

The Road

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To those that have not only followed a dream or their heart,
but their spirit of adventure as well.

The Adventurous Type

Jerry stood at a distance from the dirt road he had seen before. From the vantage point its opening quickly disappeared in darkness between a mighty stand of tall trees on either side. As when he first saw the unusual sight, he once again wondered why in the middle of just about nowhere would there be a road such as that. Where did it go? Was there another village of Inuit Indians at the other end?

He could never bring himself to ask anyone at the station if they knew about the road or where it led for fear he might appear a bit silly for even wanting to know

about it. And further, they might believe he was out of his mind or worse, accuse him of going on a drinking binge and seeing a road that was just a figment of his imagination. After all, the road was located at the north perimeter of the airfield and right next to the dump the station used to rid its garbage. But the dump was so off the beaten path that not once did he witness another living soul in the area.

The only reason he had known about it in the first place was because of his duties. He helped run the supply side of the food service organization to which he was assigned. From time to time he was responsible for disposing cases of expired C-rations according to Air Force regulation 163-8. If not for that, the road would have never been made known to him.

From the first sighting the hidden path evoked a sense of adventure. Just the existence of it had elicited curiosity which then evoked the desire to know. It was that desire which led him back during one of his off days. And the only way to find out exactly why it was there and where it led was to amble on down the mysterious path. But Jerry had doubts. Not over desiring to know the road's end, but the inherent dangers he had been warned about.

When he first arrived at the small Air Force station located in close proximity to the Yukon River and situated two hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle, it was mandatory to attend an Arctic survival training class. There he learned about the dangers of exposure and hypothermia from temperatures that could dip down below minus one hundred degrees Fahrenheit once the long and freezing winter set in. Jerry clearly remembered the staff sergeant in charge of the training, and how he could not emphasize enough that if caught in such temperatures unprepared it most certainly would end with death.

But beyond the Arctic survival training, Jerry remembered an even greater threat to the health and well-being of the station's personnel. The staff sergeant was adamant about the dangers of the wildlife that surrounded the small station. And while he heard about the animals that posed a threat, it was the stern warning of staying clear from any bear that may be lurking about the area seeking to satiate its intense hunger in an effort to prepare for hibernation. That was the point that stuck in his mind. The warning to stay clear from the black bears and the brown bears that roamed the area of Alaska's tundra forests was noted. But above all, the sergeant warned, if coming in the path of a Grizzly bear, or just being in the vicinity of the powerful animal, prayer that it is not a female with cubs. If it was then the chances of coming back to the base alive were just about zero. But Jerry sort of let it go in one ear and out the other. After all, although he was just a city boy unfamiliar with the raw wildlife he found himself surrounded by, he ultimately dismissed the warnings as unnecessary. He had been at the station for about four months and not one time had he heard of any attacks on anyone.

In fact, Jerry recalled, in a matter of days after arrival on a cool and overcast day he took a walk down to the Yukon River to witness the ice breaking up during the spring thaw. The walk was safe. There was too much activity going on from the airfield that served both the needs of the military and the civilian population throughout the region. There was also the small village of Inuit Indians in close proximity to the main grounds of the station that were out and about taking advantage of the salmon trapped by the receding river. He thought for sure that

bears or any other wildlife would tend to stay clear of the human activity with the large amounts of prey around. Reasoning dictated that any of the mighty predators would be too distracted in their preparation for winter to even care. The dangers did not exist. Yet, there was the road. And the road headed north away from all human activity.

As he stood staring at the mouth of the path he realized the opportunity to explore the road was coming to an end. It was late summer and soon the twenty three hours of day would slowly pass into twenty three hours of night. Besides that, winter storms would also ravage the tundra with heavy blizzards making it near impossible to trudge about on foot in the freezing weather and the thick blanket of crunchy snow. And while the day was somewhat warm and sunny, it would drive him nuts if he passed on the perfect opportunity that presented itself.

With a sly grin, Jerry eyed the road and strolled ahead and onto the path. Just feet into it he found himself in an eerie darkness as the tall trees blocked the light of the sun sitting close to the horizon in its east to west path. He looked around and saw nothing. He listened and heard nothing except the caws of many ravens perched high in the trees.

After a while a check of the watch showed that a half hour had passed. He knelt down and peered over the dirt and from what he could see there was an absence of footprints and tire tracks and even animal tracks. In a way it spoke of the road's loneliness. He stood and looked up but could not see the ravens, but could only hear their distinctive caws. And as eyes beheld the blue sky, he wondered not where the road ended, but why did it truly exist in the first place.

After a few more minutes of sauntering up the path something unusual was heard and seen. Up ahead, Jerry noticed the top of a tree shaking vigorously. At first he figured a fierce wind suddenly blew and threw the tops of the trees into a wild frenzy, but then he noticed the rest of the trees perfectly at rest. Then there it was some thirty feet away. Jerry froze. Paralyzed, his eyes could see that it stood about ten feet tall with huge paws and shaggy brown fur—and it looked ferocious. Jerry gasped as the beast stopped shaking the tree and turned its attention to him. The beast heard, sniffed about the air, let loose a grunt, and then looked right at him. Without a thought his heart pounded and the beat rapidly accelerated. He screamed and in an instance bolted back down from where he came convinced the predator was chasing the prey.

Moments passed before he gathered enough courage to look back and take a glance at the beast while still racing ahead. „Where is it?” he quickly whispered between the rapid breaths. Slowing down he took another look behind then altogether stopped the frightening pace. Bent over with hands on knees and struggling to catch his breath, Jerry realized it had not followed him. He carefully and suspiciously scanned the road ahead and to the sides, but the bear had disappeared. He could not understand why. If they were as fierce and unrelenting as what the staff sergeant had told him, then where was it?

Unsure as to how to proceed, he just stood there waiting for calmness to return. Once calm, a stream of level headed thinking flowed back into the mind, curiosity again grabbed hold of the thoughts. Not only was the resolve to discover the mystery of the road still there, now he had to find out what happened to the bear. Marching up the road again, the head moving from side to side as if

watching a tennis match, he kept a vigilant look out for the beast. About ten minutes later he heard a crackling of leaves off to the right side and froze. And there it was, trying to hide itself in the thick cover of tree trunks.

Jerry laughed and said aloud, „How in the world could you be scared of me? I mean, look at me.”

As incredulous as the thought was, Jerry realized that the bear had been scared just as much as him and bolted up the road to escape the human beast that he saw. He laughed even harder when he realized the bear was the smarter one; for the bear had no intentions of repeating the chance meeting by coming after him. With a wave of the hand Jerry smiled, bid the bear farewell and continued down the road.

All of sudden the fear had completely left any of the shadowy recesses of his mind. He could not explain it, but both mind and body were at such peace. And while he could not rationally explain the feeling of being under an umbrella of protection, he just knew there would be no more encounters as the one he had just experienced, no more danger at all.

Strolling down the road further something odd appeared up ahead. A faint light could be seen. The closer he came to the spot the brighter the light became.

“What?” he whispered as objects of blue and white was caught by the eyes. „Oh my God,” he proclaimed as he stepped back under the bright blue sky and light and warmth and stared at the most majestic sight he had ever seen.

He had only seen the river when he saw it breaking apart from its frozen state, but now he saw it in its splendid glory. The waters gently flowed along peacefully. The breadth of the river having shrunk from the lack of water feeding into it from the spring thaw exposed secluded dots of white sand bars everywhere along the bank that in due season would be immersed under water. And while he viewed the spectacular sight, his jaw agape, he discovered the answer to the question of exactly where that road led; it led to a wonderfully, isolated paradise where with the exception of wildlife, quiet solitude was in abundance. And as far as why it existed, Jerry could not care one bit. He was just delighted to be there.

Beyond the Road

A couple of weeks had passed since Jerry’s journey through the mysterious road. Mesmerized by the road’s idyllic setting, the thoughts ran in circles. The mind was preoccupied with the discovery of the raw wilderness untouched by the hand of man. The scene was a spectacle never witnessed before in his young life. Longing to know much more about the spot and intrigued about what lay beyond the isolated setting, the idea of a further adventure was relentless. While the season allowed, he sensed that the river was calling to him with a sweet and harmonic invitation reaching his very soul. Like a river nymph, the voice whispered to come to her just one more time to forever become one with the tantalizing beauty. Jerry made up his mind then and there. A camping trip along her banks was the only way to satisfy the unquenchable desire to visit the beautiful scene one more time.

Having grown up in a coastal town just off the Pacific Ocean, Jerry was no stranger to water. He was more than familiar with the seashore and how it endlessly stretched beyond earthly vision. Unlike his newfound beauty, the coast of old was much more expansive and abounded with wide beaches covered with beds of graying white sand. In the summertime, the memory of warming up quickly after coming out of the cool ocean waves was soothing.

Feet sank underneath the sand's heavenly warmth. The body quickly warmed too as the sun bathed it with waves of heat. The experience was a cherished nugget in the mind.

And unlike his newfound beauty, the beach offered endless stretches of soft sand where one could run miles and miles. Jerry smiled while thinking of the juvenile game of dodging the gentle sheets of water reaching as far onto the beach as possible before retreating meekly back into the ocean depths. Awe inspiring thoughts popped in the mind as the vision of rolling waves moved peacefully towards the shore. Then, in a matter of seconds the seemingly peaceful waves would crest, curl, then crash thunderously into the shallow water. Their mixture of spray and foam and sand and turbulent water was a spectacle of power. But as far as the river goes, in comparison to the wide expanse of the ocean, the Yukon presented an equal phenomenon not in size but the impact on the heart.

As far as Jerry knew and remembered there was only one river where he grew up. But with memories reaching back in time, that river was rather pathetic. He knew its headwaters were somewhere in the mountains miles and miles away and the water made its way down to the shore through etched out channels at the base of foothills and through valleys formed long ago. He figured at one time the river may have been a formidable sight, but reasoned the hand of man had tamed it to the point where it became a mere trickle of its former self. Now, with the Yukon capturing and holding captive his heart, the river back home was like a drip of water in a bucket compared to the sheer volume of the mighty Yukon.

Jerry's mind was made up. No longer could the yearning be ignored. The only problem was he had never been on a camping trip outside the one time during his year as a Cub Scout. How to go about the camping trip raised a lot of questions. Nevertheless, common sense was tapped in to and he looked around his room.

Remembering the mess kit and canteen he was issued while at basic training, he marched over to a drawer where it had been stowed and forgotten. Looking through the mess kit's contents it contained eating utensils, a small metal cup, and plate that doubled as a lid, and a small pot. The kit was perfect for heating the packaged tins of meats he had pilfered from a case of outdated C-rations. The problem of food solved, the attention then was turned to a bedroll.

„Why didn't I join the Army," he whispered while contemplating the lack of a sleeping bag, or for that matter, a large and sturdy backpack equipped to carry all the essentials of life for battlefield survival. All that was available instead of a sleeping bag were ordinary blankets and sheets. A shrug of the shoulders signaled they would have to do.

A change of clothes came to mind but the logic of such was questioned. He laughed aloud after musing over the thought of being away from everyone; why

should I care if I stink. But he did find it logical to bring the parka issued to him on arrival to the isolated station just in case it became terribly cold.

Wondering what to use to carry what he was planning to bring along, he had not a clue. Once again Jerry considered the backpack to be essential for the men and women of the marines and army to roam for days and weeks and months through any battlefield terrain, „but for an airman to roam an airbase,“ he thought aloud, „now that is ridiculous.”

But what was issued, he happily considered, was a common necessity for any service personnel regardless of the branch of service. It was the one common gear that was tough and expansive for the job: the big, green duffle bag. Jerry envisioned the monstrous bag as roomy enough to carry all that he needed. He opened the closet door and there it was. Sitting in a dark corner, the bag offered its services.

The physical needs taken care of, Jerry then turned the attention to just how dangerous the adventure could be, but “ahh,” he scoffed. Warnings of such danger had been eliminated by his experience with the bear and in spite of the adamant advice of the staff sergeant. Jerry figured no matter what, everything would go without a hitch.

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With a couple of days off, Jerry woke early in the morning eager to begin the adventure. Stepping outside he saw the bright blue sky with the sun, despite its position low on the horizon, lighting up the day. Not. He knew the day was the perfect companion for the adventure. With the duffle bag’s straps hooked onto shoulders he set out towards the road.

As Jerry approached the entrance trepidation was non-existent. He knew he was walking to a source of life. The senses became alive in the serene setting as the adventure began. Ears again detected the friendly caws of the ravens. The nose took in a mild musty breath of the fallen leaves returning their vital nutrients to the deep, forest floor. The eyes beheld the majestic trees standing bare and mighty. It was as if they acted as persona,l protective giants guarding the idle stroll up the path.

As with the first time, Jerry came to the other end of the road and stepped out into the light. In an instant the excitement was renewed. There she was. The beauty before him brilliantly sparkled. He stood there for a moment listening to the nymph’s sweet voice carried by the gentle breeze. With eyes closed, he inhaled deeply enjoying the crisp, fresh air and the utter solitude.

Leaving behind the safe confines of the station and the nearby Inuit village, the leisurely stroll up the river began with a step along its receding and rocky shoreline.

Jerry realized, truly realized, that in the absence of trash cluttering up the shoreline and shimmering splotches of oil slicks, he was physically separated from society for the first time in his life. He pondered why worry and fear had failed to show, but believed the surrounding peace and tranquility provided the mind with a strength that conquered such weak, emotional responses. Even as signs of the predators that came in the form of paw prints set deep in the soft sand began to appear, the belief that all would be well was strong.

The thoughts lost amidst the solitude, Jerry ambled up the shoreline. The chosen path led him further away from the safety of civilization. Then the leisurely stroll came to an abrupt halt. A small tributary which spanned some thirty feet across blocked the way.

Standing above the water, he looked down to see the flow slowly moving in the tributary. Jerry suspected that its depth was shallow. He carefully climbed down its bank in an attempt to wade through the obstacle, but the effort proved unwise. The first step into the murky water took hold of the boot. As the boot sank deeper into the mud he struggled to break free from the suctioning grip below. After a few seconds the mud gave in and released the boot.

He looked into the woods and wondered if there was another spot at which to try and cross the tributary, but the trunks of countless trees and fallen branches impeded the path. For a moment, he entertained stepping through the water at the river's edge but the idea quickly dissipated. The thought of just one wrong step for which the hold could not be broken just might trap him in the depths of the sodden earth. The thought was sobering and quickly abandoned. But maybe, he thought, it was the river's way of saying to stop, to rest, and to behold her beauty from the vantage point she had provided.

The first thing to do, Jerry thought, was to set up a camp. As he walked down the path eyes searched out a relatively flat spot to set up the makeshift bed. He considered going into the woods a little bit to hold off the wind if it were to stir up, but looking at the dense forest there was no open spaces for which to accommodate the needed space. He decided right where he stood was good enough.

Dropping the duffle bag onto the bed of sand, he suddenly had an idea. „What is it called?” he whispered aloud. „A one sided... sided wall... ah ha! A lean-to I think it is called.” Although the picture of the structure was clearly seen in the imagination, the lack of a mechanical mind on how to construct the wind-breaking device was elusive. Nonetheless, logic reared up and spoke.

A stroll over to the edge of the woods proved to be wise. Long pieces of broken branches were abundant. Gathering as many as he could carry he walked back to the duffle bag and tossed the construction materials to the ground. A quick estimation of the supply prompted a need for more. Hauling back another load, he laid them out in a row and sized them up. Taking one the two thickest and shortest ones, hands tried to stab it into the ground but while the top layer of sand was forgiving, the hard shell of the earth underneath was not.

„A rock,” he thought aloud, „I need a rock.”

A quick survey of the path brought forth just the needed tool. Lying atop the sand was a good sized rock to hammer the limb into the ground. The limb, although short yet strong, was no match for the pounding of the rock gripped firmly by both hands. The end easily pierced the underlying layer of impacted sand. Checking the direction of the wind with a wet thumb held up into the air, Jerry positioned the next limb accordingly and about seven feet away. Repositioning the limbs at a slight angle, he then looked to the dead limbs and branches lying in the sand and began to stack them one on top of another until they reached the top. Stepping back he viewed the makeshift shelter and figured he did not need all three sides. One side would work just fine. The

thought of the required fire pit came to mind, but there was plenty of time in the day to build the needed flame.

With waves of relaxation rolling off the river and immersing him in thoughts of sweet slumber, the makeshift bed was quickly made. Lying down the feeling was of a peace he had never known. The sound of the wind whistling through the trees and the sound of the water flowing gently down the river sang a lovely bedtime song that put him to sleep.

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Jerry opened his eyes and rolled over. Looking around, the tranquility flooded the vision. The bright blue sky was giving way to the subdued light given off by the sun that nearly dipped below the horizon. The water gently flowed down the river framing the reflection of a few clouds lazily drifting about. He deeply yawned and took in the freshness of the air while stretching out the kinks then exhaling any tension captured by the pristine conditions.

He reached over to the duffle bag and pulled it closer. After digging out one of the packages of C-rations he first checked the contents then the expiration date. Although the package had expired about thirty days ago, he felt the powers to be were over-cautious about the food spoiling and thereby he ignored the order. Jerry figured the worse he was going to get was an upset stomach.

Now a fire was needed. Looking around for rocks teeming on the river's edge, he quickly found a whole stash of them and started tossing them in the direction of the lean-to. Forming them into a ring, he then gathered as many twigs as he could and positioned them in a heap. Another search produced shorter, thicker broken pieces of limbs and branches. A match lit the dry kindling easily enough. The firewood was added. In a matter of minutes the fire roared.

Examining the pot included in the mess kit, he looked at the fire pit and whispered, „I need a tripod like contraption.” He peered over the remaining pieces of limbs and branches and sized three of them up, but when he attempted to stand them against each other they simply would not stay in place. He figured branches with twigs forming a vee at the ends were needed. Another search produced exactly what was required. Now the tripod, held together by the broad vee in one of the limbs, stood firmly in place.

„Oops!” chuckled Jerry. Boiling water was needed to heat the tin can of turkey, but all he brought along in the form of liquid was a few bottles of soda. A glance at the river's water provided the solution. From what he knew and what he could see, the lack of human settlements up-river meant the water had not been polluted and spoiled, but he could not be sure. But then he remembered something about how water could be boiled as a purification process. „Ah, why not?” he reasoned and carefully stepped through the mud and scooped out a pot full of water from the river's edge. The pot carefully suspended from the top of the tripod by its handle, the flames shot up to the bottom of the pot. The lid of the can was opened by the P-38 can opener that was standard issue for C-rations, and then placed in the water.

His back to the lean-to, the heat of the roaring fire warming the body, Jerry gulped down one of the sodas. Looking at the boiling water he figured why not kill two birds with one stone. Once the can of potted turkey was ready, fingers

carefully took hold of the top rim and lifted it out. The remaining water, still in full boil from the hot flames, was then carefully poured from the pot and into the empty bottle. Noticing the sentiment flowing about the bottled water, Jerry thought of something to use to act as a strainer to remove the debris. Not having brought along an extra pair of socks or pants or shirt, he had no choice but to use one of the sheets as a strainer. And while it was somewhat dirty, he figured the passing of the hot water through its threads would destroy anything harmful.

After eating, the garbage and extra food placed just behind the lean-to, Jerry drank down another soda and began the boiling process to fill both the bottles with the processed water. Once done, he threw more firewood onto the fire and lay on the makeshift bed. Looking up, the sight of the Northern Lights came into view. As if they were angels dancing in joy while looking down at God's wonderful and awesome creation, the waves of moving light filled the heavens.

For hours Jerry lay there quietly just in awe of the spectacular show of light. But finally the excitement waned, the eyes close, and sleep took over.

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Waking up early in the morning to the sight of glowing red embers and wispy black smoke, Jerry looked around to see if there were signs of any intruders that had happened upon the campsite during the night. The food and trash was undisturbed. There were no visible paw prints up or down the river. The lean-to was still in place. So much for warnings, he whimsically thought.

A few more twigs were thrown in the embers and with a gentle and slow breath they burst into flames. A few more well positioned pieces of firewood and the flames flickered up to the top of the pot. Jerry used the river water he had boiled the day before and filled the pot. A packet of instant coffee, cream, and sugar provided the energy that had been lost through the night.

As he sipped on the coffee, nibbled on crackers spread over with a layer of peanut butter, the river and the surrounding woods remained at peace. He figured winter would come soon enough and hide the precious serenity in a thick layer of solid ice and blanket of deep snow. But even then, having heard that the Iditarod Race, a race teaming man and dog against the cruel elements the frozen tundra inflicted upon the weak, would eventually bring back the presence of human activity. Even in its frozen state, thought Jerry, the river still found a way to nurture life.

From morning until early evening Jerry lazily walked about the shore line in awe of the river's beauty. From time to time he would pick up a flat rock. An examination of the rock's surface evoked wonder. A thought that at one time it had begun its journey as a large boulder but over time the river had chipped away, refined, shaped, and polished its rough exterior to the smooth surface it had today. In fact, he instantly knew, the very sand he was standing on was the remnants of such boulders from mighty mountains.

As the sunlight started to fade away, a chilly wind blowing down the river. Jerry smiled and understood. The river, the nymph's invitation to come out to life had come to an end. A voice was whispering in the wind it was time to leave and return to the safe confines of the station.

All the generated trash was wrapped securely in a paper bag and packed away with everything else in the duffle bag. The embers were drenched, but the lean-to was left in place. Jerry put on the parka and walked down the river unafraid of what might have been lurking about. For whatever reason, the sense that something, perhaps someone, even the river itself was with him clearing the path of all dangers.

The entrance to the road appeared. It was dark as dark could be. Jerry pulled out a flashlight he had packed along and shined its light into the blackness. The path was lit up. He could clearly see between the tall trees guarding the path on either side. After a leisurely stroll, Jerry walked out the other end. The subdued lighting from the station was seen as a soft glow in the distance.

With the river's majestic beauty in the thoughts, Jerry turned around and stared down the blackness of the road. He then looked up and whispered, „Thanks.”

