I didn’t dare believe it. It had been such a long time! Then I rushed to the deck. There in front of us, on the broadside, was a thin strip of land stretching westward: Point Hope. Two clusters could be made out. Halfway from the extremity, bungalows; and then, at the very end, huts. The sounding line showed ten fathoms, then eight. We stopped the motor so that the *Audrey* could go along on her own momentum and we cast anchor a half mile from shore at six fathoms.

Art and Slim went down to sleep. What an absence of curiosity! I couldn’t wait to get away from the ship. What
I needed was land under my feet, not that oscillating floor that rose up one moment and dropped the next, but a fixed ground, with a horizon that wasn’t always seesawing up and down, in short, real land. I put the jolly-boat into the water and pulled for land. Big breakers were crashing into the long straight beach. My boat had hardly got up on the sand when it was pulled back by a wave. And I had no grapnel. Finally I managed to get it out of the water. I left it on shore and walked to the nearest cottage. It was nine o’clock.

I knocked at the door. No answer. I walked around it. The main entrance was on the other side. A handsome copper plaque on a varnished (!) oak door informed me that it was the home of the Reverend Harold K. And there was the Reverend in person, sleek and freshly shaved. I gave my name.

“What?” he said, as if sheltered by a thick mattress. “Di Pounce? When did you arrive? At eight o’clock? As a matter of fact, I thought I saw . . . And what can I do for you, my good man?”

His voice flowed like syrup. I stopped short for fear of getting stuck in it.

“We’d like to have some fresh water.”

“Yes, I see . . . Er . . . the trouble”—again the syrup—“is that today is Sunday.”

A group of natives came up.

“Here’s the committee that has come to welcome you. Greetings, my friends! This is Mr. Di Pounce. Mr. Di Pounce would like . . .”

I listened to the sugary voice. I looked at the smooth, well-starched collar, at the fine cloth of the suit. I am a
Catholic. For me, the priest's frock is associated with poverty. The sight of a representative of God, prosperous looking, well dressed, smelling of eau de Cologne—unless it were After Shaving Lotion—rather took the wind out of me. The Pater Noster stuck in the middle of my throat.

A thousand memories came back to me, a thousand images rose up. I remembered the cargo boat on its way from Noumea to Marseilles in 1934. Father Bochut was on it, a big devil of a man with an enormous nose—a big piece of bone in the middle of his face—and feet in proportion that wore canalboats from the First World War. He was on his way back to his native region, the Drôme, a visit which would probably be the only one of his entire career. This visit, which missionaries are allowed after twenty years or more in a faraway place, is an Event. They start thinking about it and living on it long in advance. They'll be seeing their old mother who sits down once a year to pen a letter. They'll be seeing the steeple of their childhood, and the valley that's already so far away in their memory. But after three days at home, they begin to hear the call of the bush. They're in haste to leave, knowing full well that they'll never be back. That was probably what Father Bochut was thinking of, for he didn't say a word. He would leave the dining room before anyone else and settle down at the foot of the stairs, under a green plant. And there he would stay, lost in his dreams and puffing at his pipe. Or rather chewing it, for he hadn't any tobacco. Or for that matter any money, not a blessed sou. He was going to see his sister, the only surviving member of the family—at least, he thought she was still alive. He was planning to walk from Marseilles! We were moved by his

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plight, and decided to take up a collection—a rather lean one, about 200 francs, if my memory is correct—which the captain was requested to give to the priest as tactfully as possible.

Father Bochut held the money in his palm. "That's good," he said simply. "I'll give it to my bishop!"

"No!" said the captain, "it's for you, for your railroad ticket."

In vain did he storm. But there was no way of getting the priest to promise that once he got to Marseilles he wouldn't turn the money over to his superior.

I also thought of Father Henry, who lived like a hermit in the Arctic, not in an igloo, which would have been relatively warm, but underground, in an icehouse for seals propped up by a few rafters. He hardly ate. He had sacrificed even his pipe. The only ones who attended his mass were some frozen seals that stood against the snow walls looking like consecrated saints.

And, this time at the other end of the world, in the New Hebrides, I remembered Father Bancarel, whom I had found in Vao, dying of fever in the jungle. He, too, was a peasant, but somewhat gruff, with a face bent a bit to the side like the statues of the Middle Ages. At the age of forty, he looked like an old man. "Those who saw me go off—I was just a whippersnapper at the time—said, 'He won't live long in the Hebrides.' The first twenty years, I was sick. Now I'm better, except for the fevers."

He got up and staggered off to attend to some minor duty and then came back and dropped into his old wicker chair. He was groaning and panting, and his eyes were so eaten away that they were hardly visible in their orbits.
“This climate has an awful effect on the memory,” he said. “When I see Father Barthe, he reminds me of things we did together, and I no longer remember them!” He sat motionless for a moment, as if he were dead. Then, he began to talk again, trying to draw some odds and ends from his memory:

“Six of us had gone to try to pacify the cannibals, because the government didn’t dare. Natives who go in for witchcraft, who sell their wives for a few pig’s teeth and who immolate their children to idols. In the bush, you couldn’t see twenty yards ahead. It was months before I was able to sleep indoors. Then came the catastrophe. Ambrym broke loose and I had to flee. Father V., on the neighboring island, was crucified by the natives because he tried to oppose human sacrifice. Before we knew it, there were only two of us left. One of us was a giant of a man when he arrived. In three years, there was nothing left of him. He’s somewhere down there.” He made a vague gesture with his hands. “No, it doesn’t happen all by itself. In thirty-four years, I haven’t made a single genuine convert. But it’ll come. Nothing happens for a long time, and then one fine day, things come to a head.” He was shaken with spasms. That was the end of it. All that was left at my side was a vague shape facing the greenish darkness, facing the islands where everything is eaten. The native eat each other, the flies eat the trees, and fever eats the whites.

Whereas here, the unctuous Reverend Harold turned to me and said, “Just one small detail. Do you have the measles? Because we have it here. Oh, only two cases, but at Kotzebue Sound there are four hundred people down with it, and twenty-two have died.” Then, turning to the
natives: "That's right, isn’t it? Twenty-two?” And to me: “You’re not going north? Then it’s not so important!”

I went back to the Audrey with the news and the Reverend’s promise to provide us with fresh water . . . after divine services. The Two welcomed me sarcastically. No water, an archdeacon and measles! They’d remember Point Hope. If they hadn’t needed water, they’d have lifted anchor then and there, without anyone’s being able to tell whether it was the archdeacon or the measles they were running away from.

Then the wind shifted, and we had to seek shelter on the other side of the point. The sea was even choppier there. This time we dropped in ten fathom, and there was a swell. We had to wait for the sea to calm in order to get to land.

I finally went back. Again the waves tried to take my boat from me. The natives had to come to the rescue. Among them was the one who, that morning, had been the spokesman for the others. He told me that there was a public well. There was therefore no need to appeal to the condescension of the Reverend.

Point Hope has the most amazing graveyard I have ever seen. Turkish cemeteries—where families go on Sunday afternoon to play the phonograph—and Chinese cemeteries—from which there is a fine view—are certainly picturesque. But the one at Point Hope beats them all for originality. It’s a bare terrain enclosed in a high wall. The wall is made of whale ribs which are stuck into the ground. Two huge carved ribs compose the entrance arch.

The native village is striking chiefly because of the vestiges it contains. Huts, like those at Point Barrow, made of turf and moss and supported by whalebones extend along
the four parallel avenues to the tip of the point. The village had a great past. But isn’t this the case of native villages all over the world, whether in Peru, or the Marquesas where there were 150,000 natives when the first whites arrived and where are barely a thousand today?

My guide—his name was Ibroolik—told me that some Scandinavian scientists who had done some excavating on the spot estimated that there had once been more than a thousand houses. Their excavations revealed a soil that was literally carpeted with whalebones. The Eskimos had therefore killed thousands of them with their umiaks alone.

Ibroolik described the current situation to me. The only white man there was the archdeacon. He had been there twenty years before and then had left for another post. A minister took his place, but he was murdered by the white schoolteacher who was in cahoots with a native woman.

The archdeacon was recalled. He was now back for good, and was rather nicely set up. In addition to his cottage, he had a greenhouse and a social hall. Point Hope had indeed become his own estate.

Though the natives of the place were in contact with white men, they were no better off on that account. That’s the danger of civilization. As a result of it, the natives give up hunting and, relying on the white man for their subsistence, gradually get rusty. And if ever a time comes when the white man’s provisions are lacking, they’re stuck.

That was the case here. Their store was empty. The supply boat hadn’t come and they had no more tobacco or anything else. Ibroolik asked me whether I could wangle some coffee for him. I got him a can, and in exchange, he invited me to his home.
As Ibroolik was the most cultured of the local natives, I expected that his house would have a certain pretentiousness. To my great surprise, I found a purely Eskimo interior, with caribou skins for a bed and a supply of whale meat in a corner. It was particularly surprising since Ibroolik—he informed me incidentally—had lived among whites. I pricked up my ears.

"Where was that?"

"Oh, in Hollywood."

He mentioned this as though it were quite unimportant. But you mustn’t trust a native’s tone. It’s characteristic of them to say highly significant things in the most casual way.

"How did that happen?"

"Some white men came here to take shots for a film about whaling as we practice it. When it was over, they asked me to go back with them."

I was intrigued. An Eskimo in the modern world was something rare. How often have I not been asked since my return how a native would react in such a situation.

"How’d you get along there?"

"All right. Everyone was nice to me."

His tone was without warmth. His reply, which was utterly oriental, passed, as the Eskimo expression puts it, "along the edge of the matter." This was all the more reason for me to insist.

"Weren’t you tempted to remain there?"

Ibroolik gazed as if he were lost in space, with that characteristic native expression which is both sober and nostalgic and by whose eloquence I have so often been struck. His impressions interested me because he was a man who
could judge and compare. Ibroolik was no longer at the stage of the primitive who gives himself airs because he has been sought out by the whites. Nor was he the kind of person who asks himself, out of prudence, "What kind of answer shall I give?" Or, in order to flatter, "How does the white man want me to answer?"

Ibroolik weighed his words simply. "The white man's way," he said gently, "is not ours."

I have often heard the phrase: "It's the white man's way," a phrase full of innuendoes, when not frankly contemptuous. I had seen the white man's ways judged very severely, his brutality, his noisy, offensive manners, his direct tone, his lack of lightness, of understanding, and his lack of subtlety, too. And what hostility this attitude sometimes arouses—without the white man's even suspecting it. Because the white man enjoys a technical superiority wherever he goes, he thinks that he himself is superior.

But is he really? Had I been superior during my winter among the Inuit? Far from it. I had known enough not to expect to be, having had enough experience in the past to know how much we have to learn from the so-called primitives. But the actual experience had surpassed my expectations. Not only did I prove to be inferior when it came to living an existence in which they were perfectly at ease, but, what was more serious, I, the supposedly civilized man, was judged by them and found wanting because I had, on more than one occasion, lacked in their eyes, the most elementary subtlety and politeness. And it was they, the men of the ice age, who had been struck with astonishment, and even stupor, by such behavior. Could it be that a man was so coarse as to show his feelings on his face and to manifest
his impatience or bad humor at the slightest provocation, that in the infinite scale separating affirmation from negation all he knew was "perhaps"?

I could not help recognizing that the comparison was not to my advantage. Any more than, in the South Seas, the vulgarity of the white man's language and the rudeness of his behavior were to his advantage in the presence of the nobility of the Maoris. I can still see the hideous spectacle of a colonist in the New Hebrides beating, for some trivial reason, a native worker, a colossus, who, had he wanted to, could have twisted the white man's neck with two fingers. But he let himself be beaten. Then he stood up. And with reproach in his eyes, he said to the white man, who stood there all red and panting, "It was your arm that spoke, not your heart."

Ibroolik was like that. Contact with the white man had not embittered him. Nor had it dazzled him and made of him, as it had of so many others, a kind of performing monkey. Like the man in the West Indies who had placed a sign above the door of his bar which read: Here there are races, classes and civilization. Or the Melanesian chief who presided over a savage dance, perched on a straw-bottomed Victorian chair and whose only costume, apart from the fringe of twisted fiber that protected his sex, was a top hat. Or that other notable of Polynesia, who, to astonish his fellows, constructed, a few yards from the bamboo hut in which he lived, a European villa with a suspension lamp and a brass bed.

Ibroolik had come back to live at Point Hope with his young wife. All he brought back from his "exploration" among the whites were a few objects which he regarded as mere curios.
Some readers may feel that the kind of Eskimo life I described in *Kabloona* is uncouth. Yes, it is, if you go only by appearances, for example, the primitive way of eating. But it's a simple life, and though I might have suffered from it physically, it also brought me peace of soul. And that's worth something. How often, when harassed by the frenzied and, to my mind, inhuman life of the Big City, and by its cruelty, not to say its ferocity, have I not longed to be taken back to the Arctic, if only to relax. And if anyone tells me that, judging from their mode of life, the Eskimos are an inferior race, my answer is that they have a sense of fraternity, a dignity and a delicacy which would put lots of white men to shame. "Then why don't you go back and live there?" Because each of us belongs from birth to a certain climate, a certain valley. This climate and valley condition us. In the last analysis, it's the place that suits us best, spiritually as well as physically.

To be sure, I can enjoy, in passing, the advantages of a different kind of life and the virtues of a different race. But as for living among them, I'm fully aware that some day my valley will call me back. "But," someone may say, "there are, after all, Godforsaken places in the world." Not for those who live in them. Do you think the Breton doesn't love his sea, despite the fact that he battles the waves day after day? He wouldn't change it for any other setting in the world. And that's as it should be. How often have I heard Russian émigrés say, "I know that life under the Soviets is ghastly. But Russia is my country. I want to go back there some day."

If we all went to live in Honolulu, who would be left to fish for cod off the Newfoundland banks or extract coal
in Pittsburgh? Were the men of Cape Hope Godforsaken? They had fresh whale, which was certainly just as good as the canned pork and beans I ate every day on the *Audrey*.

The men with whom I had lived a short time before, and who were worse off, regarded themselves as privileged creatures. Millions of caribou came to them in the spring. In the fall, the lakes gave them fish, the like of which we never see on our tables. Witness the 54-pound salmon trout I once saw pulled out of the water before my eyes, along with others weighing more than forty pounds; they were frozen instantaneously at 40 degrees below, and three months later, they were as fresh and tasty as the fish preserved by the white man’s latest deep-freezing methods.

And when it comes to seals! . . . One day I was leaning over the breathing hole in the company of my Eskimo, who was gently humming the ritual song for making the animal come to the surface. He stopped and asked me point-blank: “Are there many seals in your country?” I was taken unawares. “No,” I said finally, “there aren’t any.” (Except, I thought to myself, a few miserable ones in zoos.)

The man remained silent. He was visibly disturbed. A moment later, he went on. “But . . . at what time of the year does the ocean freeze in your parts?” Here, too, I had to admit that the ocean never froze in my part of the world. He questioned me no further. But he probably thought to himself, “What a Godforsaken country, where there are no seals and where a man can’t travel over the smooth hard surface of a frozen sea!”

Ibroolik stretched some skins on the ground and laid out whale meat and smoked caribou.

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"No white man's food is as good as that," I said.
He laughed.
"That's what I think, too."

His wife was present, but she merely listened. And as I thought of the domestic tyranny of certain white women, I admired the lightness, and the art, too, with which native women can efface themselves without having to be told.

As we ate, I pointed to various objects and named them in Netsilik Eskimo. Ibroolik repeated the words after me. He knew them. There was an identity of language between these men who lived hundreds and hundreds of miles from each other and who had no contact. This observation alone was worth my visit to the place. The dialects and the accents differ. My "seal Eskimos" speak from the stomach, whereas these have a head voice which reminded me of that of the angakok (sorcerers) when they fall into a trance. But the basic language is the same. Wherever Eskimos live, the whale is called arvilik, the earth nuna, the sea tareor and the river kug. Their lives are basically identical, save that the Eskimos in this area, who live on walrus and whale, are sedentary. The fact that the sea is only partially open enables them to attack the whales in calm water, at the edge of the ice. The whale feast—which has a special site on the cape—lasts several days and is accompanied by a whole ceremonial of incantations and rites. And the same kind of thing takes place at the beginning of the hunt. The life of the Eskimos here is thus more grandiose than that of my nomads. It is more "noble" to harpoon a whale than to kill a simple seal. They are also more artistic because they have the ivory of walruses. With the help of colored stones, they make the most amazing settings.
Toward the end of the meal, there was a big to-do on the porch. Ibroolik got up to see what was going on.

"I think," he said casually, "that they have some objects to sell."

The door opened. I could see a throng of people in the semidarkness. There was a lot of stir and bustle and stifled laughter. Then, a native entered with a bag in his hand and advanced to the middle of the room.

"Put down what you have," said Ibroolik encouragingly.

The man emptied the contents of the bag. I was anxious because I had been told that the Cape Hope Eskimos carry on a regular business and sell their goods to dealers who make a special trip and who gather up everything. I was an ethnographer, not a dealer, and my means were less than modest. And besides, I prefer not to use money. I like to barter with the natives. Nevertheless, I chose some things and declared, "For this, that and that, a jar of jam" (I had brought a few, just in case).

The man made a face—was he perplexed or choking?—and then he said a few words, which Ibroolik translated so that matters would be quite clear: "For this object, he wants fifty cents. For that one, a dollar."

I gently explained to the man—via Ibroolik—that I was "a man who draws the picture of the earth"—according to the expression used in the Great North. The objects were for myself. If he didn't want to trade them for jam, the jars of which stood there temptingly, there would be no hard feelings. Then, to show that I knew what I was talking about, I said, "This harpoon is badly made. This bow drill lacks a kingmiak" (the round bone you hold in your mouth in order to manipulate the instrument).
The man looked at me dumfounded. A white man familiar with Eskimo ways? "Namakto [that's good]!" he said finally.

He was followed by a dozen individuals, each with his goods to sell and his way of presenting them. For the Eskimos of the region had grown shrewd. One of them laid his merchandise on the floor and waited, with an air of detachment.

The next one, on the other hand, undid his pack very carefully with the intention of impressing me. I cut him short with the comment that the lot wasn't worth much. The man broke off and looked at me in a way I was familiar with. It meant: "It doesn't work? What does work with that bird?" After which, we reached an agreement. It was especially easy because the only things that interested me were the old and broken objects, not those they made to sell.

When it was all over and the porch was cleared, I turned to Ibroolik and said, banteringly, "How about you? Wouldn't you like to do a little trading?"

He laughed.

"If you like."

But he was embarrassed. Because it was he who had introduced me, and, besides, he was my host. It would be a kind of comedown for him to lay out his objects like the others. And how could he decently ask payment while the coffee which I had given him as a gift was steaming in front of us? In order to gain time, he said, "Would you like another cup?"

"Listen," I said, "you've got a walrus tusk here. I'll give you so much for it. Is that all right?"
He smiled and placed the object at my side. Then, on thinking the matter over, he took from behind his litter—the usual hiding place of Eskimos—another walrus tusk, but of a quite different value. It was a piece of ivory in the process of fossilizing; it had probably been buried for hundreds of years. With age, the stratifications had taken on the most amazing tones, from purest white to the most velvety brown. Never have I seen so fine a work of Time.

"I'd like very much to have that," I said.

Ibroolik grew thoughtful.

"I was keeping it in reserve. If worked properly, this tusk would bring a good price. But if you want it . . ." It would have been a crime to "work" a treasure so beautiful in itself.

"Ibroolik, I don't have the money to pay you what this thing may ultimately be worth. But I accept it in the name of friendship. If you like the mackinaw I'm wearing, it's yours in exchange."

I took it off and Ibroolik put it on.

"I'll wear it in memory of you," he said.

He laid the walrus tusk near the other.

I took it into my hand. It was warm and alive to the touch. I already felt that it would be a fetish to me and that I would never part with it.\(^5\)

"Ibroolik," I said, "it's getting late. Your wife probably wants to sleep."

The eyes of his wife, who was sitting in a corner, lit up as if to say, "Is there a time for sleep when a guest is present?" That wonderful oriental ability to express everything

\(^5\)Since then, I've carried it with me everywhere. As I write these lines, it lies in front of me, more alive than ever.
in a look, the only live feature in an immobile mask. And what precise shades of meaning it can express! My Eskimos would express their assent by a breath drawn from the depths of their being, accompanied by a flashing of the eyes. Depending on the intensity—and duration—of the gleam, I knew whether it was a “yes, perhaps,” or a “yes, of course!” Their gaze has a vitality and intensity of expression in comparison with which we have nothing.

I took leave of the woman. Ibroolik and I went out into the darkness. I could see the silhouette of the Audrey, but I couldn’t see my boat. All I could do was wait for dawn.

Back at Ibroolik’s place, I stretched out on the caribou skins. Without any false embarrassment, he lay down beside his wife, who was already sleeping.

Hardly had I fallen asleep when the door opened. The head of an Eskimo appeared.

“They want you on board right away!”

I instantly felt that there was something precious in that house that I was about to leave. And images came back to me which, together, formed a kind of composite of the way I have been welcomed among natives. I was once invited by a New Caledonian tribe to spend the night, and I slept in the “big house,” beside a brasero which was kept going by invisible hands, while the chief slept nearby, or pretended to, and the rest of the tribe, which was grouped outside under the trees, formed a protecting circle around us.

In Bora-Bora, I was guest of honor at the most sumptuous, the most royal feast that was ever offered me. It was a feast at which everything had been done and built for that evening only—in secret, of course. Divers had gone
plunging to the bottom of the lagoon for the finest pieces of mother-of-pearl, which were to serve as plates. The women had woven together the leaves which were to serve as a tablecloth. I can still see the clearing in the middle of the forest, circled with fire by torches that naked men were holding at arms' length like candelabra. Other fires farther off made the forest quiver as their flames licked the trunks of the coconut trees. Who was it who was responsible for this splendor? Who had directed the show? Who was the inspired designer of the forest and the clearing? No one and everyone. Each one had had his little idea and had done his share—like the rug weavers in the Orient who, though following a general plan, leave the details to their fancy. And what artists they had been—those weavers of leaves, those embroiderers of flowers, those craftsmen in mother-of-pearl, those carvers of shells, on which they had made tracery of such violent effect by alternating pink and pure white.

After the feast, which was composed of varo (crayfish) and pigs cooked in the embers and sprayed with fresh coconut milk, they gave the clever “pantomime of the double outrigger.” A commentator sang the theme, and the prima ballerina danced with the corps de ballet, the ten most handsome men and the ten most beautiful women on the island. However, it's not the elaborateness that I want to stress, but rather their solicitude toward me. I was at the end of the table; the chief’s place was set back a little, out of politeness. Each sign of satisfaction on my part, every change of expression, was closely observed; my slightest preference was noted so as to be, if possible, satisfied.

At Pelly Bay, too, among the most primitive—and most
sensitive—Eskimos, I dared not make a gesture or express the slightest desire. For if my eyes merely lingered for a moment over some object or other that was lying about in the igloo, that same evening the object would inexplicably turn up in my dwelling. I felt a network of graciousness being woven about me, a subtle considerateness which is the politeness of the heart.

I got up. When I had to leave Ibroolik’s dwelling, I felt my heart contract, for I sometimes feel closer to a caid of Atlas or a Polynesian chief than to the men of my own time and country.

This feeling was reinforced the moment I got back. No sooner had I set foot on the deck of the Audrey than Slim snapped at me: “We’re leaving. We don’t have any time to waste!”

I didn’t say anything. I gave some farewell gifts to Ibroolik. “I’ll never forget your visit,” he said. Nor will I. Cape Hope will always bring to mind the calm and grave face of a man who could not be seduced or intoxicated by the mirage of Hollywood. He did not try to honor me by taking out a teapot or some other white man’s gadget, which would have been ridiculous in his home, but he received me in accordance with his code. And he thereby reminds me of another native, in Moorea, who, despite the fact that he, too, had been the star of a film, did not even bother to go and see it in Papeete, which was only a four-hour trip by boat. A woodland god. That’s how he appeared to me that morning at the turn of the road, with a tiaré-tahiti behind his ear and a bunch of bananas draped around his shoulders like a collar. “Why go elsewhere?” he

*A common flower in Polynesia.
said, as he pointed slowly to the trees and the lagoon and the sky. “I’m content here, and I have fine children.” Like Ibroolik, who returned from his adventure neither debased nor degraded, but enriched by a new experience. He had understood that his sandspit and whales were better for him than the city, and that the dignity of his race was worth more than the haste and exhibitionism of the whites.

Out at sea again. Because of refraction, the sea now looked like a floor of sand, along which we were dragging. For we were weary. Not only were we unable to catch up on our lost sleep, but we were losing more and more every day. And when we happened to make a stop, for one reason or other there was no rest.

“The next time,” roared Slim, “I’m going to lock myself up in the after-cabin and sleep straight through for ten hours, God damn it!”

Once again I was caught up in the sordidness of the boat. The engine went chug-chug, and the smoke spurted putt-putt from the black pipe. Have you ever seen those dirty and archaic freighters that moor insolently at the docks among the steamers and then fill up with coal, which they alone use? Whereupon they take off, leaving a black splotch behind. Tramp steamers that strut the sea like prostitutes but that don’t give a rap, because they arrive, and that’s all the shipowner asks of them. They greet every ship they meet with a “How goes it, pal?” and continue on their way with a list.

We were just as disreputable-looking as they. The Audrey looked like a shady character, the kind of not very reliable individual you sometimes employ, providing he
keeps his mind on his work. We kept driving her on with oaths and imprecations. We had to threaten her to make her stick to the course. And our coarseness increased with the filth on board. We were blasphemers who were aroused by every spell of bad weather. Because we couldn’t hit back at the sea—and because, like the landlubbers we were, we had an urge to hit back—we would fly into a temper. We barked at the waves. We crushed cigarette after cigarette in a fury. We kicked out savagely at anything lying about. And we yelled at the ship: “Go on, you old bitch!” We weren’t proud of her. Nor of ourselves. Even the merchant marine would have been ashamed of us. We were a disgrace to the profession. We befouled the sea.

But what was the Audrey? A naked hull, in the middle of which was a square box with the corners cut off. Not so much a pilothouse as a casemate. A madman’s cell, two yards long and two yards wide. At least, that’s the image that remains with me. These four square yards were our only shelter, our only bulwark against the sea. As soon as the sea got rough, we took refuge there, like a troop at bay.

How can I describe what it was like inside? Take a crate of potatoes and kick at it till you smash it; then take some tools and leave them at the bottom of the sea for a year before taking them out. Take a cot and grease the sheets. Then you have an approximate idea of what the place was like. The helm was tinkered up with copper wire. The potatoes were sprouting in the crate. The Primus lay with its four paws in the air on a heap of wet clothes, rags and boots. Only Art’s false teeth were unscathed. They grinned on the plank of the binnacle.

A real burrow. But comfortable. Since we were some-
times blocked up inside for two or three days running, we had gathered together all the objects we needed. We’d take something, throw it down and pick it up again later. The tobacco jar, on the plank; the pliers, on the floor; the maps, in the drawer of the berth, among dirty overalls, a square and a spanner. We wouldn’t have tidied up for anything in the world, like writers who live in the utmost disorder, with papers all around, but who fly into a rage if anyone cleans up and, claim that they can no longer find anything. Here, too, Mrs. Watson had tried to put things in order. But we gave her to understand that it was useless.

There was still a heavy swell. My stool would rise from under me, remain balanced for a moment on two legs and then drop again. Watson, who was leaning at the porthole, was staring at the sea with a contemptuous look. For him, this voyage was just one phase among a hundred of the tough job of living. It made little difference to him whether he was there or elsewhere.

Each of us had his own personal vision of the voyage. For Slim, it was a serious business that threatened at every moment to end badly. To Tiny, it was a trial to which she had been submitted without anyone’s asking her for her opinion. Muriel was the only one who had a romantic vision of the thing. It was a pity that we saw her so little, for amidst all the sordidness she was the only one who saw the voyage with fresh eyes. She regarded it as a “nice ride, and we were going to pay some visits.”

Perhaps I ought to say something here about the weight and solemnity that the simple word “visit” takes on in the Great North. To the men who live there, visiting means emerging from isolation, from solitude, and becoming a
man again. The word glows with all the warmth of the human heart. It means sociability, and festivity, too. Visiting, in the North, means not only being again at one with fellow creatures, but also vying with them in generosity and hospitality and largesse. To visit is not only to be together again, in order to laugh and carouse and exchange greetings and compliments and civilities, but also, even for the poorest, to put on airs. “Are you hungry? Take this leg of caribou. It’s been waiting for you! . . . You seem to like this dog. Take him with you. You’ll be doing me a favor. Would you care to have my wife? No problem at all, I’ll lend her to you for the night!” . . .

Muriel had heard the word “visitor” so often that she looked forward eagerly to being one herself. She was constantly expecting her mother to let her put on her pretty dress and to take her to shore. The sad thing was that when we did happen to stop somewhere, there was nothing for a little girl to see. But Muriel was convinced that she was being tricked, that all kinds of nice things were being hidden from her. Her mother was always bringing her aft in tears. But her disappointment never lasted long, and hope was constantly reborn. Next time it would really happen! She would stand at the bow of the ship, wearing the fur coat that made her look like a miniature adult, scanning the horizon endlessly. Even if no coast were in sight, the sea itself was a spectacle. It was the sea that passed before her eyes, rather than the boat that struggled through the sea. It was enough to see the way her eyes actually absorbed every passing wave, those waves that rose up one after the other, lapping the deck and then falling away.

We saw a walrus whose head bobbed up and down like a
ball. It was only the third we had seen since Cape Barrow. They are seldom far from the ice pack.

As for ice packs, this is what the Coastguard Pilot Book says about the seas we were crossing:

“The bowhead whale keeps as far to the north as he can find spouting holes, and to catch him the whalers are obliged to keep as close to the pack as possible. Usually they track along the Asiatic side in the Bering Sea and Strait, and, as they reach the Arctic, cross over and work the American shores to the north-east.

“In the Bering Sea there is little danger in entering the ice, as it is almost sure to open and offer a chance of escape. With a knowledge of this fact, the whalers sometimes enter the ice to the southward of the Strait and endeavour to work through it if they have reason to believe, from the sudden disappearance of the whale, that there is clear water to the northward.

“In the Arctic, however, the pack is carefully avoided, and it is only when conditions are most favorable that attempts are made to follow up the lead. Point Barrow is approached with the greatest caution, as it is one of the most dangerous places in the Arctic. As has already been mentioned, by far the major portion of the vessels lost in the Arctic are wrecked in its vicinity.

“The most striking feature about the weather in the Bering Sea is a great uncertainty throughout the year. Good weather is rare and not lasting, and the winds cannot be depended upon to remain long in one quarter. The late spring and summer are mild and very foggy, with considerable rain. After September 1st the gales become very frequent and heavy fog gradually lessens, and toward the
latter part of the month the snow often accompanies the storms. During the fall, gales are frequent, violent and almost from any quarter.

"An average of 1,499 hours of fog has been recorded over seventeen years."

In order to avoid the deep pockets of Kotzebue Sound, we had headed straight for Cape Prince of Wales. We had been hoping for a restful twenty-four hours, but the mist came up again. A genuine nightmare. Dropping with fatigue, we decided to take only two-hour watches.

There was a general turmoil. And it was raining. The bench under my berth was flooded. In the darkness, we could just about make out the triangular bow of the *Audrey*. Dawn came up about four. I lay down . . . only to be reawakened shortly by Slim. He saw the water getting dirty and was worried.

The lead, quick! Ten fathoms way offshore. What did *that* mean? Probably the stretch of shallows marked on the map, north of Cape Prince of Wales.

Eight fathoms now, then seven! We had to get as far out as we could.

It was easier said than done. Hardly had we altered our course than the dance began. For three hours we scaled mountains. The thing that got me was not so much the jolting as the nervous tension. I kept saying to myself, "We'll never hold out!" Impossible to take a wave right. But we had to keep trying because if one of them were to knock us off balance, the following one would send us to the bottom.

At this stage of our torment, land appeared.
“Stand in for it!” said Art, who for once had had enough.

As for standing in, two hours later we were still wondering what land it was. Was it Siberia or Cape Prince of Wales, or one of the Diomede Islands which are midway between the two? The barometer suddenly shot up. But when it does that, the wind generally increases. As a matter of fact, the sea was rolling. As the prevailing wind at the approach to the strait was north-south, the waves got us three-quarters aft and jounced us. Were we going to “do” the Bering Strait on the crest of a wave?

Land was nearing. This time there was no further doubt. It was really Cape Prince of Wales. A big dark mass flanked with hillocks. Such a charming name for so sinister a spot. We gazed at it in silence.

“The Gate of the North!” Slim sneered. “Five hours now that we’ve been in sight of the bastard!”

As we stood there watching it, the cape disappeared. Whisked away! Who would have suspected that a continent was hidden behind that innocent-looking curtain? The next moment, it appeared again. It was a real trick of sleight-of-hand. But where were the Diomedes?

“Must be shy,” said Art with his usual sarcasm.

We could now make out some buildings to the north, one of which, with a pointed roof, was probably a steeple. Must have been a nice little country nook. At times, the mist decapitated the cape, making it look like the frustum of a cone, and at times it obliterated the base. The spot would then look like a sugar loaf suspended in the air.

“Better get some sleep.”

Coming from Watson, the offer was so surprising that I didn’t wait to be told twice. But much as I needed it, sleep
didn’t come. Something inside me was knotted up. And I also felt as if I were choking. But I had to get some rest before going down, because I had seen a fog bank in the southeast which meant that our troubles weren’t over.

Our course was now due south. If all went well, we would sight Saint Lawrence Island the following day. After which, the distances, as they appeared on the map, were the following:

Saint Lawrence—Nunivak 180 miles
Nunivak—Dutch Harbor 275 miles

At one in the morning, King Island was before us. But as we approached it, the mist covered it and so we were forced to veer to starboard, resuming our course a while later.

Two hours of false sleep. When I awoke, I found Slim all excited. He was tender and almost exalted.

“Wonderful night!” he said. “There was an aurora borealis. Like the kind in the Arctic, only red.”

I remembered what it was like in the Great North, when the dismal world through which we were winding our way would suddenly light up with fantastic gleams. A real dance of spirits. Sila, the wonderful Eskimo word that means not only the atmosphere, but also the mysteriousness that surrounds us, was full of them. The lights would go on and off. They would cut across each other like the beams of projectors. They would shoot out at prodigious speed. And I would stop my dogs and stand there spellbound and exalted by the unexpected performance, the supernormal demonstration.
Watson had meanwhile seen a big animal that he thought was a killer whale.  

King Island was now behind us. Seen against the light, its angular outline looked like a stage set. The island is said to be very picturesque. The Eskimo huts, which are built on stilts, hug the hillside. The only way of putting the kayaks into the water is to catapult them.

King has its legend. This is it—at least this is how it was told to me. A long, long time ago, Eskimos lived on the mainland (Alaska). Many murders were committed among them, with the result that a group of peace-loving souls decided to break away and go elsewhere. They therefore left and went to live on King. They lived happily there. But when those on the mainland learned of this, they grew jealous and resolved to disturb their peace. They approached King in their umiaks, intending to take it by assault. But those on the island were waiting for them and dropped huge boulders which sank the umiaks. So even peaceful men are sometimes obliged to kill. They then resumed their quiet existence, which they lead to this day.

A change had taken place about us. The night before, the setting sun had been red, as in the Pacific, and the rest of the sky a deep greenish blue. After a wonderfully calm night, dawn had come up very rapidly. Over the unruffled surface of the sea, pigeons and sea parrots disported themselves and played about the Audrey. There was also a curious bird, of which I was presently to see millions, but which I was then seeing for the first time, namely, the whalebird.

*Orca gladiator*: several of them band together and kill whales by attacking their throats.

*A bird which accompanies the whales in swarms, and, like the whales, lives on plankton.

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It was dark and had narrow crescent-shaped wings. It skimed rapidly along the waves, like a hawk. As it grazed the water, its wings would at times stop moving—though without the bird’s losing speed—and then would resume beating. The sun had arisen and illuminated the lookout. Were it not for its dirty walls and the rags lying around, the lookout would have seemed almost pleasant. It was the first fine day since Hershel. Suddenly we all grew talkative.

“We ought to have this weather until we get to Vancouver!” said Slim from the berth, where he was resting.

“Don’t tempt fate,” I answered from the wheel, without turning around.

“No need to tempt it,” Art broke in. “It comes by itself.”

That was the way all three of us reacted to a burst of light. The Arctic was far away. Everything bespoke calmness, even the purring of the engine. I felt regenerated. And that’s how it is, I think, for all seamen. As a result of holding the wheel, of feeling with his whole body the pressure of the wheel that transmits, so directly and accurately, the labor of the ship, as a result, too, of receiving the shock of each wave against his chest, the sailor becomes a kind of extension of the boat. In like manner, I have seen cabinet-makers become furniture and their complexion turn walnut or rosewood, so that you might speak of a “three-drawer cabinetmaker.” I have seen sailors swaying through a city so that they seem to be fragments of the swell, pushing their waves over the square, flowing into bars and ebbing out again. Just as the farmer bears within him the fertility of his soil, so the sailor bears within him the swelling of the sea. Does the sea rise? He rises with it. Does it seem to be getting calmer? He, too, subsides, almost happy—insofar as
the absence of unhappiness makes for happiness—and he hums softly to himself. His state of soul is that of the sea, constantly changing. For to the helmsman, whose eyes are fixed on the waves, each wave is different from the one that precedes it. But how can one express this feeling? How render the peace of soul that fills the sailor when all is calm? How render the supreme indifference of the man who goes off to sleep when his watch is over? Handing over the boat, and the full weight of responsibility, into someone else’s hands and unburdening yourself of it. I saw Slim lying in the berth behind me and casually turning the pages of an old magazine while I toiled at the wheel. I raised my bloodshot eyes to the chronometer, which seemed to be standing still. Anxiety heightened my physical fatigue. My breathing was labored and my gestures were strained. Slim was utterly unconcerned. Indifference was his privilege, as it would be mine in a little while. We had to have this relaxation if we were to hold out.

Saint Lawrence Island loomed pale and blue at the horizon. We had done twenty miles since first sighting it, and we still had ten to go. It was amazing how visibility had returned all at once. There were still two fog banks below on the horizon, but for the time being we didn’t feel threatened.

Unfortunately, the definition of happiness might very well be the same as that of health: “A fragile, transitory state which bodes no good.” As I lay resting in peace in the messroom, Slim’s head appeared at the top of the ladder: “A storm’s coming up. We’ll take shelter behind Saint Lawrence!”

I was back on my feet again. Sure enough, a big black
mass was gathering to the south. The weather had suddenly got cooler. The sea had changed, too. It had again become, in the words of Art, “that dirty bitch you can’t ever trust.” We headed for the nearest point, though it was still away off. We stood there staring at it, as if hoping in that way to draw it toward us.

“How far would you say?”

“Ten miles?”

“Hm. Take the wheel. I’ll go look at it from up above and I’ll yell out to you.”

While we were still wondering whether or not the point was on the northwest course, we found ourselves enveloped in darkness. Slim went to take soundings. I climbed up on the bridge. We could hardly see. We had slowed up.

Slim’s voice in the darkness: “Nothing at sixteen!” . . . “Still nothing at sixteen!” . . . I was beginning to worry, because there was something yellowish at the level of the water which might well have been the shore. The Book of Nautical Instructions said: “low swamplands, ahead of peaks.” Slim must have been thinking of the same thing, for I could hear him grumbling, “Must have had his own soundings!” Finally, he announced eleven fathoms, then immediately afterward, eight. We dropped the hook. We were now in complete darkness. Land was probably near. We could hear the surf.

We made some coffee, because the weather wasn’t warm. At twelve-thirty, I went down to get some sleep. The storm might be a false alarm.

At four o’clock, Slim woke me for my turn at the wheel. “If the wind changes, yell out!”

A plashing. But, for the time being, the wind remained
the same. At four-fifteen, day came up. Half a mile off was a cape, set, sure enough, in swampland and flanked by two peaks. According to the book, it was a big island, with a herd of 7,000 reindeer, a wireless station—at the other end, of course—and a missionary. On the largest of the Punuk Islands, which borders it on the southeast, were the vestiges of a former native village. But this information dated from 1931. Perhaps the reindeer were no longer there. Perhaps the wireless operator . . . unless he had killed the missionary. As for the eight fathoms two miles out, according to the book, I wonder where they got this, because at three quarters of a mile from shore, our line didn’t touch bottom!

The darkness was breaking up. The south-southwest wind was slowly shifting to south-southeast. At ten o’clock, as it was shifting more and more, we decided to change anchorage. With thirty fathoms of chain out, we tried to liven up Old Kelly (that’s what we called the motor of the winch), but, like a good Irishman, he refused to start. Then he got going, but stopped immediately and kicked like a mule. For an hour, we struggled with the crank. It was noon when we finally got under way. We sailed westward, keeping an eye out for the reefs marked on the map. But there was nothing! Finally, tired of it all, we approached land and cast anchor in eleven fathoms. Squalls had come up and dark clouds were gathering rapidly.

The wind was turning into a storm. The banging of the chain against the hull sounded like the Last Judgment. The rain began to fall in buckets, making visibility practically nil. If we stayed there, with the wind placed as it was, we’d be driven ashore.

“Push off!” barked Watson. “Let her take it!”
Were we going to move the *Audrey* out at a time like that? It looked like madness. Worse than madness. Cruelty.

No sooner did the boat start moving than the waves went for it. They tore into it like a pack of hounds. It all happened so suddenly that we hadn’t time to defend ourselves, not even to pull up the anchor which was tossing around at the bottom.

The important thing was to get away from the coast! But would we? That morning we had had but one wish, to see land approaching, to reach the haven. But now all we wanted was for it to keep away. What was the log doing? For the moment, its wheel was the wheel of our salvation. Every now and then it would stop. Then slowly, imperceptibly, it would start turning again.

In two hours, we had done a mile. It wasn’t a storm, but a mad wind that was sweeping over the sea. The *Audrey* was thrashing about like an epileptic. She would bound forward, stop, rear and then fall back. Confronted with this hysteria, we were overwhelmed, annihilated. We were being tossed from one side of the pilothouse to the other, gripping at anything we could get our hands on. I clung to the wheel. But it was a total loss. Impossible to take the waves. There were no waves, only a boiling caldron.

There was epilepsy on board, too. Loose barrels were rolling over the deck. The tarpaulin of the forward hold was partially detached and was flapping all over the place. The anchor was still bouncing down below.

There was such a bacchanalia in the messroom that it was as if *Tupilak* in person were leading the dance. Amidst *The devil of the Eskimos.*
an incredible turmoil, there was Tiny, frailer-looking than ever. The thing had caught her as she was preparing the meal. She had stopped what she was doing and just sat and goggled. Around her was the rattle of pans and the dull thuds of the sea against the hull, which seemed at every moment as if it were going to fly apart. From time to time, Tiny would get up, mechanically pick up a utensil and then sit down again with her hands on her knees. She looked as if she were being tortured. Muriel, who was also there, wanted to play cards. Her mother, who was positively livid, dealt two or three cards, stopped and then listened.

“Better go back aft!” (I yelled because of the din.)

She looked up. She hesitated. She was not so much afraid for herself as for the child. “What’s it like there?” In reply, I grabbed the child and carried her across the deck, with sudden stops and plunges. Behind me, the mother, half running, half crawling, followed her child like a wounded animal.

Slim was standing at the wheel with his legs spread wide. His forehead was lined with deep furrows that opened fanwise from the bridge of his nose. Watson, who was nearby with his cheek flat against the porthole, seemed to be saying, “To hell with the Audrey!”

Perhaps it was because he wasn’t a seaman that he was so indifferent to the sea. He belched several times. Then he left—at the worst moment of all—strode to the head of the ship, with his hands in the pockets of his overalls, stopped and rounded his back in the midst of the squall, took a bored look around and walked back. He hadn’t said a single word since his order to push off.

We had been hoping to pull up the anchor before dark-
ness. But the madness didn’t let up, any more than did the jouncing of the Audrey. The Audrey was no longer a boat. She was a circus animal trying to elude the whip. She was contorting herself. She was no longer even rigid. She writhed under the waves. Her floor swelled up under the pressure of the sea. And the heaving lifted us from the floor and dashed us against the walls of the pilothouse. Night had come, plunging everything into the same darkness, the same chaos. We were being tossed from pillar to post, less shocked than dazed by what was happening to us. The only thing that has ever thrown me into such a state of panic and stupidity is an earthquake. If we could hold out till morning, perhaps the sea’s madness would subside. While waiting, a half hour at the wheel was all one could take at a stretch.

I counted the minutes. Centuries! It wasn’t the effort that was painful; it was time itself. At last! I waited another minute, just to say that I held out. Then, with one hand on the wheel, I searched for Slim’s body with the other. “Hey!” If he didn’t wake up, I’d be a goner. At last, he got up, reached out one hand to the wheel, and then the other. I let go.

Squatting on the floor, buttressing myself against the wall with my back as best I could, I tried to scribble some notes. My pad, which had been stiff, had become supple. Nevertheless, I scribbled away furiously. Near me, on the floor, was a pot of cold soup from which the liquid was slowly dripping. The pencil fell from my fingers and rolled off. I stared at it dazedly and let it roll. My eyelids were getting heavy. Then my eyes shut. A second later, I sank into nothingness.

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Dawn at last! . . . The pilothouse regained its shape. All about, the ocean was calm. The madness had gone as suddenly as it had come. I was emerging from a nightmare, like a man who has had a terrifying dream. Was it the book he had been reading before going to bed? Suddenly he awakes, sits bolt upright, haggard-looking, his body in a sweat. . . . Nothing! The book is lying on the night table, the alarm clock ticking quietly away. Everything in the room is peaceful. . . . And so it was with us. We rubbed our eyes. Then we shook ourselves. What had become of the anchor? We had to pull it up.

We shook Art. The three of us struggled in the early dawn. Again the winch refused to work. We had to grab hold of the crank. Ten fathoms of chain, then fifteen. Finally up she came. Links emerged, filed and polished by the rocks. We leaned overboard. Good God! There was no more anchor!

We flew into a rage. We kicked out at everything within reach. The stool, which had been knocked over, was brutally put back on its feet. By God, we had to get going. It was now fully day. The sea was calm and ironic.

But what irony of life had placed three landsmen on a rumrunner in the middle of the Bering Sea? For I swear to you there was nothing of the sailor about any of us. And there wasn’t a single sailor’s hat among us. Our only protection against the cold was our Eskimo furs. We had no oilskins, nothing but our overalls, and I had an old sweater. We were men who didn’t roll our hips to cross the decks, but who walked as best we could, Art with careful little steps and Slim with big long strides. As for me, I would wait for what I thought the right moment, and then would
make for it . . . if an unexpected heave didn’t toss me to the other side.

When the deck was too slippery, we would spread out old sacks. We found that convenient. Nor did we use sea-
men’s jargon. We didn’t talk about halyard or booms. It wasn’t as it had been on the *Saint Roch*. There, when it was time to sound, the megaphone would roar out, “Heave the log!” and the men would echo, “Heave the log!” The man on duty would go down and get dressed for the maneu-
ver and then would reappear wearing big boots, oilskins and gauntlets. He would climb up on the gangplank that had been set up for the purpose along the side of the ship and would yell out, “Watch out, everyone!” Then, slowly and solemnly, he would swing the sounding line in an ele-
gant curve, and it would plunk into the water. But our line was just a simple weight at the end of a rope, with a piece of rag at each fathom. In like manner, for us the log was just like a line that hadn’t caught anything. We were just ordinary chaps who, as a result of a trick of fate, happened to find themselves at sea. No different from thousands of other individuals. . . . One chap, because war surprised him in China, where he was studying typhoons, woke up and found himself a policeman in Shanghai (don’t think I’m making this up). Another, an artist, had visited Spain to see all the El Grecos and wound up fighting in the ranks of the *Falange*. A third, a placid man who hated complications, got involved, despite himself, in smuggling hashish over the Indian Ocean. All of them were men who had been sidetracked from their original goals, without quite know-
ing how it happened. I wonder at people who plan their lives in advance and say, “This is how it’s going to be!”
They lack entirely a feeling for the unforeseen. Doesn't life have better plans for them than those they conceive themselves? What do they know about the future? I, who had been a student at the School of Fine Arts, found myself overnight a factory worker in Rome and then president of a British firm in Manchester. Then, having been cast out of business, I was a fisherman in a trawler off the coast of Africa. Finally, a few years later, I flew off to the Arctic just when I meant to explore the Rio de Oro with a friend. Such were the decisions of fate. I'm careful not to complain about them. I just obey. A voice inside me says, "Get going." And I go. Where will it lead me? I don't know. But what I do know is that today that's where I must go, that's the direction I've got to take. As for the rest, I trust to destiny. I believe in the destiny of each human being. Mine forces me periodically to take off again, to leave behind the security that the people around me seem eager for, to leave even my human happiness for the sake of something bigger, something bigger than myself perhaps.

People say to me, "You go off that way because you're basically anxious." To which I answer, "There are all kinds of reasons why people leave" (I'm speaking of a true departure, not the kind that is merely a longer or shorter absence, from which a person knows he will return, but of the kind that means leaving everything for the unknown, in which a man's entire existence is involved). There are people who go away in order to find themselves, unsatisfied people who seek themselves, who hope that somewhere, sometime, they will finally make the human contact that will illuminate them, the climate that will
finally enable them to blossom out. There are those who leave because they are nomads at heart (just as there are wild animals and domestic animals, so, I think, there are human beings who are nomadic and those who like to stay put). There are those who leave because there is something in the atmosphere about them that no longer suits them.

I’m probably one of the latter. I go away, less because something calls me than because something chases me. Chases me far from a world in which I can no longer live, a world of agitation, of meaningless noise, a world of chatter, of mountebanks who keep jabbering away from their platforms and who do nothing, a world of *arrivistes*, in which the material prevails over the spiritual, a world of false values and false gods, where I feel my purity abandoning me, my face disintegrating. It is in order to regain my true face that I leave, and in order to find again the peace of mind that is so precious to me. And it has been in lands where men were fewest that I have found it, in those which were the most denuded, the most stripped. If anyone says to me, “Your life up North, where it’s sixty below, must have been atrocious,” I don’t answer. I simply think to myself, “Nevertheless, that’s where I found warmth of heart. And I never felt lonely.”

The Two took advantage of the calm to inspect the engines. The bearings were overheating. So what? Let them overheat! I went down and took a shave. Nothing like it to make a new man of you. For the first time in days, I got undressed. Mrs. Watson drank her first cup of coffee since Saint Lawrence. And we replaced the anchor by an old-fashioned grapnel that happened to be on board.
According to the log, we were supposed to be in the vicinity of Nunivak. But how could we find the island with all that mist? Nevertheless we had to, if we wanted to set our course for Unalaska with any chance of making it.

The following is all that is said about Nunivak in the Coastguard Pilot Book:

“Rarely approached by vessels . . . Captain Fisher anchored there with a sternwheel boat in 1898. In 1899, the U.S. Corwin cruised completely around the island . . . In 1900, the Manning made a reconnaissance.”

More and more birds, including many sea hawks . . . Suddenly, I thought I saw land. “Ho, Slim!” He, too, had seen something. It was land all right. A promontory that corresponded to the description in the book (“280 feet, then gently sloping inland, to rise again”). We were safe. We put the log back at zero and set our course (incidentally, the magnetic variation of 55 degrees had shifted to 15).

I saw my first fur seal. They can be recognized by the fact that they sleep at the surface with one fin out of the water. This one was standing straight up as he watched us approach. Then he bounded from the water in a wonderfully graceful and easy curve. His coat was darker than that of my Arctic seals. He repeated his bound three times in succession. Then, when we had sailed beyond him, he remained there watching us. The fur of these animals, whose recognized habitat is the Pribilof Islands, is of such value that there is an international agreement whereby only a certain number may be killed annually. The number is determined by the increase of the herd and is on a pro rata basis for each power. In order to avoid poaching, the
herd is escorted by destroyers during the migration season.

There were now clouds of whalebirds at the horizon. Closer by, gulls and sea hawks were swooping and plunging continuously. The sea was probably teeming with fish. The fact is that we were off Bristol Bay, the center of the fisheries and canneries of Alaska.

Three sea lions were floating on the waves and for some inexplicable reason were violently whipping the water with their fins. As soon as they noticed us, they rushed toward us with a roar—as if they were saying, "Up and at 'em, boys!" They came up to the boat, maneuvering just below the surface with prodigious ease and speed. How often I had observed the ease of certain of the larger animals! Look at the lightness of a charging rhinoceros, of the elephant pivoting to make an about-face. I remember, too, the lightness with which the polar bear of the Great North would turn around and kick out at the pursuing dogs. And the speed with which the same polar bear, that lies in wait for the seal beside the breathing hole, lashes out with the back of its paw, just as its prey rises up and, with a flip, sends it sprawling several yards.10

10The amusing thing is that the bear waits for the seal, with its paw raised, exactly as the Eskimo does. This similarity between the behavior of the animal and the man has always struck me. In France, I have seen cock pheasants, during the laying season, go and get the females at the nests and take them to where food was, and then bring them back to the nest, by the scruff of the neck if necessary! In New York, I have seen, at the edge of a tall building, a hawk keeping an eye on the first flight of its fledgling. The mother would push it to make it fly, and if the little one faltered while in the air, she would catch it in full flight, bring it back to the roof and make it try again. Art told me that he had once seen in the Arctic a bear leaning over a block of ice and watching its
Bad weather again. Damn it if I expected it! At ten in the evening, when Art had awakened me, all had been calm. It began around eleven. By midnight we were having a rough time of it, though we saw no waves at all. There was something sinister going on. It was enough to make us think there was an Evil Spirit at the bottom that took pleasure in making us suffer and that struck out at us just when we were least expecting it. Was it because I wasn't a seaman that I looked at things that way? No doubt but that I was in the grip of a vague fear, the kind of fear man has of the unknown. And it rarely let go of me. At the slightest alert, it would seize me again. I turned the wheel over to Art and ventured on deck. All I could see were the murky crests of waves dashing into us.

When I returned to the pilothouse, I started yelling at the wheel. The wheel to which I was riveted was no longer a simple piece of wood, but a living thing. There was something sneaky about it, something tricky that I had to keep an eye on constantly, against which I had to fight. Most of the time the wheel was not an aid but an enemy. And it was an enemy that I railed at. "Go on, kick, you old bitch. Let me have it! Go on! The more you kick, the sooner you'll knock yourself out. What are you trying to do, break my arm?"

Watson was standing nearby, and though he didn't understand French, he knew what I meant. "That wheel's some bitch!" he said understandingly. "Whenever you

cub vainly trying to remove from the water a seal it had just caught. At the third try, the exasperated mother threw herself into the water, gave the cub a sharp slap and then pulled out the seal herself.
bring her to starboard, she kicks like a mule.” At 170 degrees, it was still all right. But at 160, you felt as if the whole ship were going to burst apart.

My muscles knotted as I clung to the wheel. To complete the general atmosphere, the light in the binnacle went out and then on again. Down below, the pistons were going clack-clack-clack (the noise went up the ladder at top speed). The Primus lay on its side, with its pump exhausted. A pair of overalls, which was hanging on a nail, danced a jig and then abruptly quieted down. I saw an animated cartoon à la Walt Disney, with the captain’s teeth flying off in the squall, hitting the first mate on the forehead, continuing its flight and finally falling into the gears in the engine room and getting crushed.

Slim’s thick voice emerged from the berth. “How are things going?”

“You can see for yourself!” said Art.

He went to the door and tried to open it. The door resisted—the wind was weighing down on it with its full force—and then all at once it yielded. Art was snapped up by the suction. The door shut again with such violence that if his wrist had been caught, it would have been cut off.

Slim sat up. “How about some coffee?” He plunged into the darkness and then staggered in again with some objects in his hands. Squatting on the floor, he tried to get the Primus going. It threw off some sparks but refused to work. “God damn it!” he said and gave up. He just stood there dully.

My turn to rest. I stretched out in the berth. There was still a knocking down below. And there was still the sen-
sation, though we were barely moving, that we were plunging into a gulf at dizzying speed.

Up again at seven. The sea had subsided, but it was still shaky. A nasty sea, nasty weather, objects scattered about the shiny deck. Suddenly the motor stopped. Art dashed forward. The Audrey was rolling from side to side. A few moments later, the motor started again. Watson went on deck. The door slammed shut. The next moment, he was back. He stood there a moment without saying anything, and then exploded, “God damn it, we’ve lost the log!”

The explanation was simple. In stopping, the boat had veered. The rope of the log, which we had forgotten to pull in, had got caught in the propeller. And when the propeller began to turn again . . .

It was getting funny. . . . Slim awoke just then. We broke the news to him. He laughed dryly. Then, he went out in his underpants, and, with a gesture of contempt, pissed on the sea.

The messroom was all upset again (it was order that was abnormal). This time, the jam had flowed onto the stove in a sticky layer. And my comb had slipped into the garbage pail. The floor was strewn with spoons and forks. In the poop cabin, Mrs. Watson and the child were lying under a rain of heavy oil. One of the barrels on deck had split, and the oil was dripping slowly through the planks. . . . But why weary the reader with such matters?

On August 31st, at one in the morning, while I was at the wheel, I had a strange vision: I saw a peak in a cloud above my head. I rubbed my eyes. I thought I was delirious with fatigue. . . . But it was a peak. The foot of it was
simply masked by the mist. We were surely in the Aleu-
tians, for the map indicated that, in addition to the vol-
canoes in the interior which reach a height of 9,000 feet,
there are peaks 3,000 to 4,000 feet high along the coasts.
But which one of the Aleutians was it? The islands are
strung out from Alaska to Japan. And what were we to
do in the pitch-darkness? It would have been prudent to
tack so as to keep off while waiting for dawn. But now that
we had them, we weren’t going to let go. We heaved to and
kept our eyes open.
Dawn broke at six o’clock. It began to rain in buckets.
We could no longer see the Aleutians. There was absolutely
no visibility because of the rain. We decided to set our
course south. In that way, we would be sure of finding the
archipelago again.
About us were clouds of whalebirds. And in our wake
something we couldn’t make out. Half a dozen big brutes,
whose dorsal fins were cutting through the water, were
tearing into us. I went out and, in the driving rain, took
a shot at them with the .270. They vanished. As I was put-
ting the gun back, I heard Slim rapping with his heel on
the upper bridge. It was our alarm signal.
“What’s the matter?”
“Land aft!”

Behind us? I couldn’t figure it out. We tacked about. Our
noses were up in the air again. Above us was a dark summit,
and farther off, behind, was an even higher mountain, the
sides of which were covered with snow. The effect was
indescribable. Could it have been the Matushin volcano on
Unalaska Island, with an altitude of almost 6,000 feet?

We sailed along the coast for three hours, twisting our
necks as we looked at the peaks, though unable to tell which island they belonged to. The rain was needling us so hard that we had to come in every ten minutes to shake the water from our eyes.

A bay at last! But as far as we could see, there was no village on the bay. So it wasn’t Dutch Harbor. We stopped in order to think things over. We took out the map and compared it with what we had before us. Down below we thought we saw a channel with a signal. . . . Then two! Could it be Akutan? Could fate possibly have led us to the island of the whalers that I had been dreaming about ever since Coppermine and that I had been secretly hoping we would come to?

A narrows appeared, and then a gulf. At the end of the gulf were smoke and a loud dull noise. Probably the whale factories! A factory in such a setting? I would not have been more astonished had I seen Tupilak himself sitting on the mountain.

We stopped the motor and drifted in silence. A wharf came into sight. The wharf grew animated. Figures were waving their arms for us to come in.

I can still see the scene: the black water of the gulf, the amphitheater of bald mountains and the wharf on its pile foundations. The wharf was over our heads because of the low tide. Thirty faces looked down at us as we came alongside, no doubt wondering where we were coming from in this odd-looking boat with its naked deck, its lean flanks and its unkempt and defiant air. A ship in Akutan? It was such a rare event that arrivals were generally announced long in advance. But we had suddenly sprung up from nowhere.

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There was a general silence, save for the shrill cry of a gull. The men were distrustful and were waiting to see what was what. But something within us awoke, the reaction of men of all races when they return from a long voyage. My Eskimos, even the poorest of them, had this reaction whenever they came to a camp. However long their solitude had been and however great their desire to communicate at last with fellow creatures, they nevertheless first went through all the ritual gestures: stopping the team with a great lashing of the whip and then making the dogs lie down, one after the other. In short, they satisfied the universal code of pride. And then only did they raise their eyes and deign to notice the throng about them.

The basic reactions of men everywhere are so identical that we did the same. In the presence of the men who were watching us, we displayed a superb and affected casualness. And yet, God knows whether whalers are seamen! I give you my word that the men who were standing there were something out of the ordinary. Of every caliber and kind, from the old sea wolf to the gangster, from the purest Norwegian to the Aleutian half-breed. Oilskins brushed against the overalls of factory workers, and hats made of boiled leather were side by side with fur caps from which there emerged rebellious curls.

But what was that to us? For once, we were top dog. And even though we might have felt inept and pitiable during our nights of distress, hadn’t we succeeded, hadn’t we arrived? By virtue of this feeling of achievement which filled us for the moment, we were the equals of the greatest. We were Cook and Shackleton. If only for a few minutes. But we would not allow these few minutes to be shortened.
No sir! We wouldn’t notice anyone. We wouldn’t open our mouths before they spoke to us!

Finally the question came: “Where are you from?”

Without raising our eyes: “Coppermine.” Apparently, that meant nothing to them. Then, we condescended to add: “Coppermine, in the Arctic.”

A pause. Probably they didn’t believe us. Still and all, one of them finally said, “You can stay here . . . for the time being.”

“Thanks!”

A siren moaned. Its echo resounded through the gulf. One by one, the men turned on their heels and went off. We remained there. Then only did something within me which hitherto had remained taut suddenly give way. A calm came over me, an immense peace, after all that sea. . . .
The gods were with us! (Had we acquired merit without realizing it?) Not only had they dropped me on the very island I'd been seeking (Look at the map. It's just a pinhead in the immense string of the Aleutians), but the island also had everything we needed in the way of gear and pinion. The *Audrey* would be repaired. We were given full assurance by the manager of the place. After the first moments of distrust (and who could blame him? In his place, I wouldn't have put the slightest faith in the statements of such questionable-looking individuals), this giant of a man proved to be the nicest chap imaginable and was ready to help us however he could. Of course the job would take several days. But in view of the *Audrey's* condition, how could we have ever managed to do the 1,700 miles we still had to plow through the Pacific? The delay gave the Two a chance to rest and me to kill two birds with one stone. On one and the same expedition, I was going to fulfill two of my fondest dreams, namely, to live with Eskimos and to kill whales. . . .

So here my sea diary breaks off. The voyage of poor devils—lost on strange and hostile seas—stops for a while. If I relate the details, it's because they may be worth telling.
The place had a factory that was going full blast. It was savage work in an even more savage setting. I have never seen anything grimmer and harsher than the Aleutians, with their short, stubby vegetation, their bald mountains enshrouded in mist, their climate, which is less extreme than that of the Arctic but no less disagreeable because of the humidity, their flashes of livid light, and their sea, with its squalls and flurries. It was almost as if the whalers had deliberately chosen such a site so that they would be left in peace. However, a brief word about their station.

The idea was said to have originated with the Norwegian Sverdrup. The enterprise started with two “catchers” (two small whale chasers). Then business got bad and the plant was bought up by American capital, though there was no change in personnel, at least in the seagoing personnel.

The Norwegians are the best whalers in the world and quite proud of the fact. “Sir, this cannon harpoon is Norwegian. That whale rope is spun in Norway.” No doubt but that they’ve still got some of the old Viking blood in their veins, since they still furnish 60 per cent of the world’s whalers (about 12,000 men). And they all come from the same region, Oslofjord.

Alas, whalers no longer hunt with the hand harpoon. It has been replaced by a harpoon which is shot from a gun, a weapon invented in 1868 by a Norwegian named Svend Foyn. This sport, perhaps the most grandiose in which man has ever engaged, is no longer practiced today, except in rare places, for example, by the Eskimos of Cape Hope and the natives of the Azores. Today we see floating factories for cutting up whales, 10,000-ton mother ships, a description of which is enough to set one dreaming. Two steam saws
for cutting the bones; 23 kinds of winches; 16 vertical cookers; 6 horizontal Kvaerner boilers; 7 receiver boilers with rotary purifiers; a crew of 157 men, including 14 officers and 88 whalers. Melville came just in time, for even the killing of whales has become a "matter of pushing a button."

Thank God, Akutan had not yet reached that point! It was still at the stage of the cannon harpoon and the catchers. There were three boats in all, and they weren't much bigger than the whales they brought back.

The following is a description of the spectacle that goes on at the station. A catcher appears at the entrance to the gulf with a whale chained to the side. The animal is moored to a buoy, amidst the shrill cry of gulls which swoop down on the prey. Then, leaving the rest of the job to lesser men, the boat refuels and goes off again. A man rows in from land and digs a hook into the monster's tail. Immediately a winch on land starts hauling it in. The whale is then lifted up, tail first, on an inclined plane and laid on a strip of ground. This ground is the center of the spectacle.

While waiting for the monster to come in, several blond giants sharpen their round-bladed knives, the hafts of which are more than eight feet long. At a given signal, they get down to work. They wear oilskins and mountain boots. In fact, their work does involve a bit of climbing.

One of them, with his cutlass, hacks out steps in the monster's flank. And thus he gradually reaches the top, step by step. When he gets there, he digs a deep groove all along the body. The other man does the same thing on the side. When the double groove has been made, an enormous hook is brought up, a butcher's hook, but twenty times bigger. This is done with a feverishness and haste that
heighten the entire scene. The hook is then dug into the
whale's flesh at the free end. Then the men raise their
hands and make cabalistic signs with their fingers to an
invisible operator. The chain, at the end of which the hook
is attached, grows taut. Then the fat of the whale—which
varies in thickness from six to fifteen inches, depending
upon the animal—is ripped out. It sounds like paper being
torn, only amplified a hundredfold. If there is too much
resistance, the men signal again. The winch stops. The men
—they are called flensers—step in with their cutlasses. Then
they continue ripping. Finally, a strip of skin, black and
smooth as rubber, peels off all along the body. Then, as if it
were a carefully timed raid, another gang appears, the
Lemmers—Aleutes this time; they look like dwarfs beside
the others—who rush in for the kill. They cut the strip into
sections, sweep up the quarters with hooks and drag them
to a belt of scoops which carry them up to the boilers.

No sooner is the whale stripped of its fat than other
hooks go into action. The workers start pulling from the
side in order to turn the whale over. The animal is now just
an enormous mass of bloody flesh. The cables are brought
into play, and the whole works falls with a "plunk." The
head and baleens are cut up into sections. The baleen used
to be worth a fortune, but now, with the use of plastics, it
has lost its value. They are heaped up along the shore, and
when there is a mountain of the stuff, the lot is chucked
into the sea. The head is then carried up on an inclined
plane to a second story, where men, leaning on their yata-
ghans like Samurai, are waiting for it. Then it disappears
into a shed, where it is taken completely apart. The tongue
goes one place, the intestines another (the large intestine is
as big as a sewer pipe). All that remains is the carcass, in which three men, red with blood, are working like devils. Then, everything is cleared away.

This phenomenal dissection takes fifty minutes in all. Already the next whale is slowly and solemnly emerging from the water. There is just time enough to sharpen the cutlasses, and the whole scene is repeated. It looks as if they were shooting a film, what with the precision of the spectacle, the perfect co-ordination of the actors’ performances, the speed with which the scenes unfold and the grandiose, unreal setting. It’s as if they were reconstructing a prehistoric tableau, with men and material brought from a great distance and at such cost that they can’t afford to lose a single moment. Just as in the case of a film, there is a man whose job is to measure the terrain. He comes with his measuring tape and puts it around the star’s waist: 17 yards!

The truth of the matter is that the job of the specialist in question—a Dutchman known as “Mr. Van”—is to see to it that the whales that have been killed are of the minimum size and also that the whalers sacrifice as few pregnant mothers as possible. At the end of the season, he sends a “detailed” report to the International Whaling Commission, which, because of the fact that the number of sea giants is diminishing at an alarming rate, restricts the number of animals killed. (There have been years when the figure has exceeded 40,000.) Only a limited number of whales may be taken in any particular sea during a given year. Certain seas are closed until further notice. This is an eminently sound procedure, since a “factory boat” can digest as many as 25 whales a day.

When I got back to the Audrey, my eyes were full of
the hugeness of the spectacle. It had pursued me like a dream. I was a dwarf in the land of giants. It had also awakened my hunting instinct. I remembered the shark fishing I had done in the New Hebrides, on board the tramp steamer which sailed around the islands, and which dropped anchor every night in a different cove. We forged enormous hooks on the ship’s anvil. When night came—the heavy and phosphorescent night of the tropics—we would bait the sharks. I had just had an irritating experience with them. Returning from Vanikoro, south of the Solomons, in a small schooner with a native crew, I had had trouble with the propeller and needed someone to dive down and inspect it. There happened to be a Japanese on board who was an excellent diver. But no sooner had he gone down to look at the hull than he came up looking deathly pale. A shark! There was a twelve-foot shark under the hull. It was too shrewd to let itself be seen at the surface. It was waiting there, as if it knew that we were having trouble. Until we got to Espiritu Santo—in other words, for four whole days—it didn’t leave us, thus making it impossible for us to make the necessary repairs.

I was therefore out for revenge. We took some huge quarters of meat from the storeroom, wrapped them around the hook and tossed them into the sea. We got two or three sharks that way every night. Some of them were with their young, which, at the slightest alert, took refuge . . . in their mothers’ mouths! The biggest of all, a sixteen-foot brute, came out from under the hull to sniff at the bait. The next time, it swallowed it as if it were a meat ball. The rope stiffened, but the next moment the animal shook it, and it snapped like a thread. You can imagine how we swore. He
was the biggest specimen we had seen. And imagine our amazement when, two hours later, we pulled in another one that was just as big and discovered that it was the very same shark. It still had the first hook in its mouth, and yet it had bitten at the second. We immediately cut off its tail and flippers and then tossed the fellow into the water, where his cronies ate him in no time.

But what I wanted now was whales, and not sharks. I forgot about the *Audrey*. I was so caught up by the idea of whales that I even forgot the goal of our voyage—Vancouver. The man who had been hounded by the sea had suddenly become himself the hunter, the man in quest of prey, of a definite prey (with that amazing faculty man has of transforming himself, of passing as easily and naturally as can be from one excitement and passion to an entirely different one).

However, when I went to talk things over with the men on the spot, they shook their heads. "Even Mr. Van isn’t allowed!" And that was all they said. I got the same reply from the manager: "There’s nothing I can do for you. The captain is master of his ship." There was something he didn’t want to tell me, but what was it?

I drew upon my last resources. "That’s too bad. The Geographical Society and the Museum that sent me were hoping that——"

This time he looked at me a little more closely. "Do you have any identification?" I went to get my papers. He examined them. "If the captain’s willing," he said. "But these people are superstitious. So far, it’s not been a good season. If they don’t kill anything with you on board——"

I should have suspected it. The sea, so nervous and so
feminine in her moods (since she too obeys the moon), so mysterious too, and peopled with fantastic animals, begets more legends and superstitions than does anything else.

During the winter, I had also seen my Eskimos paying reverence to the Spirits of the Sea. Whenever they harpooned a seal, their first concern was to throw back into the water a piece of the animal’s liver so as to thank the goddess Nugliayuk—the evil woman of their mythology—for her kind gift. I had seen sailors from countries all over the world regard the stormy petrel and the company of porpoises as good omens. I also knew that whalers, because of the very nature of their work and its constant dangers, are the haughtiest and fiercest of men. Had I not read *Moby Dick*?

And there was also the account—which was true, and perhaps the most amazing story I have ever read\(^1\)—of a man who was spilled into the sea with his companions while they were preparing to harpoon a sperm whale and who was swallowed by the monster. A moment later he was vomited forth by the animal which had received its death-blow. He was picked up by his ship, the only survivor of this extraordinary adventure. When he came to, he saw a queer expression in the eyes of his shipmates. I should like to quote the passage:

"An uncomfortable silence prevailed, depressing and unusual. It was not due to the natural solemnity following upon the sudden loss of five of our number cut off in the prime of their health and strength, for, until I had told the wonderful story of my going down into Sheol, their de-

\(^1\) *Idylls of the Sea* by Frank T. Bullen, of which Rudyard Kipling has said: "It's tremendous. There's no other word for it."

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meanour had been very different. I looked appealingly and
wonderingly from one to the other, but could not meet any
eye. They were all furtively averted with intent to avoid
my gaze.

"To my relief we reached the ship speedily. I was as-
sisted on board gently enough, and led aft to where the
skipper was roaming restlessly athwart the quarter-deck,
like a caged animal. I was allowed to sit down while he
examined me keenly as to the occurrences of the day. The
gloom deepened on his face as I recounted all that I could
remember of the fate of my unfortunate shipmates, until,
my tale being told, he began, in curt, half-angry fashion,
to question me about my antecedents. Not liking his man-
ner, besides feeling faint and ill, I gave him but little infor-
mation on that head.

"Then he burst out into petulant disconnected sentences,
in bitter regrets for the lost men, blame of everybody gen-
erally, and at last, as if his predominant thought could no
longer be restrained, shouted, 'I wish ter God A'mighty I'd
never seen y'r face aboard my ship. Man an' boy I b'en
spoutin' fer over forty year, an' never see, no, ner hearn
tell ov, sech a hell-fire turn out. Yew'r a Jonah, thet's wut
yew air, an' the sooner we get shet ov ye the better it'll be
fer all han's, an' the more likely we sh'l be to hev some
luck.'

"This was such a crusher that I did not attempt to reply,
nor, owing to my condition, did I quite realise the full
brutality and injustice of the man as I might otherwise have
done. I crept forward to my bunk, to find myself shunned
by all my shipmates as if I were a leper, which treatment,
as I had hitherto been a prime favourite, was very hard to
bear. But in the face of ignorant superstition like this I was powerless. . . . The rest of the voyage to Valparaiso was a time of such misery as I have never experienced before or since, and I wonder that they did not land a hopeless lunatic.

“However, I fought against that successfully, determined to live if I was allowed to, and at last, to my immense relief, I shook off the dust of my feet against that detestable ship and her barbarous crew, thankful that their cruelty had stopped short of heaving me overboard as a sacrifice to the manes of my lost shipmates.”

That will give you some idea of the apprehension with which I went on board the Kodiak to see the captain. But I had two fine fox pelts with me. When the old man saw them, his eyes lit up. White foxes are dirt-cheap in the Arctic; though elsewhere . . . That clinched the matter.² I rushed to the Audrey to get my toothbrush and my camera and was back in no time.

The Kodiak immediately sailed out of the gulf with its motors purring smoothly. It was a change after the dry vibration of our Diesels. “You won’t find much comfort on board,” the captain had warned me. But compared to the cockroach hole in which I slept on the Audrey, the berth he offered me, which was wide enough for me to turn my body about with ease, was supercomfort. The general atmosphere, in contrast with that of the Audrey, was warm and intimate. In the pilothouse, which was filled with the rich smell of pipe smoke, words were exchanged at night

²By pure chance, it so happened that the hauls increased from the day I came on board, as a result of which my presence was regarded as a lucky omen.
in an undertone. "A half-point to the left . . . That's it!"
At dawn, we were on the whaling ground. The captain—an old Norwegian named Pete—was scanning the horizon. With his pipe in his mouth, he was leaning on his elbows at the window of the charthouse, as tranquilly as a householder on his balcony. "The whales seem nervous this morning. This kind of weather"—the sea was rather rough—"gets them a bit jittery. Ho, Andrew!" (to the lookout man) "Do you see anything? Wouldn't be a bad idea to let us have one!"

If I expected to find epic heroes when I joined these men, I was wide of the mark. And I must admit that my first contact was disappointing. These ill-assorted and unprepossessing men seemed more like merchant sailors. And they were so utterly placid. They looked as if they were going after sardines rather than whales. Except for its whaling rope, which was wound about the winch, the small cannon harpoon which was standing aft, and the gaffs and hooks, which were of larger than normal dimensions, the catcher was no different from an ordinary trawler, what with its rounded stern, its iron hull, the soot from its smokestacks and even its cook, who, so everyone said, made excellent pastry. It all gave the impression of a comfortable bourgeois existence. And the captain, with his pug nose and his domestic manner, spoke of whales not as if they were ferocious animals, but as of old acquaintances. "Those fellows have quite a machinery inside, you know. They can sure take in a lot of water!"

Suddenly Andrew signaled something from the top of the mast. The "old man" awoke. "Where is it? . . . That's good." (To the helmsman) "Two points to the right!" . . .
What?"—bending forward—"She going to blow only once? There she goes again! Full speed ahead!"

The *Kodiak* was already tearing through the waves to the spot where they expected the whale to turn up. Forward? No, it emerged from behind. Hard-a-starboard! Then began a zigzag course, for, when a whale is eating, it veers in every direction. The trick is to foresee where it will re-emerge.

The decks were already being cleared for action, while the gunner, with his legs planted wide apart amidst the flying spray, was making wild signs to the pilothouse. Everyone was running over the deck. Some were arming themselves with gaffs, others with hooks. The placid crew had suddenly grown frenzied. In fact, this was the most surprising feature of the entire scene. Englishmen in their place would have remained calm; they would have been precise but imperturbable. But these men had Viking blood. They were no longer slow and heavy but nimble and acrobatic. They had been aroused by the spirit of the hunt, which had given them a swiftness and precision wonderful to behold.

Even before the monster emerged, they saw it coming. And the astoundingly slow ascent from the depths, 50 yards away, was impressive. "There he is!" they yelled in a single voice. The tense gunner was ready to fire. The monster's head emerged, then its neck. Two slits opened from which a column arose with a "whoooo!" Then came the middle of the body. It looked less like a fish than a pachyderm. The shot went off, catapulting the harpoon and forty fathoms of rope that whirled through the air. The ribs of the boat trembled. The gunner disappeared in
a cloud of smoke (it's as dangerous to be behind the cannon as in front of it). There was just time to see the animal being hit right in the side before it disappeared in an eddy.

The boat stopped. The rope was now vertical. I leaned over the side and watched the line, at the end of which hung a whale. Was it dead? The men waited a moment and then pulled in. The rope vibrated with the tension. But the boat helped. With every lurch, it drew in five or six yards.

The whale was pulled up. It was dead. The rest happened faster than I can describe it. Two booms were thrown out in order to pass a chain around the monster's tail, which had first been amputated of its extremities. The Kodiak got under way again. By itself, the whale came up alongside the hull. Its throat, which was bluish-gray, tossed about in the sea like a huge waterskin. The back was streaked longitudinally with deep veins. These finbacks can easily do a speed of 35 miles an hour.

The animal had to be inflated, because whales with baleens do not float. The gaffs went into action again. They pierced a hole in the body through which a pipe was passed. When the monster had been blown up, the hole was stopped with the aid of a long pike, at the end of which was a wad of oakum.

A mile away, the catcher Patterson was pursuing its whale. We saw it turning about and about, veering in the foam as fast as it could. With the steep mountains as background, the effect was really Viking!

I went down to the messroom to get a cup of coffee and see the men at closer quarters. If a whaler does his work, you don't ask him where he comes from, any more than you do a Legionnaire. In the old days, the crews of such
boats were generally shanghaied. On the eve of sailing, recruiting agents or the mate would get a man drunk and put him on board. By the time the fumes of alcohol had dissipated, he found himself well out at sea. And if he didn’t like the looks of things, or if he shirked his job, his thumbs were strung to the mast, and the cat-o’-nine-tails began to hiss. The result was some of those crosses I saw in Hershel.

Doubtless, this sort of thing is no longer done. Nevertheless, the crew of a whaler is a mixed assemblage. For example, in the messroom were Tim, an Irishman; Peter, a Dane (it seems that their family names are unknown); and Max, a German with a silky beard and handsome profile. When he wasn’t on duty, he read Rilke.

“Talking about Germans,” said the skipper, “we used to have a cook named Theodore. How that man could swear! No need to tell you that on ships like ours the men go in for strong language. But he broke all records. That man could swear so hard that even in a squall there wasn’t a peep out of his pots and pans.”

We had returned to the station. At midnight, we took off again. And at dawn, we were harpooning a second whale. “It looks like a good one, judging by the spout,” Pete had said. This one, too, sank straight down. But when the rope was pulled in, it resisted furiously. Bah! since a whale couldn’t remain submerged for more than twenty minutes, it would have to come up again. Suddenly the rope grew taut. The whale was coming up. It was emerging a hundred yards ahead of us, spouting away and plugging for all it was worth.
It towed us for an hour. No longer was it a matter of a fisherman playing a fish at the end of his line, but of an animal with a rope attached, and at the end of the rope was a 250-ton ship which it was driving at a speed of three miles an hour as if it were a locomotive. Still and all, it seemed to be tiring. We began to pull in gently, but it merely worked up more steam. Finally, we got close enough to send out another harpoon. That did the job. (But once we had to shoot seven times!) As it was early, we decided to "flag" it and go after others. After inflating it, we dug a harpoon with a pennant attached into its body and let it drift.

Between two catches, I listened to Pete as he spoke about whales. "Sir"—he took his pipe from his mouth and spat—"I've been going after them for forty years, and the more I observe them, the less I know them. The ones you see here come from around the Philippines. They generally drop their young in the warm seas. Judging from the size of the whale calves we see here, before the mothers leave, they wait until the calves have grown a bit. At birth, the young are already a third of their adult size. When they go north, they follow the 'Japanese current,' which is the Gulf Stream of the Pacific—it goes along the coast of China—and then they veer off in the direction of Alaska. When the warm current reaches our part of the world, it clashes with the cold current from the Bering Strait. The cold kills the diatoma, which float in thick columns in warm current. When the diatoma decompose, they let off gases which help develop the chizopodia that constitute the plankton. It's this plankton that the whales eat.

"In the warm seas, they pick up parasites which bury
themselves under the skin. These parasites put forth a kind of bulb with four or five roots at right angles to it. The presence of the parasites indicates that the whale has just arrived. Another index of recent arrival is their thinness. Like all animals, whales don't eat while traveling."

"What about cachalots?"

"That's quite another matter! Unlike whales, they can remain under water for more than two hours and can sound 4,000 feet in quest of the cephalopoda (octopi) that they're so fond of. There are probably some terrific battles down below, judging by the pieces of octopus the sperm whales vomit up when they're harpooned. But as far as seeing these battles—"

Here I should like to quote Frank T. Bullen again. The passage\(^8\) describes a duel between an octopus and a sperm whale which he witnessed in the Straits of Malacca:

"I had to watch from eight bells to midnight, and at about 11.0 P.M. was leaning over the lee rail, idly gazing seawards, where the rising moon was making a broad lane of silvery light upon the smooth, dark waters. Presently there was a commotion in the sea, right in the way of the moon, and I immediately went for the night glasses to ascertain if possible the nature of it. In that neighbourhood there are several active volcanoes, and at first I judged the present disturbance to be one of these, sending up débris from the sea bed. A very short examination satisfied me that the trouble, whatever it might be, was not of volcanic or seismic origin. I called the Captain, as in duty bound, but he was indisposed to turn out for anything short of actual danger, so the watch and I had the sight to ourselves."

\(^8\)From an article in the English magazine Nature of June 4, 1896.
We edged away a little under the light draught of wind, so as to draw nearer to the scene, and presently we were able to realise its full significance. A very large sperm-whale was engaged in deadly conflict with a monstrous squid, whose far-reaching tentacles enveloped the whale's whole body.

"The livid whiteness of those writhing arms, which enlaced the cachalot like a nest of mighty serpents, stood out in bold relief against the black boulder-like head of the aggressor. Presently the whale raised itself half out of the water, and we plainly saw the awful-looking head of the gigantic mollusc. At our distance, something under a mile, it appeared about the size of one of our largest oil casks, which held 336 gallons. Like the rest of the calmar visible, it was of a peculiar dead-white, and in it gleamed two eyes of inky-blackness, about a foot in diameter. To describe the wonderful contortions of those two monsters, locked in a deadly embrace, is far beyond my powers, but it was a never-to-be-forgotten sight. The utter absence of all sound, for we were not near enough to hear the turmoil of the troubled sea, was not the least remarkable feature of this titanic encounter. All around the combatants, too, were either smaller whales or immense sharks, who were evidently assisting in the destruction of the great squid, and getting a full share of the feast. As we looked spellbound we saw the writhings gradually cease, and the encircling tentacles gradually slip off the whale's body, which seemed to float unusually high."

At the station, I had watched a cachalot being cut up. Though only fifty-four feet long, it was more monstrous-looking than a whale. The texture of its dark skin was like that of a rhinoceros. The front of its head was round and
reminded me of one of those huge Diesel locomotives of the Pennsylvania Railroad. In order to remove the oil contained in its head—a yellow, semifluid oil which, unlike that of the whale, does not go bad, hence its value—the men had to make a rectangular cut in its head and then remove the muscle. It is this muscle, located in the upper part and made up of a five- to nine-inch-thick mass of fibers which interlace toward the back, that gives the creature its gigantic strength. The oil was then removed from the head with enormous ladles.

Under the head was a jaw five to six yards in length and resembling that of a crocodile. In the lower part of the jaw was a set of forty teeth which the animal used to tear its food from the bottom of the sea. Though the cachalot swims less rapidly and can be approached more easily than a whale, it is definitely more dangerous. When struck by a harpoon, it is often bewildered at first and remains motionless. But the next moment, anything can happen. Pete had seen some that leaped entirely out of the water, with the tail touching the head. And they sometimes charge at their attackers. The sperm whale becomes furious when it feels that it is dying. The annals of whalers are full of stories of boats that have not only been attacked but struck at the most telling angle. Which proves that when the animal attacks, it reasons and calculates. Pete told me that he had once been in a boat of about the same dimensions as the *Kodiak* that had been struck squarely athwart by one of them.

"The boat literally shivered into pieces. It went down in seven minutes." 4

4 This assertion may seem incredible, but it is confirmed by similar cases.
“Have you ever seen whales coupling?” I asked.
“Yes, I have. And it’s the most graceful sight in the
world. The female, while swimming, leans a bit on one side.
The male then takes her very quickly. It lasts just a few
seconds. A real fast job! But”—his little eyes narrowed—
“they do it lots of times!”

Between runs, I went back to the Audrey to see what
was going on. The Two were in the pilothouse. The num-
ber of cigarette butts that had accumulated indicated that
they hadn’t budged.
“Aren’t you going to walk around a bit?” I asked.

I was more confounded than ever by the indifference of
these two men to everything that happened. I could under-
stand their lack of interest in whales. But what did interest
them? If a man is caught up by a single passion and is blind
to everything else, I can understand that. In the West Indies
I met a scientist whose sole interest was lichens. “Not moss,
my good man. Lichens!” A man who had been all around
the world, who had visited every corner of the globe, and
had seen only that. And his evaluation of the countries he
had been through was based purely on the varieties of
lichens they contained. The obtuse expression on his face
bore witness to his obsession. It was apparent that he had
seen nothing else, that he had been oblivious to the human
or the picturesque. He kept his eyes to the ground, alert
to recognize his prey from afar, exactly as a hound is at-
tracted by the mere odor of deer but won’t ever stop if he
catches the scent of a rabbit on the way. Comical as his
specialty was, to such a point that his room was one big
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display of old newspapers on which his precious hauls were spread out to dry, he did, after all, have his particular passion (like the skipper who was completely indifferent to the port and city when he put in somewhere, and who never went ashore, merely requesting his mate to bring him back some colored post cards, for which he had a passion).

Art and Slim had no passion for anything. Not even the Arctic had a pull for them, for they left it without even turning their heads. I was unable to understand this indifference. It really frightened me. I’m full of excuses for cranks and faddists, even for madmen—of whom I’ve known quite a few. But those who like nothing! There seems to be an emptiness within them that I can’t fathom, and that almost terrifies me, probably because it doesn’t seem human to me. Going after whales was sheer romanticism. All that they were interested in was their own affairs. Nothing else. They were there because their engines were being repaired. The sooner the job was done, the better.

I hurried away from the Audrey and went back to my whales. But one day, on going ashore, I was called to the telegraph office. There was a cable for me. How had it got there? I tried to figure it out. Then I realized that it must have arrived in Coppermine; that Coppermine, knowing we were to stop at Dutch Harbor, had retransmitted it, and that Dutch Harbor had probably been informed of our presence by Akutan, owing to the fact that the Aleutians are a strategic base.

I opened the telegram: ARE WITHOUT NEWS. MOTHER. That was all. But to me, who knew my family, it expressed not only worry but anguish. The mere reading of this paper caused a sudden transformation in me.

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The more I think about them, the less I understand human beings. A week before, the vagabond within me had disappeared to make way for the hunter. And now the hunter was being superseded. It was as if several living creatures existed within me at the same time, not in combination, not in any kind of blend, but in simple juxtaposition; as if the different selves that dwelt within me not only did not interpenetrate or influence each other, but actually lived in a state of perfect apartness, without the slightest relationship among them. I felt as if I were made up of watertight compartments, of distinct personalities each oblivious of the others’ existence. If they did know that the others existed, it was only because one of them happened to be occupying the drawing-room or the bathroom for the moment. How often had I witnessed this sudden change within me, this sudden taking over by one of the parties!

I have related in Kabloona what happened to me at the King William Land post. There I was, buried in thought, permeated with the Arctic, which so filled me that I couldn’t think the slightest thought, didn’t have the slightest desire that was unrelated to it—when suddenly I heard the portable radio start talking French. How Paris managed to reach me there I’ll never know, but it was Station Paris-Inter. The announcer had probably just finished the news broadcast, for now, in a familiar tone of voice, he was giving the weather report. “In the Paris area, fair, except for scattered showers. The temperature is 72 degrees.”

God knows how trivial the announcement was—and it was obvious that the man was in a hurry to get it over with so he could go home to bed—but the effect upon me was fantastic. Suddenly, without any transition, I was another
man. A Frenchman from France, a man who loved his native countryside and who was relishing it. I could see its gentleness, and the little village with its bell tower emerging from a grove of trees, and that white twisting highway, over which a cart, full of peasants in blue smocks, was going gaily to market. I heard the ducks quacking in the neighboring pond; I smelled the fragrance of the grass. . . . All the Eskimo in me drained out.

And here, at Akutan, on this whale platform, I ceased to see what was about me. . . . An image was before my eyes, an image of old parents, alone at home, facing each other in the drawing-room as the light slowly faded, unaware of what I was, of what I had become, knowing nothing about my life of the past twenty years, except that I was gone, of parents who had been worrying about me all their lives, unable to understand why I had gone off to endure hardships in Godforsaken places, when I could have lived so comfortably at home; parents who, though educated, were, like most French people, ignorant of geography and were reduced to saying that their son was "somewhere in the islands." No doubt but that this last absence had been even harder on them, for not only had I been unable, as a result of circumstances, to get in touch with them—while they must have regarded me as lost—but I had not wired them from Coppermine for fear of frightening them by announcing my voyage.

So I, too, suddenly felt a need to get going, but for quite different reasons from those of the Two. I went back to the Audrey. The motors were still being repaired. The job would take another three days. As for the wireless—which might have been so helpful during the voyage, but which,
with its constant "blanks," merely inflicted upon me additional disappointments—no sooner was it in order again than Slim botched it with tubes that were too strong.

I left the boat feeling haggard. Not only had I no further desire to go whaling, but the station itself suddenly looked sinister to me with its twisted harpoons, the grinding of winches and the heaps of bloody meat. To get away from it all, I climbed the mountain. It was just a series of sweating walls, bristling with low, rough vegetation that scraped me as I advanced. I came down again as best I could, for the lava came loose beneath my feet. A cold rain had begun to fall and was being driven by the wind in diagonal sheets. In the bay below, the peevish gulls were lined up on the backs of the whales waiting for the dissection. There were also some crows, but I didn’t know of what species. They had a pocket under the throat and croaked as they flew; then, folding their wings, they glided on their sides, and then turned round again and croaked as if they all had goiters.

At night, a noise burst forth that resounded over the mountainside. It came from the boilers, whose valves were being opened. The waste was being dumped into the bay. The factory disposes of its refuse periodically. First comes the smell. It fills your nostrils and nauseates you; then comes the rest, hitting against the posts of the wharf, ricocheting from one to the other, with a roar that swells out at night like the peals of an organ.

The Audrey was still laid up. The engines had been fixed, but a bearing was heating. It had to be broken in.

Finally, everything was ready. We said a rapid farewell (I gave the manager some ermine skins, and, in exchange, he gave me some sperm-whale teeth and whale ears), and
we sailed into the bay. The Audrey tooted and was answered by the factory whistle, and everything receded.

Seven hours later, we got to Dutch Harbor, where there was an American coast-guard station. The bearded sailors gave us a hand with the landing. The place wasn’t much more cheerful than Akutan. It was a frontier post, the kind we used to see in the old-time Western films, with its single street—though the muddy lane hardly deserved to be called a street—lined with shacklike saloons in which nondescript prostitutes listened to juke boxes grinding out the same tunes over and over. It was all a perfect expression of remoteness from everything, of utter dreariness.

In the first saloon I entered, two typical-looking, rangy American boys, with their hats pulled down on the back of their heads, were lounging wearily at the bar over their glasses of beer. They had been sent to build a lighthouse, but they were in the dumps. The blues clung to them, de-humanized them. They wanted me to drink with them, but I refused. What they were really inviting me to share was their gloom. I had just one idea, to stay there as short a time as possible.

Early in the morning, we heaved up. We crossed the Unalga Pass. Over at the tip of Cape Cheerful was a catcher fringed with foam, and closer by were whalebirds that whirled and plunged into the water, sending up a flaky spray.

We had a fourth man on board, a Greek sailor named George who had worked on fishing boats. Art took him on because he wanted desperately to get to Vancouver. We hoped that, having an extra hand, we might get a bit more sleep.

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We were out in the ocean again, less as navigators—which presupposed instruments and seamanship—than as swimmers who entered the water at one end and emerged as best they could at the other, who every now and then would be thrown up on shore, as at Point Hope and Akutan, just long enough to catch their breath and then would fall back into the sea.

But this time the act of setting foot on the Audrey again filled me with a curious kind of joy. The colorless deck, whose slippery parts were so familiar to me, the door of the pilothouse with its threshold that I constantly tripped over—in order to avoid stumbling I would always lift my foot too high—and its green copper knob which creaked dryly against the wood every time it turned, the pilothouse itself with things all scattered about, whose dimensions we knew down to the last inch—it was like seeing old friends!

There were the tarnished portholes, which had become semiopaque; and the wheel, so familiar to the touch (the wood was cracked for want of paint). “So you’re here again, you old slut! You’ve given us a time of it!” And the greasy chain, whose slack made the wheel jump and caused the rudder to obey with a delayed reaction. And the plank of
the binnacle that had such comfortable dimensions that, without letting go of the wheel, you could explore it just by stretching out your arm. These were all familiar things. There was the tobacco jar (without its lid, but there was no danger of the tobacco’s drying on board). And the chronometer that was screwed to the wall and that, like all sea chronometers, advanced very slowly in rough weather . . . when it didn’t remain motionless. It was really and truly like coming home again.

The Two seemed to feel the same way. Maybe we had become sailors without realizing it. It was as if the sea were our natural habitat. We were at ease on the water. I might even say “in the water,” for when the deck was washed by the waves in stormy weather, we were somewhat amphibious. We had taken on the assurance—perhaps we were ingenuous, but that’s how we felt—of people who say, “We can take anything!”

At Dutch Harbor, the officials had tried to throw a scare into us when we announced that we intended to head straight for Vancouver. “Cut through in the middle of the Pacific? It’s sheer madness! Look”—with a finger on the map—“you’ve got two depressions traveling in opposite directions. In three days’ time they’re going to meet. That’s where you’ll be!”

“Depressions?” we answered, raising our eyebrows. “We’re not depressed.” Because we were nonsailors, we escaped the rule. The rule says that when you go from Dutch Harbor to Vancouver, you’ve got to make for the coast of Alaska and follow it all the way down through a channel that’s infested with currents, and that you’ve got to drop anchor every night. Not for us! We were going to

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cut straight through. Because we weren't professionals, we had—at least, we thought we had—the privileges reserved only for amateurs.

In addition, I was pleased at being with Art and Slim again. My few days' outing at Akutan had wiped away the disagreeable elements in our relationship and left only what was best, the memory of tasks performed in common. I now saw the Two as comrades, partners in adventure. I felt for once that I was at one with them.

It was George's presence on board that had revealed to me this unity, this complicity. George was perhaps more of a sailor than we, but he hadn't done what we had. At each of his remarks—the wheel wasn't worth a damn, he didn't like this, he didn't like that—we were at one against him. We forbade him to criticize the Audrey! I was now defending the boat that I had loathed so. "I'd like to see you find another one like her!"

What difference did it make that she had a queer and ungainly shape—she was a fine boat! Just because George dared criticize the Audrey, I suddenly felt a real warmth for the old tub. What did he mean by saying that the boat was no good? She held up, didn't she? Wasn't that what counted? All right, so she was stubborn! She didn't like the bit to chafe her mouth. She didn't want to be forced to go somewhere against her will. But didn't every boat have its idiosyncrasies, its moods? Wasn't it just this human side that made you feel attached to it? George had better not go complaining to the Two if he knew what was good for him!

I told them some of his comments. They snickered. And for once I approved. We were like all seamen, who, among
themselves, during a storm, call their ship a bitch, a jinx and what not, but who, when they’re in port, don’t even deign to glance at the other ships. For their own boat they have only the highest praise. “The best set of planks I’ve ever set foot on!” they stubbornly proclaim. Isn’t it characteristic of any esprit de corps that when a stranger is present you put up a united front against him? What was that Greek complaining about? Let him shut up with his dumb jabber. He’d be better off if he took the wheel. Besides, it was his watch! That’s how men are. Provoke them and they become dishonest.

Still and all, on the third day the wind started getting cooler. Bah! Since it was blowing from the northwest and the waves were pushing us three-quarters to the wind, it could still turn out to be a nice day. . . .

George wasn’t so sure about it. “You’re not getting scared, my boy?” (I was getting sarcastic.) “Do you need a launch to haul you into Dutch Harbor?” George shook his big nose. (He was all shoulders, a bull-necked peasant.) George wasn’t in the mood for joking. In the first place, he was disappointed at not having found a crew. And besides, he didn’t like the look of those little purple clouds on the horizon.

The horizon was veiled. And the sea was beginning to rise. . . . More breakers! Were we in for a Pacific surge, just for a change?

The Audrey’s bow was already being washed. The waves were rolling and slobbering over the deck. It was time for chow. “Better take a look in the messroom,” said Slim. I knew why he wouldn’t risk it himself. Whenever he went
there in rough weather, he would come back squeamish. The messroom, with its odors, was a treacherous place.

I found Mrs. Watson there. She was already feeling sick. I took her back to the pilothouse and persuaded her to lie down. Then, as it didn’t do any good, I brought her back to the stern.

Rain was beginning to come down. The weather was getting bad. George was at the helm. His face was ashen, with an expression that seemed to be saying: “I knew it was bound to come!” I looked at him. Was he going to be a jinx? (You couldn’t be too careful about the men you took on.) “Better take the wheel from him,” I thought. “Just to play safe. The fellow’s a beast of burden, not a fighter.” And it was a fight that was looming. The toughest part of our trip—I know it now—wasn’t behind us. The worst was yet to come!

The rough weather was building up. This time there were no surprises. The preparation was slow and methodical. Architect’s work. First, the wind was whipped up. . . . The sea would come later. There was nothing lost in waiting. The wind was rising. I could tell by the hum. It sounded like a throbbing string getting more and more taut.

My whole body felt the thing coming on, and I started trembling. For a high-strung chap like myself, the worst moment is the approach of the fight, when the boxer, sitting on his stool in the ring and facing an empty corner, sees his opponent cutting through the swirling crowd. But in this case it was the opponent who was rolling up his sleeves, without taking his eyes off me. The colossus was getting his club ready, while I stood there facing him, but without any weapon. I felt I had courage. But what good is courage against a man who’s slowly getting ready to brain you?
I was getting scared. . . . George had been right in feeling that something serious had been brewing. He was a seaman. I had often observed this premonition of danger among my primitives. Suddenly they would jump to their feet, their entire being in a state of alert. Something impalpable had just set them on guard. Like animals, they had sensed the approach of something. They had had a vague, and at the same time very precise feeling that something, somewhere, had changed, that a balance had just been upset and that a disturbance, and therefore a menace, was in the air. To them, the air was a living, sensitive matter, full of fluids—scientists would speak of currents of force. And any modification of these currents, whether a change in the weather or the approach of a man, was instantly registered on their sensibilities, even if it were indicated by no visible sign. They contained within them a warning signal. And what a precious signal it was!

Down below, the sea was swelling. Not at the surface—the waves were only the crust—but depthwise. Someone was churning the sea, some baker from Hell. He was kneading the dough, slowly and methodically: the yeast of the tempest. Then it came—the dough began to rise. . . . This time it was serious. The sea wanted to settle with us once and for all. It was gathering all its strength, all its wrath.

All its violence, too. The wind kept rising. Up we went, and the waves lashed out at us. "I'm pretty near sick!" said Slim. A warning shock. The Audrey had just been jolted. It was only the beginning, a couple of jabs from our opponent, to see whether we scared easily. It was just a preliminary feint.

The face of the sea had altered. It had changed from
something human, as it were, into something inhuman. It looked like a giant hydra lashing the waves with its tail in order to rouse them and dash them against us—when it wasn't spitting right into our faces. For the moment, the chief thing was still the wind, a slashing wind that sliced off the crests of the waves and hurled them horizontally through space. It was like a white curtain over the sea.

Was it the result of the two depressions they'd talked about at Dutch Harbor? Was this increasingly shrill whine—the whine of an animal rather than of a wind—the "force 10 wind" they had predicted? The waves were dashing in and up from everywhere. Was it wind against the sea or the sea against itself?

The Audrey was being pushed about; the Audrey was getting scared. She hadn't had time to get settled in the storm. But would she get settled? She was too light and was rearing and being whipped upward. At the crest of the waves she was caught in a twist and swiveled about. For a moment, she remained in equilibrium. Then she plunged, or rather toppled, like an animal over an obstacle.

I was at the helm. . . . The wheel was going wild, too. It kicked out. Suddenly it stiffened (I was bearing down on it with all my might). Then it darted from my hands and spun three times around, almost breaking my arm. I swore at it. "Just wait, you old bitch!" (Like those skinny, mean-tempered shrews who kick with their heels.) "I'll fix your wagon for you! Wait and see!"

I was in a temper. I yelled at every wave that came along; they had a harsh, metallic look. I was roaring at the top of my lungs. Faced with the outburst of the sea, the human had broken loose in me, too.
The hood of the poop cabin had been knocked out of place by the waves. The water had got into the cabin. Mrs. Watson was sitting at the edge of her berth, petrified (fear had the odd effect of immobilizing her). Muriel was the only one alive. "Why is Mummy sad?" she asked. I made the mother gulp down a few drops of vinegar. She spat them right out. Too bad! No time to bother with them. I braced the hood of the roof and left them there.

As for the Audrey, she stood up under it. How she did it I don't know. The old carcass had guts! At times she trembled in all her limbs and just stood there, inert. I kept wondering whether she would revive in time, and she always did. But it was foul play, for while one wave attacked from the front, another came up from under with a backbreaking whack. The tub was sent reeling, and then the boat collapsed. I jerked it up. The helm was a bit, and I was pulling at the bit.

Night came down on us, as if someone were covering the sea with a lid. With the coming of darkness, our vital space contracted. The dividing line of the waters was no longer the hull, but the walls of the pilothouse. These were now the target of the sea's attack.

We had to set up in the darkness. To buttress with our shoulders. To struggle pitifully, desperately. To take the blows without knowing where they were coming from and without being able to hit back. To be squeezed together in that narrow space—the only one that was left.

I can still see myself doing an enormous split, with one foot against the helm and the other against the wall of the pilothouse. The next second, a shock dashed me against the wall and a second later hurled me back to the helm. I clung
to it as it slipped. Was I holding it, or was it holding me? ... "God Almighty, what's going on here?" (I was talking to myself so as not to lose self-control. As long as I kept my wits about me, things would be all right.) I kept running my hand over my forehead. I felt as if I were covered with big beads of sweat, and I was probably red as a beet. ... What did the compass say? I had to keep our course. ... Our course, that was all I could think of. But the needle was shaking wildly in the box. Was it the needle that was driving me mad, or was it my own madness that was unhinging it? During the day, it was the danger; at night, it was madness that gripped me, that pressed down on my temples. ... The only light was the one in the binnacle. It was tiny and feeble, but it was all we had. ... I had to hold out! (I kept repeating this to myself.) Hold out until dawn!

The Audrey had just bolted, like a horse trying to clear an obstacle with a standing jump. I was knocked over backward. The bunk stopped me, then threw me back again. I hurled myself at the helm (it had spun all the way round as soon as I let go). I caught it again. ... The course had shifted from 100 to 10. Had to bring it back. Dangerous as it was, this was my one and only concern. I gasped with the effort. Climbing the dial meant climbing up myself from the depths of nowhere.

A voice nearby, both close and infinitely remote: "All right!" It was Slim. He was awake and wanted to take the wheel. But I was scared. I felt that if I let go of it, anything might happen. The business of turning the wheel over to Slim was the moment of acutest anxiety. ... He had his hands on it—two heavy hands. They looked like blades at — 196 —
the end of oars. I was still holding the wheel. My hands were contracted. I had a conviction that I was the only one who had the "feel" of it. . . . Slim shoved me away. This time I let go. . . . Come what may! . . . No sooner did I let go than all life drained out of me. I collapsed limply between the helm and the chadburn.

With the return of day, the vision expanded. But it wasn't any more reassuring. The white curtain had disappeared, revealing the immensity of the sea, the tremendousness of the waters. Waves all the way to the horizon. When we were on a crest, we saw an endless succession of other crests rushing in. The fight was too one-sided! . . . If a hundred tons wouldn't break us down, well, then, a thousand would! . . .

What did we look like in the face of all that? Like pygmies. What was a man's backbone to those spouts? And yet it stayed stiff. Man's fight against the sea is perhaps the thing that best gives the measure of his greatness. . . . I can still see that trawler off the coast of Africa. Throughout the squall, the ten members of the crew and I clung to the rim of the trawl that had to be pulled in. For though the cable of the winch brought it alongside the boat, it still had to be raised by the arms of men. And we hauled away, less with our physical strength than with our ferocity. I can still see our frenzied gestures and tense faces—we looked like unleashed devils—and I can still hear the yells with which we urged each other on. We would never have been able with our arms alone to hoist that pocket, filled as it was to bursting with all kinds of fish. So we waited for the boat to tip toward the sea until the water reached our bellies and the rope slackened. Then we would
quickly lean overboard, or rather we entered the sea in order to catch another two yards of rope, repeating the process again and again. We were no longer human bodies, but rather a link between the boat and the sea, a frail link, to be sure, but one that held because it wanted to hold. And through it all, the heavy sea beat down on our backs. As each of us emerged, we looked and counted to see whether we were all still there. We were, and clinging to the trawl. It was ours, and something within us, bigger than ourselves, wouldn’t give in!

But on the Audrey I began to think—either from despair or fatigue—that we wouldn’t hold out. I fell into a strange frenzy. I started yelling at the top of my lungs: “I want women! By God, I want women!” Each of us has his own way of responding to death when it calls. What I wanted was to spurt out!

But the end didn’t come. The waves swamped the Audrey, but she emerged every time. Slowly, solemnly. She was more of a ghost than a ship. (But what was the anima that dwelt within her, what was the energy that sustained her?) A dead hulk that refused to lie down, that would rise up again and again and throw off its shroud. The analogy is the more striking in that the Audrey emerged from the wave blanched, as polished as a bone.

Everything on board was affected with the sea’s viciousness. To what is that occasional malignity of inanimate objects due? You left your eraser on the table. It’s no longer there. Your pencil escapes from your fingers and lodges in a crack from which you can’t extract it. Or else a sewing needle stabs you to the bone, the handle of a door pinches you like a beak. And you not only get hurt but you’re
seized with panic. A general mockery has taken possession of objects, and it's directed against you, and you alone. And not only things, but the elements.

A while before I had run to the messroom. As I dashed in, a pot took off from its nail and flew straight at my head. Hardly had I regained my senses than a jar tumbled down on me from behind (as if objects had been freed from natural laws and were indulging in eccentricities with a maliciousness peculiar to themselves). I put out my hand for my tobacco jar, which was what I had come for. It escaped. It scattered its contents on the floor while the lid rolled round and round. Just as I was leaving, I saw a detached air shaft bolt toward the rear, smashing everything in its way. “Catch the lunatic!” I almost yelled. But I must have been having a hallucination. For there went a piece of ripped-off tarpaulin, twirling in front of my eyes like a lasso, and disappearing into the sea.

The Evil One was at large in the pilothouse too. The coffeepot left its corner and went crashing against the opposite wall. The drawer of the berth emerged, stopped and went back into place with a dry bang. The engine shaft creaked like a skeleton. Slim was sitting on the crate of potatoes with his head in his hands. “Jesus!” he groaned to himself. And again, “Jesus! But who wants to be a sailor, anyway?”

Night already. It seemed that it had been light a bare two hours. But time no longer was. Time had stopped—once again—the moment the storm began.¹ Again the cesspool.

¹I learned later on from Slim that in my state of aberration—or fatigue—I was unable to distinguish between morning and evening.
The night before, I had had the impression that all that remained of the ship was the pilothouse. A square box. And we were rats, caught in the box. Now I had the impression that the water was inside the pilothouse. The walls seemed to be buckling. We were in the water. Worse than that. We were floating in some bluey-green stuff that turned my stomach. At times, the level rose and reached my belly—I swear it seemed so to me! I had to push forward in order to see the face of the compass. Then the pilothouse emptied. The ship went down by the stern. The clack-clack-clack of the engines had stopped. Were we going to sink by the stern? I looked at the chronometer. Its hands were solemnly still. Then the pilothouse filled with air again.

The noises, the darkness, the weirdness of it! The sound of the waves as they crashed. The wind was pulling all its stops. At times, a high-pitched note, like the howl of an animal; at others, a rumble, as of a snorting monster. The engine shaft groaned. The chain rasped in the forward hold, suggesting an army of ghosts on the march. Muffled noises were coming from the hold. What the devil was going on?

Watson was lying on the floor, sick. I gave him a shaking every hour. "Oiling time!" The body got to its feet and leaned against the wall. It was no longer the usual Watson who was there—his complexion was waxy, his eyes were turned inward—but a Watson who belched, who tried to pull himself together. "Never felt like that!" He tried to control himself. Then: "I'm going!" The unwieldy body disappeared. A moment later he was up on the ladder again. He couldn't take it down below.

How many times had I given over the wheel and taken it again? Around us, everything was getting thicker. We

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were moving in slow motion. We sank into something gummy, opaque...

Where were the others? They disappeared only to reappear abruptly. Art loomed up before me on the deck, seemed to ponder, and then faded away. Slim? Squatting on the floor in the pilothouse, heating potatoes. I wondered whether he was reverting to the old gestures. He was concentrating on what he was doing, leadenly, stubbornly, as if his salvation depended upon what he was doing at that moment. Suddenly, he raised his head. "Huh, what? . . ." as if returning to a world of which he was no longer a part. Then, back to what he was doing, alone with himself, weirdly absorbed.

We plunged into this solitude, every man for himself, everyone far, far away, preoccupied with something that manifested itself in gestures incomprehensible to the observer. I saw Watson pulling a knife from his pocket and slowly, carefully, scraping his nails, one after the other (he who never cleaned them), or tapping the porthole with his fingers, as if he were trying to remember a tune (he who wasn’t the least bit musical). From where did we drag up these gestures? At any rate, they meant that we no longer belonged to the boat. The Audrey was alone, on her own. If she didn’t go down, it was because Fate wouldn’t permit it. As for us, each was pursuing his own solitude, every man for himself. . . . A while before, when I had seen Slim collapse, I had exulted: "Ha! Now I’ve got you!" But now I was way beyond that stage. Between myself and the others there was no more animosity, or even contact.

Suddenly I came to myself. What was happening to Mrs. Watson and the child?
I worked my way to the stern, staggering through the darkness, clutching at whatever I could get my hands on. When I finally reached it, I moved the hood of the cabin as best I could. Suddenly I heard something—laughter. Laughter at a time like that? Was I out of my mind? I went down three steps. What did I see? Muriel standing in front of the berth, where her mother was lying like a corpse, and laughing to her heart’s content, as only a child can laugh, at the wild dance of the objects about her.

The disorder in the cabin was indescribable. The coalbin had been knocked over, and its contents were strewn all about. The floor was littered with dirty socks and old shoes. The lamp was swinging from the ceiling like a lunatic. To Muriel, the whole spectacle was just a circus! A special show for her amazement and delight. With dancers and corps de ballet, the lamp waltzing on the ceiling, the shoes pattering after each other, the water keg rolling in the middle of the empty space like a dancing bear. Muriel was laughing. I heard her laughter ringing in the wind. Coming from a world to which I no longer belonged, the laughter astounded me; the child’s joy left me dumfounded. She was the only one on board who was still alive! By virtue of seeing everything through her own eyes, she was protected. And hadn’t I been, too, all winter long, when I saw the Arctic as I wanted to see it, so that the blizzard and the filth of the men simply added to the picturesqueness? Wasn’t that what salvation was? Isn’t that the way the office clerk protects himself when he sees, beyond his dreary account books, visions of voyages, of sunny climes? And the little typists, when they daydream about Marlene Dietrich? And the poet, in war, when he forgets the battle and grows
ecstatic over the magical spectacle of the bombardment?

Now, I thought to myself, I understand how Father Henry, that hermit of the North, was able to stand it in his seal hole while I, at his side, was dying of cold. Because he didn’t see the cold the way I did. For him, the cold wasn’t something that bites, but an instrument of sanctification. . . . The same holds for saints, for poets, for children. . . . Muriel was laughing. Her laughter defied the storm. It was greater than the storm. When the objects stopped, gasping for breath, she urged them on, she clapped her hands: “More! More!”

But we—exactly what were we? Living corpses? Somnambulists? . . . I went back to the pilothouse. There I found Slim standing at the helm with his legs spread and carefully running a comb through his hair! Aren’t these the very gestures we make in the antechamber of death?

Day again. My despair changed to indifference. I watched the Audrey thrash about. “Why go to all that trouble? You look grotesque!”

Was it the exhaustion of those fifty days at sea? I yawned several times in succession and almost unhinged my jaw. In short, I was bored. I didn’t give a damn whether we sank or not. What I wanted was to sleep. For the first time in my life, I felt indifferent in the face of death. I understood the attitude of a crew that could go to sleep out of sheer disgust. The boat would continue by itself and would plunge into the abyss with a contemptuous crew sleeping in its flanks.

A lapse. How long was it? . . . I was at the wheel again. My body was there, but my self was elsewhere.

I had known such states in the Arctic. Perhaps they were due to extreme fatigue or to a feeling that I was hopelessly
lost. I felt that I had a split personality. I remembered once walking over hills. . . .

I’d been traveling all day and then, out of sheer stubbornness, decided to continue throughout the night, if need be, so as to reach the sea. As I sat on a peak, my permanent self watched my fleshly part seek its way among the passes. “What are you doing here? What destiny has brought you to these regions to die?” Slowly I thought back over my life. I saw the turns I ought perhaps to have taken. “No! It’s right as it is. You’ve done what you could. It’s not much, but aren’t we all in the same boat?” And I felt a great wave of reconciliation, both with life and with myself.

Everything seemed to me to be simple and blessed. However infinitesimal my achievements might have been—and they were the more so since I was seeing them in Time and Space—I was not angry with myself because of their inadequacy. “It’s been botched. But isn’t life a failure for every one of us? The thing that counts is not how high we’ve climbed but the effort we’ve made to get where we are. Do you have little to show for all your effort? At least, your toil will be counted.” I was probably absolving myself too easily. But the unreal, moonlit landscape was tender and merciful.

My body was at the wheel—I recognized it through the glass panes of the pilothouse—but my disembodied spirit was elsewhere. I’ll tell you exactly where (one must be exact even in the realm of the unreal). It was over and above at the right, a little way off. It was in view of my body, but whereas my body was riveted to the wheel, my liberated mind was roving about. . . . I was musing. (I am making a distinction here between musing and dream-
ing, for there is a detachment in musing which is not the case in dreaming. When I dream, I'm a prisoner; when I muse, I'm free.) I drifted from one memory to the other, most of them memories of childhood. No getting away from them. (But does man ever divest himself of them? The dying soldier calls for his mother. The man who curls up with his last spasm takes the position of the fetus.)

Childhood, to me, is the golden age, the age of impulses, of promises. But the impulses are squelched almost at once, the promises remain unfulfilled. And all because society stifles us, ruining all our illusions one by one and destroying all our hopes. Life, to me, is just one long failure, a succession of frustrations. I can still see myself as a lad sitting on the stone edge of the sunk fence facing my parents' home, which was drenched with sunlight. Beside me was a little girl. She was no older than I, but she was already very sedate. She sat there like a little lady in her blue-taffeta dress. Her big black eyes were terribly serious. I was courting her, after a fashion. I was telling her about a snake which I had seen hypnotizing a bird the day before. It was a fine story, and I tried to tell it as well as I could. I was already a bit of a mimic. She hardly listened. I gave it all I had. I imitated the bird flitting frantically from branch to branch, with its eyes on the motionless reptile. I finished my story and waited. Then she looked at me with scorn and indignation. "I don't like your story at all!" She got up and went away. I never saw her again. . . . I saw myself as a young man in my room at school, during the evening study period. My cell had a number, as in prisons: 72. As far as the school was concerned, I was just a number corresponding to a card in the files of the Discipline Board. It was
eleven o’clock, but the study period ran until midnight. Sitting at my table, with my homework before me, I mused about hunting and the great voyages about which my uncle, who was an explorer, had so often spoken to me. I was pursuing the wild goat on the slopes of the Himalayas when suddenly I saw a harsh face pressed against the glass of the door. It was the supervisor. There I was, to all appearances perfectly in order and deeply engrossed in a trigonometry problem. But that wasn’t what he was looking at. It was the dreamer in me that he was eying, the dangerous creature who was trying to escape from the rule. The face of the inquisitor remained glued to the pane for a long time (I raised my head and then quickly turned away, but I felt his gaze boring into me). He was weighing me. He was trying to see *behind*—the way my mother did, when she used to come and lean over me as I slept, trying to peer into my dreams. There was something there that had to be broken. What they wanted was resigned creatures, not free souls. . . .

There was I again, having recently been promoted to the post of inspector of a large firm, at an international conference. The big bosses from all over the world were present. The whole brutality of business was visible in their faces, in their thick, heavy hands. They were sitting around the green table, ponderous with the disturbing weight of Power. Business was bad. Stocks were piling up. If that went on, they would have to lower prices. An urgent meeting had been called. The question was put before them: would they lower prices, so that the little people all over the world might buy an indispensable article, or would they burn their stocks? The matter was quickly set before
them. Then it was put to a vote. The vote was overwhelming. They would burn the stocks (just as oil wells and nickel mines were being closed elsewhere). Anything, so long as prices were maintained! Such cynicism and selfishness! And such greed! My Eskimos, at least, hadn’t been like that. Among them, everything belonged to all. At the end of a long day on the trail, they even waited to drink their tea until the last person arrived.

At times, I would gaze at my body at the wheel. Was it suffering? Probably. But what could I do about it? “I feel sorry for you,” said the Spirit, “but there’s nothing I can do for you.” My body would be lifted by a wave, but my self felt nothing.

At dawn, on the fourth day, it was over! The storm had subsided. The attack was followed by a deathlike calm. The Audrey’s deck was deserted. There was no movement on board, no one to be seen. It was as if the boat had been abandoned and left to drift. We were completely inert. We had come back to life, but we felt lifeless. We were like men who, the moment the battle is over, simply collapse wherever they happen to be. During the storm, we had at least gone through the motions. But when it subsided, it left us limp.

Finally, one after the other, we came to. But this remounting to the surface of life was achieved only by degrees. First a leg moved, then an arm. Finally the body sat up. But the mind was not yet working. The eyes had a haggard look. . . . At length, we got to our feet. There was work to be done. We had to look into the damage. Everything needed repairing. A board had to be knocked
in with a hammer, the missing air shaft had to be replaced by a piece of piping, the water had to be pumped from the hold (George had been given that job, but he did it so clumsily that he got soaked, as if he had turned the pump on himself). The barrels had to be restowed, and we had to make an inventory of all objects that had disappeared. The ship had to be given a thorough going-over.

And it occurred to me that a boat was simply a house in which you yourself were the housekeeper. You wash the floor, you polish the coppers, you fill the lamps. You tighten the line here, you calk a barrel there. No sooner have you finished than some malicious imp, always the same one, upsets and tarnishes everything. You say nothing. You do the work all over again. There's no end to it. . . .

There's no respite, and this is typical of a seaman's life. The longed-for moment when there's nothing left to do never comes. When the weather is rough, you have to fight. Hardly has it grown calm than you're busy again putting everything in order. In one place, you tape a wire in another, you splice; somewhere else, you do a bit of soldering with a blowtorch because a pipe is leaking. Even when you're in port, there's work to do. Link by link, you follow the dwindling anchor chain, you calk the deck, you repaint, you never stop repainting, fighting the rust that attacks everything, fighting the barnacles that cling to the hull and slow down the ship. And there's none of this that's not important. It's all vital. Hardly have you finished than you set sail again.

The house cleaning was over. It was now time to attend to ourselves. We got out of our water-logged clothes. Then we stretched out on deck. Having hung out the
objects, we were now hanging out ourselves. Our taut faces were beginning to relax.

We resumed our course at low speed, reckoning with the fact that we had drifted as a result of the storm. The log showed 1,150 miles since Dutch Harbor. We probably weren’t far from land, but would we ever make it?

I had been seeing something for some moments in the northeast. At first, I thought it was land, but it was only clouds.

The log showed 1,200 miles.

This time, it was land all right! Several pale blue hillocks loomed on the horizon. They always have that odd way of surging up unexpectedly. Distance: 15 to 20 miles. According to the map, they could only be the islands at the southern tip of the Queen Charlotte archipelago. Would we get to leeward of them before nightfall?

One thousand two hundred and fifty miles by the log. And not only were the islands no closer, but they had even disappeared. The mists had come up. We could no longer count on coming in that evening. The only thing to do was to tack and navigate all night so as to find ourselves in the same place at dawn.

Mist all night long. At times the surface of the sea would light up and then fade away. We hoped and prayed that the wind wouldn’t rise. It would be exasperating to be driven out to sea and to have to take another beating!

Was that a light I saw? I called Watson. We peered into the mist, but the harder we stared, the more flickers we saw. . . . It was just imagination. In the morning, the mist was still there. But then the floating seaweed became more and more abundant. It looked like long speaking tubes.
Slim and I were watching a fog bank. Suddenly, through an opening, a summit appeared, followed the next moment by a complete mountain chain, with all the trimmings. I mean that it had not only summits and slopes, but trees, too.

Trees! I wish that each one of you could go at least once in your life where the tallest vegetation is only a few inches high, so that you might realize what trees can mean. You who live among them generally disregard them. But words cannot describe the way they affect a man who hasn’t seen any for fifteen months. God has given us words for the lesser emotions, but not for the great ones.

I'll try to tell you what I felt. I was a man who, for a length of time he had ceased to calculate, had been forced to live with an ill-tempered wife, a shrew whose skull had been cropped because she had had a skin disease—and who suddenly sees before him a girl with a fine head of hair. For the first thing I saw wasn’t land but a girl, a girl lying on the water, half submerged. Those two hillocks were her breasts. And that other one over there, higher than the others and with streaming hair, was her head! Aren’t trees the hair of the earth? And so green! Green, most restful of colors. I glutted my eyes with them. A deficiency, that’s what I had. Without suspecting it, I was seriously anemic—a deficiency of greens!

While I was still in ecstasies over the idea that I would soon be walking among trees, the land faded from sight. All that was visible on the portside was a light vapor.

*This is a rather frequent hallucination. Saint-Exupéry once told me that in moments of great fatigue when he was doing the “Southern Mail,” he would commonly see, off in the distance, not an island, but a naked woman, of enormous size, lying on the water.*
Suddenly . . . a boat. It seemed to be a fishing boat. We tacked toward it. . . . But darkness was also coming on. . . . It looked as if the boat were fleeing us. . . . Darkness fell. We stopped the engines. We were discouraged by our inability to touch anything, by the objects that vanished as soon as we laid eyes on them. We doubted the reality of things. We felt so shadowy in the encircling mist that we even doubted our own reality. Suddenly a noise struck our ears. A foghorn! Was it a trap? . . . No. We had tooted our siren, and others were answering. That meant that we weren’t alone! Without realizing it, we were surrounded by other presences.

I gave George the wheel, left the pilothouse and its berth with the rumpled sheets where each of us in turn had vainly tried to relax, and, with a light heart, went to the messroom. Despite its sordidness and smells and cockroaches, it looked to me, for the moment, like the most delightful nook in the world.

I climbed into my berth and tried to sleep. But I was overtired and couldn’t rest. One by one, I had to relax the different parts of my body which were taut with anxiety and straining at the wheel (I felt it particularly in my shoulders and forearms). Gradually the pain eased off and I began to feel deliciously torpid. The slackening of my body gave me such pleasure that though I was dog-tired and impatient to fall off to sleep, I lit a cigarette so as to make the pleasure last. I used to do the same thing in the igloo when, at the end of a day’s trek, I would slide into my sleeping bag and, leaving just a tiny opening for the smoke, I would drag at my butt until I burned my lips. The relaxing of a weary body is quite a wonderful thing. Mine felt
as if it weighed tons. I fell asleep. My torments were over. No nightmare disturbed my utter repose. Within me was calmness and a great silence.

I had needed fifty days at sea in order really to sleep. As if only things bought at great cost had value. As if we have to keep learning over and over what things are worth.

I thought of the rich man who, though in the habit of getting up late, one day has to wait at a station at four in the morning in order to change trains. He feels chilly and orders a cup of coffee at the lunch stand. The coffee is vile, but he relishes it. Though he would never dream of ever thanking his butler at home, he smiles gratefully at the waitress, though she’s not in the least bit affable. He squeezes the cup between his palms the way he caresses a glass of choice cognac at home. Then, going outside again to wait for his train, he suddenly sees beyond the tracks the redness that precedes dawn. For the first time in his life he feels in his body the expansion of the earth. He is surprised and thrilled by the transfiguration. Rich as he was, he had never known the luxury that belongs to the humblest workman, the luxury of watching day break.

There was a spectacle waiting for me, too, when I awoke, the very thing I needed to perk me up. Before me was land, the northern point of Vancouver Island, bristling with a dark green vegetation that plunged right into the water. . . . We got under way again. The struggle was over. Not only was the sea no longer an enemy, but it was now helping us. It was carrying us to our goal. We were being escorted by the crests of waves in a triumphant procession. We were like those Eskimo teams that, after a long and miserable route, end up in a burst of dazzling speed.

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I felt like a new man. It wasn’t an awakening but a resurrection. The long night watches and the bellowing of the waves were far behind. The *Audrey* was sailing through a channel between Vancouver Island and land. We passed Beaver Post and then Alert Bay, a creek teeming with fishing boats. Standing at the bow, I raised my arms and greeted the land. I turned to my companions for their approval. . . . But what was wrong?

A while before, when the coast had appeared, neither Art nor Slim had budged. Standing motionless behind the portholes, in the pilothouse, they hadn’t made the slightest sign, just as if the land for which we had been waiting for fifty-five days weren’t there! . . . I felt disturbed and turned my eyes away. Every man has his own way of reacting. Maybe theirs was by silence. . . .

But they hadn’t stirred since. They were observing me with what I would have sworn was a sour expression. . . . What the devil! At a moment when our differences should have ceased to exist, when we should have felt *as one* in the presence of the coast that meant safety, there they were with a hard look on their mugs. It was enough to offend the feeling of fellowship that had welled up within me. Did they disapprove of my gestures? Did they regard my excitement as being out of place? Or could it be that as a result of having lived so long away from the world they had suddenly got panicky at its approach? No, they were annoyed with me!

A while before, when I had been at the wheel, delighted at the progress the ship was making, Slim had come up and stood at my side for some moments. He seemed sourer than ever. “What’s got into you?” he said with hostility. I was
astounded. Hadn’t they been in a hurry to arrive throughout the voyage? Hadn’t they been furious about having to put into port at Point Hope to take in water, and hadn’t they stormed with impatience at Akutan because it took so long to repair the boat? And now I was the one who was in a hurry to get into port, whereas they—

I was tempted to snap back at Slim. But it would have been stupid to argue with them when we were almost in view of the port, after having restrained myself throughout the voyage. It would have been degrading, an insult to human dignity. . . . I clenched my teeth. But the fact remained. The Two were avoiding me. I heard them jabbering in the engine room. What were they cooking up?

It was George who informed me. “They want to drop anchor for the night.” Drop anchor? When the current was pushing us along? With the moonlight on the water? What was eating them? Drop anchor so as to take another day? Hell, no! This time I really got sore. I was fed up with those guys! I wasn’t stopping for anyone! Let them quit bothering me and I’d attend to bringing the Audrey into port. I had to. I couldn’t bear it any more. I was in a hurry to get it over with. I suddenly felt like an old man.

I remained at the wheel. They didn’t turn up. Were they afraid to? I didn’t know. I stayed where I was, in a state of tension. The Audrey was still sailing. The channel had been getting narrow. Away off, at the end of a cove, were lights. They were automobile headlights crawling along the coast road like glowworms. I felt a lump in my throat. But I was overanxious. Would I have ever thought that this would be my worst night on board? And yet it was.
We were approaching the Seymour Narrows when Art appeared. Standing motionless at my side, he stared at the pass. I knew what he was thinking. ("Currents of eight and a half knots," according to the book.) "Don't think we can make it!" His tone was menacing.

I said nothing. My hands contracted more tightly over the wheel. If he made the slightest motion to remove my hands—

We were now in the pass. There was plenty of current, no doubt about it. The eddies were so violent that if it hadn't been for our momentum we'd have spun about like a top. But I kept a tight hold and we sailed through. The channel opened up. It was now a mile wide. We'd be in port by dawn.

I was alone again, frightfully alone. I began to be filled with a feeling that was neither anxiety nor anguish but rather uneasiness, like the feeling I had had those first nights on the Audrey. It was the sensation of being nowhere, the kind of feeling experienced by those who leave for the Unknown or who return from afar, as from the Beyond.

The phenomenon is the same in both cases. The past has just dropped away, but the future does not yet exist, it is indiscernible. And you're left between the two, in a vacuum. I had often experienced that kind of thing. I see myself in Paris, packing my valises. A friend is helping me. But I'm no longer aware of him. Even before taking the train, I'm already gone. I've left the shore, though I still don't see the opposite side. Or else I see myself returning from a long voyage. I'm on the dock, surrounded by friends. Newspapermen are questioning me. I stand there like a somnambulist. A short while before, my eyes had
still been filled with the mirage of the islands. Then all at once everything vanishes. I no longer see anything. Nevertheless, I make gestures, I may even be answering questions. But my inner self is inert.

Would day ever come? I clung to the wheel with my remaining strength. I was so weary that I had difficulty breathing. Finally, the sky began to turn gray. It was reddening in the east. When I saw the light, a weight fell from me. The dawn was cool. . . . Bowen Island. If not for the faint silklike curtain of mist, I could have seen the City.

Finally it emerged. It rose up all white in the morning. There was Vancouver, spread out before us. Its bridge was opening. The Golden Gate was in Vancouver, and not in Frisco.

In a frenzy I gave the wheel to George. I took hold of my old trousers which were patched and mended all over, and flung them overboard. Sounds idiotic, but I had to make the gesture. In throwing away my pants, I was rid- ding myself of an entire past.

But as I watched them disappear, my heart contracted. Wasn’t it wrong of me to hate my sufferings? If anything could have broadened me, wasn’t it tempest rather than calm?

I thought to myself, “If all the storm has done has been to rouse your temper, it has simply unleashed in you a blind force as blind as itself. But if, as a result of it, you’ve come to know yourself better, then it has been a creative experience, something for which you’ve given part of your soul in exchange. Not an evil, but a purification. The storm has consumed you, as did the blizzard. But it has consumed only what was perishable.
"I know you didn’t put up a very good fight, I know your jaunt has been only a minor victory. But isn’t it better to be small in the face of the immensity of things than a big shot in a barroom? What difference does it make what the sea has done to your shipmates? It’s enough that through it you sought your personal truth. And perhaps it’s this that has made you see it (it’s not much, but it’s with such scraps of truth that some day you’ll make a truth that will be yours). The objects we borrow have meaning only in so far as they help us to free ourselves. Just as the sled not only took you from place to place, but also taught you patience, so this hull has taught you something besides seamanship. She has taught you obedience.

"The important thing is to be able to accept. It’s through his enduring that man discovers himself, that he creates himself. Nowadays, to be sure, there are great liners that cross the oceans almost jokingly and travel in a beeline without worrying about the barometer. While the wind whistles in the shrouds, the passengers, unaware of what’s going on, dance in the big salon to the strains of an orchestra. And meanwhile the Captain chats idly at his table with the guests he has invited for the evening. And the only sign of navigation is the little diagram that’s tacked at noon at the entrance to the promenade deck, at which the passengers glance casually on their way to the bar. Floating palaces, hostelries rather than ships.

"But for one such titan that glides through the night in a spangle of lights, how many boats, lost in the dense darkness, struggle and groan? The passengers of the supersteamer, for whom the appearance of one of these luggers provides a moment’s distraction from their sumptuous bore-
dom, lean over the handrail: ‘Do boats like that still exist?’ I’ll say they do! And trawlers of all tonnages, and old steamers that plow the Atlantic, that look as though they’d never make it. And fishing boats. Tramp steamers of 1,500 tons and less that toil along the coasts of the globe. And the windjammers, the dhows, the tartans. To say nothing of the countless hulls, which, though they may be too old to interest the regular shipowners, still do heroic service in the Caribbean.

“You think the days of hardship at sea are over? Not on your life! . . . There are still thousands of men who stand on a wet deck in their sou’westers, braving the elements. Thank God, the sea still makes men! They know what it is to be alone at the wheel at night, to sing softly to themselves and to raise their eyes gravely to the barometer. They know what it is to be one with a toiling hull, with a groaning mast. They can relish the joys of a stopover, when they’re rocked by the gentle swaying of the ship and enjoy the rocking because they know that they’ll soon be off again.

“Thus, slowly and mysteriously, I came to appreciate the calm and the port. For does the calm have any meaning if it doesn’t come after the storm? What relish would it have if it didn’t follow the taste of spray? But it loses its flavor quickly. That’s why it’s not good for the stop to last long. Whoever lingers grows stagnant. The hull gets covered with slime and droppings. You’ve got to protect the face that has been carved by suffering. Because it’s already beginning to deteriorate. You think you see yourself, but your eyes are getting filmy. Something within you is already beginning to rot. Life is a struggle, and as soon as you stop struggling, you backslide. Purity is not a permanent
gift, but a soil that has to be cultivated, an acquisition that must be guarded and constantly reconquered. No sooner have you won it, than grace abandons you. All's to do again."

And so, the trousers, which at first were just a paltry wrapping, suddenly seemed to me, with their rough homespun, a garment of purification. As I watched them drift off, I began to feel anxious, as if my purity had left me and were returning to the sources of regeneration, as if I were already beginning to lose it, even before reaching port.

But the port was calling us. In front of us, boats were hurrying in from everywhere. We followed after them.

We were at the dock. It was deserted. There was no one to welcome us. But it didn’t matter. Quick, a customs officer! I wanted a customs officer!

I extracted my baggage. No one to lend me a hand. As a matter of fact, where were the Two?

In the pilothouse. Side by side. Motionless. Through the tarnished glass of the porthole I could see their faces, full of indifference, if not of hostility, and with that tight expression they had worn all along. . . . Still and all, I had to say good-by to them. For my own sake, if not for theirs.

I pushed open the door. Neither Art nor Slim budged. I looked at them. My irritation returned.

"Aren’t you going on land?"

Then Slim exploded. "On land? On Sunday? When there’s no beer around anywhere?"

I stood there flabbergasted. So that’s what it was! Beer—that’s what had been on their minds all along. (Try to figure out what goes on in men’s heads!) A cold glass of
beer, off the tap, with a big head on it—that’s what had been haunting them for days without my suspecting it. Beer! . . .

And it was Sunday. The bars were closed. If they’d had any heart, they’d have opened just for Art and Slim. But they were closed.

As for me, off I ran. The *Audrey* disappeared behind the rooftops. With a bag on my shoulder and a beard on my chin, I hurried to a hotel in order to wash and shave and become a man again.

Whereas They . . . barricaded inside their pilothouse. Their faces drawn, their noses flat against the portholes. . . . Frustrated. Furious. Two against the universe with their hostility. What was the good of coming into port—after an absence of fifteen years—if you couldn’t even treat yourself to a glass of beer!
POSTSCRIPT

It was on this ironic note that my voyage ended. Upon reaching our goal, I felt that I was coming out of a nightmare, to such a degree that though I was obliged to remain in Vancouver for three weeks, never once did I dare go back to the port to see whether the Audrey was still there and what had happened. Was it possible that I myself had aggravated the atmosphere on board, that I was partly responsible for the almost incredible lack of communication between myself and the Two? Could it have been due to my constant frustration and anxiety? I didn't know. But my memory of all that happened is so strange that I sometimes wonder whether I really experienced this adventure or merely dreamed it.

I should not like to end this book without adding one last episode.

The reader will recall that in Akutan I had received a message from my mother, a message that had been particularly anxious because until then I had made it my business to give my parents news of my doings and whereabouts. And my parents, amidst their life of dignity and comfort, were reassured by the thought that wherever I
went there would always be an “official” to watch over and welcome me. (You can just see the French Ambassador, girded with the Grand Cordon of the Legion of Honor, coming to meet me on an ice floe!) Nevertheless, in order to reassure them, I had sent my mother the following telegram from Dutch Harbor:

PLEASE CABLE NEWS CARE OF GENERAL DELIVERY VANCOUVER.

When I got to Vancouver, I went directly to the best hotel in town, where my entrance (I was gaunt and bearded, and sockless in my moccasins) created such a stir that the manager rushed in to see what was going on. I was finally given a room. Whereupon I locked myself in and took a bath. The water was black! I took a second bath. It was still black! I thought I’d never get the dirt off! Finally I was presentable enough to go to the post office. When I got there and gave my name, a mild old gentleman with steel-rimmed glasses told me, “We’ve got a letter here, in French. I think it concerns you. Would you like to see it? We haven’t been able to make it out.” He went off and returned holding an envelope on which I recognized my mother’s handwriting. The envelope was addressed to: General de Livery, Vancouver. The letter read as follows:

My dear General,

Since you have been so kind as to look after our son, I should be grateful if you told him that all is well and that we are expecting him.

Believe me, dear General—