



*Portage Trails
and
Campfire Tales*

Stewart Coffin

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Yet another whimsical labor of love,
for your enjoyment as well as my own

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Cover photo taken August 26, 1985
on Menihek Lakes, Labrador

Camp One: *Sticker Shock*

The setting is deep within the boreal spruce forests of the Canadian wilderness, where we find our party of four camped in a small clearing on the shore of a lake. Well, not exactly a clearing. Their two small tents are pitched on secluded mossy patches back among the black spruce, and their camp kitchen is on solid rock ledge close to the water. Creating the site required just clearing out some alder bushes, plus moving a few rocks for a makeshift fireplace that will be dismantled when they leave next morning. Then you could paddle by and never notice anyone had ever camped there.

If the lake has a name, the map does not indicate, and the same is true for several other nameless bodies of water along the way, even some of the larger ones. Probably they all had names once long ago, spoken but not written. We will never know.

It is that blissful hour in the North Country that begins near sunset, when one can sit around in peace without being besieged by swarms of black flies. The lake, which was quite choppy earlier, has now quieted down to dead calm, and an unearthly stillness has settled all around, broken only by the call of a pair of loons far out on the lake. After finishing evening chores in the fading glow of the setting sun, as usual all four are relaxing around the campfire, while someone in the party is telling a story. Aside from there not being a whole lot else to do, it is a rite that just comes naturally every evening. Years later, these are the times that will often be the most remembered, long after all else begins to fade away.

Alice has just removed the reflector oven from in front of the fire and has set the two golden brown loaves of yeast bread to cool before packing them in the wanigan box for the night. Her husband, Bob, has just returned from scouting up more wood, and he tosses a few sticks onto the fire, sending up a shower of sparks. The traditional evening campfire provides both warmth and light, and something else less tangible. Claire, with help from her companion Don, is telling the other two about their experiences on a canoe trip to Spencer Lake in Maine the previous year.

Claire: ...but the first time we went there, some twenty years ago, the road was so washed out we parked and portaged in the last half mile. Road's been improved now. Can drive all the way in, sad to say.

Don: Same story everywhere, isn't it?

Claire: Even so, we thought that by going in September, perhaps we'd have the campsite all to ourselves. But there was a big blue Tundra with a boat trailer already there by the lake, so we expected we might have to share the site.

Don: Actually, it can be kind of fun meeting others on trips. I'll never forget some of the entertaining characters we've come across.

Claire: Maybe so, but what a loud bunch they were. We could hear them from clear across the lake, even before we saw the smoke of their campfire. And on Beaver Island, of course. We pitched camp as far from them as possible. But then one of them came over and invited us to join them for a few beers. So we figured what the hell and went over to be sociable, even though we're both teetotalers.

Don: Which by the way they considered rather unsociable. For a while, just sat and listened. All they were talking about was the war against the terrorists, and what a splendid thing it would be to wipe a few Middle Eastern countries off the map. Weren't too surprised, though, because we had noticed the stickers plastered all over their truck.

Alice: Such as?

Claire: Oh, mostly political, such as support the president, the National Guard, the NRA and gun ownership—you know, the usual. When the discussion came around to supporting our troops, I said I was neutral on that because I wasn't sure what it meant or how one went about doing it. That was our first mistake. Then the discussion turned to the attack on 9/11 and how each of us had reacted to it, not all alike by any means.

(Pause while Bob stokes up the fire and Alice adjusts the teapot.)

Bob: How well Alice and I remember that. We had been sitting around the breakfast table enjoying our second cup of tea when the news broke. By coincidence, we had just been discussing the abysmal record of all recent administrations in matters of foreign affairs and human rights, with the present administration topping them all by a long shot.

Alice: I wouldn't blame it all on the administration though. How about our pathetic news coverage of military affairs. Nonexistent might be a better term. Remember Colin Powell's presentation to the UN that got us into the Iraq fiasco? When he showed fuzzy high altitude photos of what looked like a building with what was perhaps a truck parked nearby and offered it as proof that Saddam was manufacturing chemical weapons, I said to Bob, just wait until this nonsense gets ripped apart in the evening news. Alas, all the TV networks dramatically reported it as proof positive. After that, every story by the military coming out of Iraq was reported as fact, even when it didn't make any sense at all, like all the lies about Jessica Lynch, Pat Tillman, or civilian casualties. The media acted like either they didn't care or were afraid to ask questions, likewise most member of Congress.

(Another pause while the fire receives jabs directed at it from all sides, rather more forceful than usual.)

Bob: Alice and I were wondering what it might take to turn things around and launch our country in an entirely new direction of diplomacy and just plain common decency in world affairs. As the dust was settling around the site of the World Trade Center, I said to Alice that perhaps some good would come out of this tragedy, even an epiphany by the president.

Claire: Wouldn't that be expecting too much?

Alice: (with voice quivering) And of course, wouldn't you know, exactly the opposite happened. The really great tragedy was not the attack itself but rather our deranged government's misguided response to it.

Claire: Well, Don and I had pretty much the same reaction, and I expressed something to that effect. That didn't go over too well, especially with one of the guys who obviously had too much to drink, and he took exception. Well I fired back at him with some comments that I probably shouldn't have, and wow, did that ever get him roiled up. Oh my goodness, some of the things he shouted at us, now seared into my memory.

Bob: Care to tell us what they were?

Don: Ask some other time, Bob, if you're really curious. On second thought, best if you don't. (Pause) Well, that sure broke up the party fast. Next morning we had thoughts of moving down to the outlet for our second camp. It was not a designated site, but we could use our Coleman stove instead of a fire. We've always found the Maine Forest Service rangers to be reasonable in such situations. But then one of the guys came over and apologized profusely for the scene the previous evening. He sounded like he really meant it, so we decided to stay.

Claire: The second evening we even invited them over to our site for another fireside chat, although not without some trepidation. Well, the guy that had been drunk and profane the previous evening was now perfectly sober and polite, although somewhat reserved. The others were more congenial. It seems one of the guys worked for a paper company. When he learned that we had canoed the Maine Woods back in the old days of driving pulp, he wanted to know all about it.

Don: I even promised to mail him some photos, and we exchanged names and addresses. Gradually the talk got around to international affairs, and it wasn't at all like the previous evening. They each had a slightly different slant on things.

Claire: As do Don and I, for that matter.

Don: And it seems that we weren't so far apart on some things after all. When I was aside with two of them, they even agreed that the invasion was probably a mistake, and certainly hopelessly misguided from the start. Not so sure about Charlie though, the one that was so worked up the night before. He didn't say much.

Claire: So that's how things went on Beaver Island. But that's not quite the end of the story. Remember how shocked you said you were to see that bumper sticker on my car? Well, a few weeks after our encounter on Spencer Lake, Don sent some photos by email to the guy who was interested in the pulpwood drives. In his thank you message in return, he explained some things that I wish we'd known earlier.

(Claire now becomes choked up with emotion, and she motions for Don to carry on with the story.)

Don: Well, it seems that Charlie's brother had been killed by a roadside bomb in Baghdad only a couple weeks earlier. Claire then sent a letter of apology and sympathy to

Charlie, mentioning incidentally that we do support our troops. Well, we got the nicest reply you can imagine. Included was a snapshot of his brother in uniform, which we now have pasted into our trip album.

(Don is now struggling too, but Claire comes to the rescue.)

Claire: The other thing included in his letter was that bumper sticker, “We Support our Troops.” You must have noticed it on the back of our car but were perhaps too polite to ask. Well, I don’t know, I guess we do too, although I’m still not exactly sure what exactly it is supposed to mean. Well, actually, I guess I do.

Camp Two: *Andromeda*

Alice, Bob, Claire, and Don have portaged over a height of land and into another remote lake along the pioneering route they have plotted for themselves. Their map shows the nameless lake nestled amongst the rugged rocky hills of the Labrador Plateau. Where else but up here would a canoeing party find such a scenic ten-mile-long lake just for their own private enjoyment? The thought of it had spurred them on, even though the hour was late. They have not seen any signs of previous parties, so they have been brushing out their campsites as they go, which is the way they prefer anyway. They like to stop paddling and make camp at least an hour before sundown. If an especially attractive site is found, they will stop earlier. On the other hand, by sundown, they will of necessity be less particular and take whatever is there, as was the case on this day. Consequently, by the time the after-dinner chores are finished, and thanks to a moonless night, it is pitch dark. In scouting about for firewood, Bob has noticed that the nearly treeless rocky knoll behind their site affords good views in all directions. That gives him an idea, and he leads the others up there. So that is where we now find them, gazing in awe at the star-studded heavens.

Claire: Wow, I don't think I've ever seen a sight quite like this. So many stars! Any idea how many there are supposed to be up there?

Bob: If you mean visible to the naked eye from right here, under perfect conditions, which is what we are pretty close to now, perhaps around 2000. If you want to test your eyesight, start counting. Of course that includes only what we can see now from right here. Altogether worldwide it's said to be more like 8000.

Don: Reminds me of the time Claire and I were camping in the Anza Borrego desert with some friends in March of '96. The air was so clear, our first night there we all went out to gaze at the heavens. Remember that comet—Hyaku-something-or-other? We had already seen it a few days before back home in Massachusetts, but only as a small faint blob and not at all impressive. Out there it stretched in one great arc nearly across the heavens. One of the eeriest sights I have ever seen in the night sky. Made you wonder what the ancient people must have thought of something like that. It was quite a sight, and one I'll never forget.

Bob: Well, tonight you're going to see something that I think is even more amazing. Now take a look. Can you all see what looks almost like a square of stars over there to the east, just above the trees?

(They all indicate seeing it.)

Bob: That's part of the Pegasus constellation, including the three other stars in a line forming a sort of handle. Now look to the left for the letter W formation of five bright stars.

Alice: That would be Cassiopeia?

Bob: Yup. Now from the middle star in the handle and go just a bit toward Cassiopeia and look for a faint smudge.

(It takes a while and a bit more coaching, but finally the other three all think they can just barely make it out.)

Bob: Well, that's the Andromeda nebula. Only object you are ever likely to see outside our own galaxy, at least unaided. And don't waste your time trying to spot it back home, even on the clearest winter night.

Claire: Too much smog?

Bob: That's partly it, but also too much light in any metropolitan area these days. No problem like that up here. But what's really amazing is that we're looking back in history about two million years. That's when that stream of tiny photos left Andromeda and began their long, lonely journey through deep outer space to reach our eyes. Think about that!

(After staring at the heavens a while longer, the group returns to the welcome warmth of the campfire.)

Claire: Hmmm, eight thousand stars. But aren't there lots more we can't see.

Bob: Astronomers now say around septillion, which is a number far beyond human comprehension. Ten followed by about twenty zeros.

Claire: OK. Then why do you suppose there are so many?

Bob: It might be just as illogical to ask why any at all? Why not nothing? But we can't conceive of nothing, can we?

Don: Hmmm. I suppose not. Because conceiving of anything is by definition something, and something can't be nothing.

Bob: Precisely. As for why so many? Good heavens, who knows?

(Long pause, all four staring into the fire, as though for enlightenment.)

Alice: But doesn't it make you wonder what sort of answer a Christian fundamentalist would give? According to the Book of Genesis, everything in Creation was put there by God to serve man. What good are septillion stars, most of them so far away that they'll never be seen even with the most powerful telescope? Except for our sun, what good are any of them?

Don: Perhaps for the ancient mariners to navigate by? But you need only a few for that. Or perhaps just to make us gaze at the heavens in awe and wonder.

Claire: Well, then I suppose you could also ask, why only septillion stars? Why not an infinite number for good measure?

Bob: Some cosmologists say that would be impossible because space itself is finite. For a crude analogy, they say consider a two-dimensional creature living on the surface of a sphere so large that the creature thinks it's an infinite flat plane rather than curved. But if that creature goes straight ahead far enough, it follows a great circle and comes right back to where it started from.

Don: Great analogy, Bob, but wait a minute. A sphere has an inside and an outside. One side of that creature faces the inside and one side faces the outside. Which side are we facing right now?

Bob: I told you it was only a crude analogy.

Don: And what evidence do they offer for this strange notion of a curved universe?

Bob: None that I know of. Just a hypothesis I suppose.

Don: I wonder if these could be the same cosmologists who speak of multiple universes. For a while, just about every other issue of *Scientific American* had some article mentioning multiple universes, usually written by some Ph.D. in astrophysics with a long list of credentials.

Claire: And promoting either his professional career or latest book.

Don: Look it up in any dictionary. Universe has no plural form. The generally accepted definition of universe is that it includes everything. To speak of multiple everything strikes me as illogical at best, if not an outright contradiction. And then there are all those theories about the so-called origin of the universe, which are even more illogical. Wouldn't the origin of the universe by definition have to include its own origin, plus the origin of the origin, ad infinitum?

(Another long pause, all four staring pensively into the fire.)

Bob: All this reminds me of a physics professor I once knew. Some of my classmates and I had been reading popular science books of the time, such as the Mr. Tompkins series by George Gamow, that explained in layman's terms everything from quantum mechanics to relativity. He called that pseudo-science and said it was a good example of a smattering of knowledge being worse than none at all. Let's face it. We really don't know very much about what's really out there, and even less about how it got there, do we?

And so our little band of explorers, amateur astronomers, and philosophers turns in for the night, not much wiser than they were before, but full of wonder and awe, which is surely much more to be valued.

Camp Three: *The Lake Poets*

Next morning, the general consensus was that their lakeside campsite was especially attractive. But then, in such a setting, what wouldn't be? So they have decided to stay over a second night. Since it was unlikely they would ever come there again, they have spent the day exploring all around the lake and climbing to the bare summit of a nearby hill for lunch and a view of the countryside. Back in camp, perhaps inspired by the natural beauty of their surroundings, the evening conversation turns to poetry.

Alice: Don tells me that you two are now into reading poetry.

Claire: Reading *and* writing. And all that after a long hiatus. I had a falling out with poetry way back to junior high school. Our English classes included writing verse. As I recall, we were graded mostly on the exactness of rhyme and meter. I had no trouble with those, so I easily passed, but I'm sure they were horrible poems.

Don: For me, the trouble was more with the assigned readings, especially the ones where, in order to understand all the metaphors, you needed at least a dictionary of Greek mythology and knowledge of the Bible. And then, to pass the course, you had to explain the meaning of the poem. Not what it meant to *you*, but rather what the teacher said it was *supposed* to mean.

Claire: Which she probably got in turn from her teacher, and so on back to some Ph.D. who had once written a scholarly doctoral thesis on the subject. But then the poems I most treasured were never included.

Alice: Such as?

Claire: *But it's all Gospel true what I'm telling to you
up there where the shadow falls
That I settled Sam Noot when he started to shoot
electricity into my walls.*

Alice: Oh, that has to be Robert Service. He's one of our favorites too.

Claire: Funny thing is, both Don and I find that we tend not to fully enjoy a poem until we have memorized it. I find poems with regular rhyme and meter far easier to memorize, although I'm not exactly sure why. So they almost automatically become my favorites. But I try to keep an open mind. Don and I have attended several poetry readings recently, and it seems that rhyme and meter are now considered *passé*. But what puzzles me is that those really were readings. None of the poets we have heard recently can even recite their own choice poems. Does that make you wonder how much mileage they have in them.

Don: The trend more so than ever these days is for poems lamenting the present state of affairs. If you're all worked up by injustice of one sort or another, I sometimes wonder if it might be simpler to just say so, like I am opposed to exploitation of the working class or prejudice against lesbians, and leave it at that, instead of some disjointed array of negatives strewn down the page.

Claire: But you see, that's the whole idea. Poets these days write mostly for themselves or their friends, meaning other poets. It's a classic case of that old saying: misery loves company.

(Bob has gone off to scout up firewood. He returns with an armful and throws a few sticks on the fire.)

Bob: Can you imagine doing this sitting around a Coleman stove instead of a campfire? I guess that's how you have to make do in lots of places these days. Suppose that will ever happen up here?

Claire: Some environmental organizations have now come out against all campfires. I suppose there are good reasons in many situations, but what surprised me was the reason the Sierra Club gave. They called the campfire a smoky, smelly, choking, eye-smarting annoyance.

Bob: Maybe they don't have dry standing black spruce out West. See how cleanly it burns. Back home, the one thing that will bring to mind these good times in the North Woods faster than anything else is the heavenly sweet smell of a campfire, especially of spruce.

Claire: What few campfires there are now. (Pause while the fire receives friendly pokes.) Have you noticed how everyone has an urge to nurse it? Add a log, stir it up, adjust it this way or that, anything just to be involved with it. Must be in our blood, going back thousands of years.

Alice: Back when it wasn't just a luxury, but a necessity for survival. (Another pause for fire tending.) So, now tell us about writing poetry.

Don: It's funny. If you were to propose that we each write a poem as we sit here, I would end up just staring at a blank sheet of paper for want of a subject. And even if I came up with one, I would struggle hopelessly with the first line. Claire and I attended a poetry workshop that included writing poems on the spot and then reciting them. Some were good for a few laughs, but that's about all. Not sure what the point was. I am more apt to get an idea for a line of two of verse when I'm doing something that's repetitive and mindless, like pedaling a bike or paddling across a lake. But by camp time, I have often forgotten them.

Alice: Ever think of carrying a note pad?

Don: Oh sure, but try that when paddling stern in a Prospector. Pause for just an instant and it will dance a pirouette in spite of Claire's best efforts to make it behave. Not to mention trying to ride a bike with no hands. But I've managed to retain a few and write them down.

Claire: I am more apt to come up with a line or two when I'm half asleep. But by the time I'm fully awake they are usually gone.

Alice: Then how can you be so sure they really exist?

Claire: Because once in a while I will recall a bit and jot it down.

Bob: You and Coleridge. But I don't think it's possible to be half asleep. Either you're awake or you're asleep. No halfway.

Claire: Oh I suppose. (Pause for fire poking.) Did you ever dream that you had awakened from a dream, only to later discover that it too was part of your dream within a dream?

Bob: Thought everybody did that. But did you ever dream of really waking up?

Claire: Of course not, because that would be self-contradictory. Like you say, it's either one or the other. Can't be both at the same time.

Bob: Saying that a dream is self-contradictory is nonsense, because anything goes in a dream.

Claire: Yes, I suppose so. But even so, what I find really impossible is to dream that I am going to sleep, because I am never conscious of it. It just happens—poof!

Bob: In the same vein, do you ever dream about wondering whether or not you're dreaming?

Claire: Certainly yes. Not only wondering but hoping fervently that it's only a dream that will soon end. And I suppose other times wishing it would never end!

Bob: But then, some philosopher is bound to ask, how can any of us really know for sure whether or not we're dreaming, such as right now? That really gets to the heart of the matter.

Alice: This has got to be the silliest campfire discussion I have ever heard. Now Claire, can you share some of your dreamy lines with us?

Claire: Oh sure. These should fit right in perfectly. They came out of our Barren Grounds trip a few years back:

A thin dark line from shore to shore

Water, sky, and nothing more

Hypnotic in their ebb and flow

As distant islands come and go

On we paddle, lost in thought

Which is real and which is not?

Adrift upon this endless stream

Could life itself be but a dream?

(Pause while Alice serves hot buttered rolls.)

Claire: Now Don, can you recite yours about *Paul's Wonderful Paddle*?

Don: Or I suppose we could call this *The Power of Suggestion*:

*Let me tell you a tale of the day that I spent
canoeing with Paul, and how it all went.
Our purpose was trying his new paddle out.
Of its super performance he had not a doubt.
The salesman had said that the bend in the shaft
would result in canoeing that's easy and fast.
Since Paul seemed so pleased with the outlay he'd made,
I hadn't the nerve to ask what he'd paid,
but the high-tech design, scientifically bent,
supposedly made it worth every last cent.
So we went for a spin around Lake Lucerne,
Paul in the bow, and I in the stern.
When we came to the end and beached our canoe,
Paul's first remark was, "Wow, we really flew!"
And he said we could have gone for many miles more,
since his arms were not tired, his shoulders not sore.
Well, I hated to tell what I'd seen all along,
so I kept it a secret, what clearly was wrong.
The blades of bent paddles have a front side and back,
but it seems that the salesman had not explained that.
For all the while o'er the water we flew,
Paul's wonderful paddle he'd used wrong side to.*

(Hearty laughter.)

Claire: And believe it or not, partly based on actual happenstance.

Alice: Poor Paul. I hope he never heard the poem.

Don: Don't worry, that wasn't his real name.

Bob: Got any more for us?

Don: Oh sure, lots more. This one also came out of that same trip Claire mentioned. It's called *Party Time in the Barrens*.

*There's a tradition of longstanding
On our wild canoeing jaunts
Of renewing past acquaintances
In their old familiar haunts
Oh how they love to party
As they gather all around
And signify their pleasure by
Their vibrant whining sound
All their friends soon join the fun
By the billions in a blink
And they provide the music
While we provide the drink*

Bob: Bravo! I think you two ought to put out a collection of these.

Claire: Perhaps we will someday. Well, I guess that ought to be enough for one evening.

Camp Four: *Moose Tracks and Ferns*

After paddling to the outlet of the lake and lifting over an old beaver dam, the party has spent the rest of the day cruising down a stream that meanders among the spruce and tamarack. There were a few portages, and they are now camped at the end of the last one.

Don: Any of you happen to notice the moose tracks near the start of the portage?

Bob: Yes, we saw them, and I've been scanning the shoreline. Thought we might see one this evening. Until recently, I doubt if they would have been found this far north. Seems to be the same story with lots of things these days. Several species of birds are now reported being seen up here for the first time. Before long, wouldn't be too surprised to even see a Great Blue Heron come flapping out of one of these marshes.

Alice: Likewise with plant life. Did you notice all those clumps of Interrupted Ferns near the end of the trail? Look, I think you can see some from here. Most fern guides don't show them growing this far north.

Claire: How can you be so sure those are Interrupted Ferns, Alice? Without the fertile fronds, Interrupted and Cinnamon look just alike to me.

Alice: Easy once you know how. If we see any Cinnamon Ferns, I'll show you the difference. But I don't think we will. I was a bit surprised to even see Interrupted Ferns up here. (Pause.) You know what the trouble is with most fern guides? They speak of things like lobed pinnules so many centimeters long. Now, when you see me, do you note that my nose is slightly concave and so many centimeters long, consult your mental guide, and then figure, well then, that must be Alice? Of course not! Likewise with ferns. You just get to know them, same as with friends.

Claire: OK. But that still leaves the question of how to start.

Alice: Just go out with someone who knows their ferns. Better still, someone who *loves* them. Not necessarily an expert botanist, in fact, best to be avoided. After all, what's the point of learning them if it all stops there? But if you insist on a good book for company, try to find a copy of *Our Ferns in Their Haunts* by Clute, published in 1901. He had a keen sense of humor and a flair for the poetic to go along with his contagious love affair with ferns. Even the title gives an indication. Don't expect to find much of that in any of the modern guides.

Don: So, with all that, I guess we're seeing some signs of climate change. What do you make of all this fuss about global warming?

Bob: Well, it may not be such good news for canoeists. There's talk now of harnessing more of these northern rivers for power, starting with the lower Churchill. Supposed to be better for the environment. No greenhouse gas. And more feasible too, with the price of energy now rising so fast. But the good news, if you want to look at it

that way, is that the rivers flows up here have been decreasing steadily for the past thirty years.

Claire: Less rain? Hard to believe!

Bob: Not at all. Annual precipitation has remained about the same, and may even be increasing slightly. But they say there's more evaporation now, so the net effect is less water in the rivers.

Claire: So, rivers drying up. And that's supposed to be good news for canoeists? Doesn't sound so good to me.

Bob: Nothing like drying up. Just slightly less annual flow. Hydro engineers have to take factors like that into account when planning these massive power projects.

Don: Claire and I went to see that Al Gore film about the impending disaster of global warming.

Bob: Yes, I know, we saw it too. Personally, I think global warming might actually turn out to have a positive side to it.

Don: Good heavens. How so?

Bob: Because for the first time ever, all nations will be forced to work together toward a common solution. In fact, one can already see this beginning to happen. Think of it.

Don: But did you notice there was not a single mention of population control in that entire film.

Alice: Nor even in Gore's book that the film was based on.

Don: What hope is there for reduction of energy consumption if the world population keeps increasing at the present rate, combined with increasing standards of living worldwide?

Alice: Not much hope at all. That's what the Sierra Club concluded in an editorial published in their Bulletin about fifty years ago. Caused a bit of a stir back then, as I recall. You know why it isn't mentioned much these days? Because no one in government has a practical solution, or if they did they would not dare mention it. Looks like Malthus may have been right after all. He thought food supply might be one limiting factor, but now perhaps combined with things such as energy and fresh water supply.

Claire: Not to mention disease, competition for living space, and warfare.

Bob: And I suppose it also depends on what you mean by standard of living.

Claire: Did you see that program on the science channel about the high-tech home we can all soon look forward to? Just say the word: cook dinner, clean house, mow lawn, do laundry, buy groceries, and everything gets done automatically by marvelous electronics and robotics.

Don: Why even the need for saying what needs doing? Why not have a super-robot that tells the other robots what to do? Call me a skeptic. Whatever happened to that prediction some years ago of a heliport in everyone's backyard? Well my idea of living the good life is making do on a plot of land large enough for a modest dwelling, a vegetable garden and some fruit trees, perhaps some poultry, a few maple trees to tap, a hive or two of bees, a couple acres of woods for fuel, and having some small cottage industry for cash.

Alice: Which sounds like pretty much what you two have done. You and the Nearings.

Don: And many others. Even way back in Victorian England, biologist Alfred Russel Wallace came up with the radical socialistic idea of a redistribution of wealth so that every family could have their own cottage and grow food on their own land. Claimed it would benefit humanity in general and even reduce crime and alcoholism. I think his idea had merit back then, and perhaps even more so now.

Alice: But how practical is it for everyone to be that self-sufficient?

Don: That's not the idea. No one is self-sufficient these days, not even those isolated cult communities that pretend to be. On a large enough scale, say a country, I suppose it's possible, but for what purpose? From the social point of view, isn't it better that we all depend on one another? Besides, I can't imagine living without a few modern conveniences such as a car, a tractor, and electricity.

Claire: Plus modern medicine and at least a hundred other things.

Don: No, the whole idea is simply to enjoy a healthy and satisfying lifestyle. I can't speak for everyone, but I find that growing my own food and chopping my own firewood satisfies some deep-seated impulse, probably inborn. Been a backyard gardener all my life, and can't imagine what life would be like without some land to cultivate.

(Don sings and Alice joins in with her beautiful soprano voice.)

Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,

We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

Claire: And with fresh fruit and vegetables that are healthy to eat, free of all those chemicals and pesticide sprays. But for me, the biggest reward of all is the satisfaction that comes from sharing our harvest with neighbors and others in the community, especially those in need.

Alice: Well, all right. But how practical is even just that for everyone?

Don: Perhaps not very, but let's consider just growing one's own vegetables. Even Massachusetts, which is our third most densely populated state, contains about one acre of land per capita. If only ten percent of that land is tillable, that leaves nearly half an acre for a family of four, which ought to be about enough to keep them well supplied with vegetables all year, fresh and preserved.

Alice: But where did you come up with that ten percent?

Don: Yes, I know. More and more good land disappearing every day, and much of the world already hopelessly overpopulated. But I'm not giving up yet. We still have plenty of land, even in New England. Just need to manage it better.

Bob: Well, my idea of utopia would be a society in which there is no need for law enforcement, no courts, no police, no security devices of any sort, no lawyers, and no criminal justice system, because they would all be completely unnecessary.

Claire: Sounds great, but how realistic is it?

Bob: When you boarded a plane fifty years ago, there was no security procedure whatsoever. You just bought your ticket and got on. Why was it like that then but not now? The main problem now is that no one seems to care. We just take it for granted and accept it. The trend is for ever more security, more police, more laws, more enforcement, and the politicians even brag about it, even though the whole trend is in the exact opposite of the right direction, without even a reversal of the present trend in sight, much less an ideal goal to strive for.

Claire: I suppose so. But I'm still wondering how practical is your idea of a society with, for instance, no security of any sort, no police to maintain law and order, and not even any laws?

Don: Well, isn't that what we've got right here now? Seems to work fine for us, doesn't it? Then why not for everyone else?

And so it was that Bob's ideas for a return to homesteading and Don's plans for social utopia were launched, sitting blissfully around a campfire in the peaceful wilderness. The only problem then remaining was how to convince the rest of the world.

Camp Five: *Being Saved*

The party has spent the afternoon cruising down a long lake. While passing by a clearing along the shore, they notice some poles lashed together, so they stop to investigate. The poles had once supported a rough shelter of plastic film that had long since disintegrated. At first they wonder if it might have been a temporary sporting camp, but then they discover a burial site nearby marked by a mound of stones and the decayed remains of a crude wooden cross. The size indicates it was probably for a small child. In a few more years it would all vanish into oblivion. With these sobering thoughts still fresh in their minds, at their next campsite near the outlet of the lake, the evening discussion turns to religion.

Alice: First time Bob and I were up here, when we reached tidewater we spent a day exploring the settlement at Okaluk Bay while we waited for the ferry. Used to be an old Hudson's Bay Post, but now it's a Canadian government relief settlement for the Eskimos. There were two churches in that tiny village, Catholic and Anglican, in spirited competition with each other for followers.

Claire: By each one promising them a happier life in Heaven, I suppose, in return for their misery and sacrifice here on earth.

Alice: We spent some time chatting with the Anglican minister. He was discouraged by the steady gains of his rival in spite of all his efforts to lure them back over to his side. Last I heard, the whole thing was settled when the provincial government decreed French the exclusive language in the settlement, which had the ultimate effect of the Anglican church ceasing to exist.

Bob: On the way down the coast, our boat stopped at Indian River, another government relief community. For whatever reason, the government saw fit to always keep the two races segregated, but knowing a bit of their history, perhaps it was just as well.

Claire: Do you really suppose they're any better off now than they were five hundred years ago, or even a hundred, when they still lived off the land, mostly by hunting and fishing?

Alice: For the Eskimos, hard to say. Who knows what their life was like back then. Surely wasn't easy. We'll never really know. But most would agree that the Indians are generally worse off now. Few good jobs. Dependent on welfare, drugs, and alcohol. Trouble is, no one has come up with a solution. Only sure thing now is that there's no going back to the old ways.

(While Alice removes blueberry muffins from the reflector, the others give the fire a few ceremonial pokes.)

Bob: Can you believe this? I read recently that America is ranked one of the most religious countries in the world.

Don: How on earth could anyone arrive at a silly idea like that, for Christ sakes?

Bob: Some survey found that nine out of ten Americans say they believe in heaven and expect to eventually reside up there, whatever the hell that is supposed to mean. Evidently that ranked us among the highest of all nations surveyed.

Don: I would be curious to know who conducted that survey, and how. Hard to imagine why any reputable pollster would bother asking such a brainless question. What sort of response do you suppose they would have got if they had asked: Do you believe in calculus? To say you believe *in* something is so ambiguous that it doesn't really mean anything. We all have some sort of concept of heaven in the abstract, otherwise the word would not be in our conversational vocabulary. So in that sense, we all believe in it. But can you imagine actually spending eternity anywhere? Sounds to me more like Dante's ninth circle of hell.

Claire: Hey, Saint Peter, I've been up here for about a billion years now, and I'm getting tired of making love to the same guy all that time. How much longer have I got to stay? (Then deepening her voice) **You kidding? You're barely past the Pearly Gates. Eternity means just that.** But I guess I really didn't think this out, Peter. So how the hell do I get out of here? **Profanity is forbidden here, and sorry, there's no way out.** Well, Peter, how about suicide. **Suicide is also forbidden. Look, you stupid ass, your mourners prayed for you to come up here, so now here you are, like it or not.** I hate this damn place! **Well you can go to hell, Claire!** Thanks a lot, Pete, I was just waiting and praying for that!

Alice: Now Claire, really!

Bob: That same survey found that in any given week, an amazing half of all Americans attend church.

Claire: Hard to believe. Don and I don't know anyone who attends church regularly, and very few who attend at all. If anywhere near accurate, which I doubt, I would take those results to actually be contrary indicators of religion.

Bob: Well, if you want to look at it that way, the good news is that those survey figures were way off the mark. Some skeptics decided that instead of trusting the faithful to tell the truth, a more accurate way was to stand outside churches and count the actual attendance. They then came up with a number more like 20 percent. Another claim made by the religious trumpeters is that America has far more churches than any other country.

Claire: Another contrary indicator. Are we talking about religion or dogma and superstition? Would it be too cynical for me to suggest that perhaps a lot of that tedious ritual and mindless mumbo jumbo merely serves as a substitute for religion. It sounds to me more like a time-tested method for psychological seduction of the masses.

Don: Now Honey, careful.

Claire: Here's how I would have conducted that survey. Just compare the per capita homicide rates of different countries. Or consider this: What percentage of Americans do you suppose approve of the torturing of prisoners? A recent poll by Pew Research found it to be about half, but what was most revealing was that those who attend church regularly are more likely to support torture, with evangelicals capturing the top spot.

Alice: And especially if the victims happen to be Muslim, or even look like they might be Arabic. Doesn't it make you wonder how many other countries are that barbarous?

Claire: Now I ask you, what does that say about religion in America?

Don: But aren't we overlooking something? Scattered throughout the Old Testament you will find glorification of torture, brutality, and mass murder of infidels, just so long as it's carried out by the righteous in the name of the Lord. It's all been part of the Christian tradition for centuries. They're just being faithful followers of the Holy Scriptures.

Claire: (singing mockingly) *With the cross of Jesus going on before.*

(Pause while Alice serves tea and blueberry muffins, Bob throws more wood on the fire, and the other two just stare hypnotically into the flames seeking enlightenment that does not easily come.)

Don: Did we ever tell you about our adventure a couple years ago on the Allagash? It was late in the season, so we had most campsites to ourselves. After leaving our camp at Five Finger Brook, it had been stormy nearly all day, so we had in mind stopping early and camping at Allagash Falls. About a mile above, we came to a large camp group all huddled together on shore, except for one of their youngsters who was perched on a boulder in midstream.

Claire: Seemed to us like a strange stunt to be playing that close to the falls. But then when we noticed that one of her hands was bloody we became concerned and stopped to investigate. Their leaders explained that early in the day, while attempting to land and wait for a sudden squall to pass, one of their canoes had upset. The canoe and the other paddler had drifted to shore, but that poor girl ended up out there, where she'd been clinging to the boulder for dear life all day long.

Don: Of course our first reaction was: Why hadn't someone paddled out to rescue her? She was in no immediate danger of being washed downstream, but with all that rain you did have to be concerned. Well, the leaders explained that all their efforts for the past several hours had been concentrated in group prayer calling on God to stop the rain, which they believed was having some success. They then urged us to join them in prayer.

Claire: Which surely would have caused the gods to unleash a deluge!

Don: As I recall, Claire's actual response to them was almost that impious, but we'll skip that. So we unloaded our canoe, ferried out to midstream with no problem, and brought the poor girl back to shore. With a hot drink and dry clothes, she was none the

worse. The small cut in her hand had stopped bleeding, so we saw no need to treat it beyond a band-aid.

Claire: Now we come to the good part. We were all set to be on our way, but the leaders insisted that we stick around while they all gave thanks. I didn't think that was really necessary, but Don whispered to me, "Oh what the hell, why not?" So imagine our amusement when they all went into a huddle and gave thanks to *God* for the rescue.

Don: Well, as we were leaving, barely suppressing our amusement, one of the leaders got me aside and asked with a concerned look if we were believers. Luckily Claire was not nearby, and I tried to give a polite but non-committal reply. Then, as a parting gift he gave us a booklet that I *believe* we still have, tucked lovingly into our trip album.

Claire: And guess what the title is: *HAVE YOU BEEN SAVED? Your Personal Guide to Salvation.*

(Long pause, as the fire gradually dies down.)

Alice: But Claire, what about all the good things churches do, such as striving for world peace and helping the poor.

Claire: Well of course. Not sure if we ever told, but when our local church became involved in relief for the hurricane victims, Don and I pitched in for a month building new homes, not as Unitarians or even Christians but simply as caring human beings, along with many other dedicated volunteers, mostly college age.

Alice: Oh yes, now I remember. I think even you, Claire, would have to admit that a great many wonderful things we treasure in the world today would not exist but for Christianity.

Claire: Such as?

Alice: Well, the biblically inspired masterpieces of da Vinci and Michelangelo, for instance.

Claire: Anything else?

Bob: How about Handel's Messiah, or Verdi's Requiem?

Alice: Or all those heavenly sacred choral works of Bach and the other great masters of the Baroque?

Claire: Yes, I know. There are times when even I become a believer of sorts. I remember and still treasure those favorite Bible passages that my dear mother so often read to me at bedtime. Even more so when I recall sitting with her in church and singing some of those traditional hymns, especially her favorite: *For the Beauty of the Earth*, sung from the heart. Oh yes indeed!

Alice: What were some of the other you remember?

Claire: Oh, there was *Nearer My God to Thee, Blest Be the Tie that Binds, Rock of Ages, Holy Holy Holy.*

Alice: At a memorial service in our local church recently, I happened to glance through their new hymnal, and except for the traditional Christmas carols I did not see any familiar hymns, probably including those you just named. Not sure why. Do you know *Abide with Me*?

Claire: Oh sure. That was another of my mother's favorites.

(Claire sings, Bob and Don hum, and the ever-resourceful and talented Alice sings the base part an octave above.)

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide

The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide

When other helpers fail, and comforts flee

Help of the helpless, O abide with me

And so, as Claire wipes a few tears from her eyes, they all sit humbly around their altar of glowing embers, with the spires of the black spruce rising out of the dark forest and silhouetted against the fading glow of the sunset—their own private chapel in this hallowed wilderness sanctuary.

Camp Six: *Playing Games*

Shortly downstream from their previous campsite, the party has turned and headed up a small tributary that will eventually lead them over a height of land and into another watershed. Most of the day has been spent poling upstream, paddling across several small ponds, and making short portages around beaver dams and rapids. Around the campfire that evening, the conversation turns to the faint trail they have been following.

Bob: I wondered if we'd find any traces of trails in this section. It always moves me to come across one. Almost like a voice from out of the past.

Alice: When do you suppose this one was last used?

Bob: By trappers? Probably not since the thirties, if even that recent. Everything changed during the war, even up here, and hardly anyone returned to their old trapping grounds afterward. There were easier ways to earn a living, at the military bases, the mines, or the hydro stations. After that, possibly a few parties like ours may have tripped here. But I've been watching for signs and haven't spotted any.

Don: Amazing, isn't it, for the old trail to still be clear after all these years?

Bob: Did I ever tell you about the time we were following an old portage trail near Indian House Lake? One of our companions was Herb Irwin, who knows a lot about such things and has written a book about portage trails. He said it was an old Indian route to the coast, and may not have been used as such for nearly a century.

Don: Not even overgrown with scrub spruce and alders?

Bob: Lower down, of course. But we were high up in the tundra. They last a long time there. Even here, look at that trail coming into our campsite. Loads of caribou moss all around, but none in the trail. Not sure why, but it takes a long time to grow back. I think about that every time we walk on it or trample it down to make camp.

Alice: But then I remind Bob that few parties are ever likely to come this way to see the damage. Years ago, when we were active in the Boston Canoe Club, we ran a few wilderness canoe trips up this way. But not any more. Now they nearly all paddle solo in those little plastic canoes and kayaks, and just run rapids. Mention a trip with portages and you won't likely get any takers from that crowd. Then mention upstream travel and they'll think you're crazy.

Don: Well, that's fine with me. So peaceful here. No noise. Not a sign of litter of any sort. How many places do you know like that these days? And it's mostly because of no roads and no place to even land a plane.

Claire: Of course that's what we thought on our Magpie trip. We were going upstream through a chain of small lakes in order to cross over a height of land and descend the Wacouno River. We were approaching one of the lakes but still a couple

miles from it when the peace and quiet of the wilderness was broken by the distant hum of a motor running. It grew ever louder as we came into the lake, and pretty soon we spotted a cabin that it was coming from.

Don: Actually more of a shack. That was a surprise because the lake looked to be too small for a plane to land. As we paddled by, one of the three men there spotted us and invited us in for refreshments. Turned out they came up by helicopter all the way from Quebec City. Must have been millionaires. And all that just to fish.

Claire: And drink!

Don: That's right. The motor was for a generator, so they could have refrigeration for their beer.

Claire: Which they appeared to have had too much of already, and even more after our arrival. They were as surprised as we were, never having had any visitors before.

Alice: I'll bet what surprised them even more was seeing women in the party. That's probably what they go up there to get away from.

Claire: Not exactly, Alice. It's to get away from *wives*, not women. You should have seen the pictures plastered all over the wall. Anyhow, when we told them our proposed route, they were baffled. Didn't we realize we could have taken the train to Wacouno and shortened our trip by half? And didn't we know how foolhardy it was to be going off into the wilderness without a native guide? We would surely get lost. If we would just wait, they would radio for a plane to come pick us up in some nearby lake and take us to our destination.

Don: Claire then remarked with even more than her usual sarcasm that we could just as well have stayed all the while at a motel in Quebec City and we wouldn't have had to paddle at all! That sort of broke up the party, so we thanked them for their thoughtfulness and continued on our way. But of course Claire had to get in one last parting shot. As we prepared to shove off, she stared with a puzzled look at one of our maps, held upside down of course, and yelled back, "Hey you guys, which way is Wacouno?"

Claire: They just looked at each other and shook their heads.

Alice: There, you see? You should always have a woman along to ask directions. Someone said that's why they train women astronauts, to ask which way back to Earth in case the guys get lost in space.

Don: (sarcastically) Very funny, Alice.

Alice: Perhaps we never told you about our first trip together. It was on our honeymoon. Navigation by map and compass was all new to me, and Bob was trying his best to teach me. We had a simple little compass that just pointed north. I was supposed to be reading the map and giving directions to Bob in the stern. He was getting rather impatient with my slow progress, and I was getting even more impatient with his impatience.

Bob: I must have read somewhere that men's and women's brains are wired differently, especially when it comes to working out directions, and right there was living proof.

Alice: Or so you thought! We were in the headwaters of the Dumoine on a completely overcast day, looking for the outlet of some lake. I was getting tired of Bob repeatedly asking me if we were headed due east, and finally I shot back at him with "How the hell can I tell? This damned thing only points north. Which way is east?" As I recall, he did not find that very funny. Probably thought I was serious.

Bob: You see, part of the problem was black flies. Poor Alice had never been exposed to them before, and she was having a pretty bad allergic reaction. She couldn't understand why I wasn't bothered as much. Besides that, I had just finished my postgraduate at MIT, and I thought I must be just about the smartest guy in the world, surely ever so much smarter than a Northeastern music major. Oh well, I guess we live and learn.

Alice: Ah, but then there was that time a couple days later on the river when we went hunting for blueberries. Remember that?

Bob: Oh wow, how could I not! After making camp we went scouting for blueberries. Our rambles here and there finally brought us back near the river, which we then followed downstream for a ways.

Alice: When I said I had enough and was heading back to camp to start cooking supper, Bob asked me if I knew the way. I said I could see a clump of spruce trees ahead that looked like it might be at our campsite. Bob said that we had been walking downstream all the while, so just how did I expect to get back to camp by continuing farther on downstream? I was getting a bit miffed at that point and I asked Bob how on earth did he know which way was downstream, since it looked to me that the water was just flowing sideways, neither up or down. Evidently he thought I really was that stupid.

Bob: I thought, oh my God, what have I got myself into? How do I deal with someone like this? So I said to myself, I'll teach her a good lesson. Let her go on and see for herself how stupid she is, and after a while I'll come back and rescue her. So I headed back upstream to where I *thought* our camp was. I walked and walked until the awful truth finally dawned on me. I turned around and headed sheepishly back downstream. I found Alice already preparing supper. For quite a while we hardly spoke a word to each other while we ate.

Alice: Actually it was just Bob who was the quiet one. But then, when I produced my first haphazard attempt at baking a blueberry pie in the reflector, suddenly we both started laughing. Bob laughed so hard he almost choked on the burnt crust.

Bob: I told Alice that as long as I kept my eyes shut, her pie was absolutely the best I had ever eaten.

Alice: And I sensed that Bob really meant that as a love message, in his usual oblique way. So we sat for a while by the campfire just hugging each other, and that night in the tent was even better, if you know what I mean.

Bob: Oh boy, I certainly remember that!

(Pause for fire tending, while Alice and Bob affectionately exchange smiles and hugs.)

Alice: Your story about the fishermen from Quebec City reminds me of our Ugjoktok trip. The truck driver who transported us to Iron Arm seemed baffled that we would come all the way up there just to paddle a canoe, and not even hunt or fish. His idea of vacation was to spend a week in Montreal, visiting every night club.

Bob: That's how it usually is. Urbanites like us seek solitude in the wilderness, and those already living up here flock to the bright lights. Just human nature I suppose, going to the opposite extreme.

Don: Speaking of hunting and fishing, we must tell you about a couple of sportsmen we once encountered at Fifth Saint John Pond. We reached it by paddling and poling up the West Branch. They had arrived a couple hours earlier, and we could have found the pond blindfolded from the sound of their outboard. We shared the campsite there with them, but only briefly. They had somehow driven in to the pond with their jeep and boat trailer, no easy thing back in those days.

Claire: The first question one of them asked was, "Where is your vehicle?" It wasn't so much the question but the way he asked it that put us on guard. When we told him how we got there, we overheard him tell his partner: "Hey, Bart, guess what? These lunkheads paddled all the way up the West Branch. Didn't even know they could drive in." It seemed to be his way of letting us know how much smarter than us he was.

Don: They spent most of their time taking turns fishing. We wondered if their boat would hold both of them at the same time. Our nicknames for them were Fat and Fatter. We watched while Fatter hooked onto a fish not far off shore. After several minutes had passed with the fish swimming back and forth, Claire said to his companion, Fat: "Why the hell doesn't he reel the poor thing in and put it out of its misery?" Fat's answer: "He's playing it, stupid."

Claire: So I fired back: "Playing! Now that's an interesting choice of word. Would that be from the fish's point of view or his?" Fat said he knew our type all too well, goddam leftie animal rights nuts, or something like that. Said we probably didn't approve of hunting either. I told him we actually do like to hunt, but perhaps not for the same sorts of things he did. He said that his friend (that would be Fatter) liked to hunt moose, but *he* was more into hunting small game. "*Game!*" I fired back at him, "Now there's another interesting choice of word. Hey there mister pheasant, how about playing some games with my shotgun?"

Don: That's Claire for you. At that point, I have to confess I was unable to contain my laughter any longer. Fat yelled out for his companion to come ashore so they could

move their campsite to the other side of the pond. This required both of them riding in the boat together. We were prepared to rescue them if they capsized, but they managed somehow.

Claire: But there's more to the story. The next day we stopped to chat with a Maine Forest Service ranger, and we told him about our encounter with Fat and Fatter. Turned out he knew them well. He must have sensed our disregard for them. He said too bad we didn't get to chat with the other guy—the one fishing. He asked us if we'd ever heard of Bartus Medical Supplies in Portland? Well that's his company—very successful. Remember that resort development that was planned for Chase Stream a few years ago? That happened to be one of his favorite fly-fishing streams. The development was stopped and the whole area placed in conservation thanks to a grass-roots alliance funded largely by a grant from Bartus Medical.

Don: So we told him, next time he runs into them, say hello and heartfelt thanks from us. What more could we say?

And so another fireside scene comes to a close, along the ancient portage trail in the land of the black spruce.

Camp Seven: *Bob's Brief Reign*

On this day, the party has reached the limit of navigation of the stream they have been ascending. They have plotted a compass bearing across the height of land to the headwaters of another watershed. We say across rather than over, because these heights of land, so-called, often have no apparent height, and are more likely to be boggy and poorly drained, as is the case here. All signs of a trail have now vanished, and they are portaging through unbroken wilderness. They have been attacked by clouds of mosquitoes as they force their way through alder thickets and slog through muskeg swamps. Overcast skies and intermittent showers have further contributed to the overall dismal aspect. Bob is nursing a bruised knee and cut in his hand resulting from a fall on slippery rocks. And so it is with a sense of relief that the party makes camp on the shore of a lake at the far end of the portage. The larger than usual campfire this evening also serves as a clothes dryer and reviver of flagging spirits. Alice has just hung the teapot on a dingle-chain over the fire, and Claire has placed her boots near the fire to dry.

Don: Hate to tell you, Honey, but they're not going to get dry that way, and take care you don't cook them.

Claire: I know. Remember that time on the Coulonge when one of our companions, believe it was Frank, did just that? One shrunk so much he had to cut it with a knife to get it on. Makes me feel good, though, just to see them warming. (She moves them back a bit.)

Bob: Well, who shall we vilify this evening?

Claire: Who is there left that we haven't already?

Alice: Did we ever finish with the Defense Department? You two weren't with us back in the late sixties, when the hot topic was Vietnam. There were a couple guys from Raytheon that often tripped with us, and we had to be careful what we said about politics. One time the question of nuclear disarmament came up, and we got into a rather heated discussion with them. I don't think they ever came with us again after that.

Claire: We get the Friends Committee on National Legislation newsletter. They're always lobbying for a reduction in our military budget. We tend to agree with them on most things, but that's one where we differ.

Alice: Really, Claire. How come?

Claire: Sounds like they can't quite make up their mind? Why just a reduction? It sends the message that we're still willing to wage war, but with reduced capability. Not a good idea in my opinion. Why not instead do away with our military entirely?

Bob: But what are the chances of doing that?

Claire: A better question might be, in the long run how practical are the alternatives? Either way, a lot of people could get hurt. Which way is likely to be worse? And consider this: In a future world war, which countries would be the most likely to get bombed to smithereens? The ones most heavily armed, of course. Just look at the recent history of warfare. In these times, couldn't having military might actually be a defense liability, especially nuclear?

(Pause, staring into the fire and waiting for an answer that doesn't come forth.)

Claire: And have you ever noticed that in all the discussions of al-Qaeda and the Taliban coming out of Washington, no one ever asks: Why do they hate us? Why do they not hate Canadians, or Mexicans, or the Swiss? Why just us? Suppose that instead of trying to hunt them down and pop them off with drones, along with innocent civilians and children, our government took our entire military budget and spent it instead on humanitarian aid and international relations? Would they still hate us quite as much? I doubt it.

Bob: That reminds me of a guy I knew who owned a lot of stock in some big drug company. He once suggested to the management that they do away with advertising altogether and devote the entire savings to developing better and safer drugs. The response he got, presumably a form letter, was that something along those lines had been considered, but it was doubtful the shareholders would approve. Actually, I suspect it was probably a case of the management being unwilling to take the risk, not the shareholders.

Don: And how practical do you think that idea was?

Bob: I've been in business for over thirty years, quite successfully I would say, and I have yet to spend a penny on advertising. If it works for me, why not for others? But getting back to politics, can you imagine the frustration of being President and having all your visionary ideas blocked by Congress? I would take the job only if the Constitution could be temporarily suspended and I be given absolute powers. One month ought to be enough. Then I would resign.

Alice: If not already thrown out of office.

Don: OK Bob, tell us your agenda.

Bob: I would nationalize all motor vehicle laws. When I got my driver's license, every state had their own different set of regulations. License plates would be standardized and easily read, two letters for states and color-coded, instead of those cute little pictures of lobsters or broncos. Still better, why not equip all motor vehicles with electronic license plates and totally automate speed enforcement and traffic control?

Claire: And how about motorcycles having the same noise restrictions as cars?

Alice: Include leaf blowers too. And how about permanent loss of driver's license for the unspeakably rude who blow their horn merely to vent their displeasure, often just because the driver ahead of them is not driving at breakneck speed. Better still, do away with horns altogether. When was the last time you heard one used to avoid a collision?

(Pause while Alice serves tea and Bob stokes the fire)

Bob: I would immediately stop minting pennies and nickels. Some have argued that retailers would then round up prices. Hah, when was the last time any retailer ever rounded up any price? They absolutely abhor rounded prices.

Claire: Gee Bob, all great ideas, but not very momentous?

Bob: I know. But that's just the warm-up exercise. Now we get down to serious business. I would impose a large tariff on foreign oil, and depend primarily on the free market to come up with alternate domestic sources of energy.

Don: Free market? Sounds like Reagan. Would you characterize your administration as Democratic or Republican?

Bob: Neither one. No registered Democrat or Republican would serve in my autocracy. Can you imagine General Motors or General Electric being run by two opposing boards of directors who spend most of their time and effort fighting with each other for power and control, all the while enriching themselves at the expense of shareholders. Or still worse, staging a day-long filibuster reading from comic books at a corporate meeting when some important decision was supposed to have been made.

(Pause while the fire is tended to)

Bob: I would ban all arms exports. They have a tendency to end up in the wrong hands, and sometimes even used against us. And I agree with Claire: Do away with the CIA, the NSA, and the military entirely, but perhaps keep the National Guard—they often do useful things. The huge amounts of money saved would go into promoting world health and peace, just as you suggested. Here's something for you to ponder: If things went according to plan, I would hope to eventually do away completely with such things as airport security. Nowadays, even parades, sporting events, and New Year's Eve celebrations are ever more considered security risks.

Don: Silly isn't it. If that isn't an admission of failure in leadership, I don't know what is. As nearly as I can figure out, every last atrocious act committed by the NSA in their secret war on terrorism has exactly the opposite effect in the long run and just creates more enemies.

Bob: But you see, there's the rub – “in the long run.” Holding federal elections every couple years virtually guarantees that long term solutions don't get much consideration. My solution to that is to select our representatives the same way that juries are selected, by random drawing or registered voters. I'm not kidding. I think we would end up with far better government. Trouble is, I don't see any peaceful way of bringing it about.

Claire: Can you imagine what life here on Earth might be like a thousand years from now? We are making such amazing progress in technology, but human affairs seem to have lagged far behind. Do you think they will ever catch up? Take for example locks and other security devices. In an ideal society, would any of them be necessary? But have you seen any progress in that direction lately?

Bob: Even more to the point, our government has a passion for passing laws but little interest in repealing them. Why not amend the Constitution to include a provision that before any new law can be enacted, ten others must be repealed. Furthermore, all laws would expire after ten years unless renewed. In an ideal society, are strict laws really unnecessary? I know, some will scoff at such a silly notion. But then I say, look at us here. We four manage to get along quite well without any written laws. If it works for us, why not for others too?

By the way, speaking of taxes, did you know that the Federal Tax Code is now over 17,000 pages and still growing, and a printed version of it costs over \$1,100 from the Government Printing Office? Every time politicians campaign on simplifying it, of course it just gets bigger and more complicated as they sneak in more pork. But I have the solution to that. Require every member of Congress to prepare their own return, and fine them \$1,000 for every mistake. By the way, not knowing a law is considered no legal excuse for disobeying it. Do you know how many laws there are now on the books—let's say just federal?

Claire: Probably hundreds of thousands.

Bob: I tried to find out recently, and I wonder if anyone knows. In my search, I did discover the existence of a list of titles of regulations enacted by Congress, but could not find the actual list, which was said to be 134,000 pages long. If you estimate the number of titles per page multiplied by the probably hundreds of pages per regulation, and include interpretations and amendments, you are surely talking about countless billions of pages.

Bob: Well, Claire, that reminds me of my ultimate tax reform, long range of course. Do away with income tax altogether and depend instead on voluntary contributions, with all contributions available for public view. Some will ask, how would you make up for the loss of revenue? And my response is, how do you know there would be any loss? When our local conservation club switched from annual dues to voluntary contributions, the revenue actually increased.

(Pause while Bob rubs a cramp in his leg.)

Alice: And Bob, sorry, but I don't think I want to be First Lady.

Bob: Come to think of it, I don't want to be President either. All this has just been my perverse idea of entertainment after our dreary, dismal day in the muskeg, not to be taken too seriously. (Another pause.) What I really want right now is for Alice to change this bloody bandage on my thumb.

Don: Things are sure to be better tomorrow, cruising down the lake, hopefully with a tailwind for a change. Push that log farther into the fire, Claire. Your boots might even be getting slightly drier by now.

Camp Eight: *Alice's Recital*

The stormy weather has passed. Under clear skies, with a brisk cool wind out of the north, the party has spent most of the day paddling down a long lake. They have followed a crooked passageway in a generally easterly direction around many islands and other contortions of the lake. They are now camped near the outlet.

Claire: Did you notice that whatever direction we paddled today, we couldn't escape battling that headwind for very long? Even on the lee side of those islands it seemed to me like the wind was against us most of the time.

Bob: Canoeists are all too familiar with that tendency. Alice and I once had a companion who was a confirmed pessimist. He was in the habit of cursing what he was evidently convinced was the natural perversity of the winds in the North Country. I'll tell you about a party I knew canoeing in the Barren Grounds. They should have had the prevailing wind in their favor on the generally easterly route they were following. But constant headwinds put them so far behind schedule that they finally gave up and headed back to their starting point. But then they faced even stronger headwinds on the way back, at least so they said.

Claire: Just bad luck, I guess.

Bob: I'm not so sure. In fact I was thinking about it today following that crooked route we took around all those islands. Even if the wind is from the side, you have to paddle into it just to maintain your heading. So taking that into consideration, it necessarily follows that you are in effect going against the wind more often than not.

Don: Also, if you paddle some route with a tailwind, and then paddle an equal distance against the wind, you will figure that the wind was against you most of the time simply because you spent a much greater portion of the time paddling against it. Furthermore, there's also your own forward motion that has to be taken into account. When you do a vector analysis, that alone will account for some extra headwind on average.

Alice: Oh, you engineers think you're so smart. But you've overlooked the really important reasons. A wind in your face is more noticeable than one at your back because your face is more sensitive to wind. And when you're driving into a headwind you have to be concerned about waves slopping over the sides and into your lap, especially paddling bow. I suppose you guys in the stern don't think about things like that. And then there is the tendency of some people toward pessimism in general, especially when tired and hungry. Now about those guys in the Barrens that turned back, I would be curious to know what other problems were bugging them, like perhaps not enough food, or the wrong kind.

Don: So if I counted right, six different explanations for the natural perversity of headwinds. Perhaps we should all collaborate on an article for *Canoe* magazine.

Bob: I actually enjoy paddling with a light headwind in my face. It helps keep the black flies off, and besides that it just feels good. I also like the sound of the waves gently lapping the canoe, almost like music. Speaking of which, on a long stretch of lake paddling, I often find myself stroking in time with some favorite tune. This afternoon it was “Settin’ The Woods On Fire.” It was good for the first hour or so, but then I couldn’t get it out of my mind and the woods just kept getting set on fire all afternoon.

Alice: Those good songs have a way of doing that, don’t they, especially when the genius of songwriter Fred Rose is combined with the artistry of Hank Williams. That’s a good example of where the words fit the music and the music fits the words. I challenge you to fit those words to any other tune. That’s also true of just about every song Hank Williams wrote and recorded.

Claire: Can you give us some other examples, Alice?

Alice: Let me think a minute. (Alice stirs the fire and stares at it for a while, deep in thought.) Surely you all know the song, “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” (Alice sings the first two lines, and they all nod in agreement.) Do you know the song, “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry?” (Alice sings in the mournful style of Hank Williams.)

The silence of a falling star

Lights up a purple sky

And as I wonder where you are

I’m so lonesome I could cry

Can you see how the words just fit the tunes? Those two songs have essentially the same meter, but just try switching the words with the tunes. Hank Williams often wrote both the words and music, which might explain why they match so perfectly. Of all the great songs he wrote, that one was said to be his favorite. Yet it never became popular until after his death.

Bob: At the untimely age of only twenty-nine. (Pause while Bob stokes the fire.) Alice, wouldn’t my favorite “Blue Skirt Waltz” also have the same meter as “Take Me Out to the Ball Game?”

Alice: Yes, I suppose it would. Do you two know it? (Claire and Don indicate otherwise.) It’s Bob’s favorite waltz. We’ll sing a bit of it for you. (Alice and Bob harmonize.)

I dream of that night with you

Lady when first we met

We danced in a world of blue

How can my heart forget?

(At which point Bob's voice breaks. Clearly he is deeply moved by this waltz.)

Alice: In popular songs like these, notice how the lyrics so perfectly match the tunes, and especially how the judicious placement of bars and dotted notes stresses the key words.

Claire: Of course, just as we do automatically in everyday speech.

Alice: I believe that being easy to memorize plays a large part in tunes becoming popular. We already agreed that rhyming lyrics are easier to memorize, but more so if they mesh well with the melody. And the melody even more if it follows what we have imbedded in our brains as traditional chord progressions. And perhaps most important of all is regular meter. It is the fundamental building block of music. Some ancient dances used only the drum, and practically all dances that are popular today incorporate regular meter.

Claire: Why is that, Alice?

Alice: Well, to begin with, I suppose it's the most natural way to move about, whether it's walking, skipping, swinging, or whatever. With a partner or set, it's hardly practical any other way. And of course soldiers have probably marched in time to music since the times of the Romans or even the Trojans. Likewise, occupations that involved repetitive motion such as rowing or spinning are often accompanied by song. But especially dancing. In the popular contra dance tune, Miller's Reel, it doesn't take much imagination to hear the millwheel going round and round, or the sound of sawing in Mississippi Sawyer. The list of examples is endless. (Pause while the fire is poked and stoked.) For instrumental music, it's hard to imagine an ensemble of folk musicians playing in time with each other except with regular rhythm. The suggestion has been made that we may even become imprinted with rhythm from our mother's heartbeat while still in the womb. The steady and seemingly unending beat of the aboriginal Eskimo drum dance strongly suggests the human heartbeat: *th-thump, th-thump, th-thump*.... (Pause while Alice checks the muffins in the reflector oven and adjusts the fire.) Now we haven't even mentioned instrumentation and arrangement. Sometimes, with very talented musicians, the words become almost superfluous, and the instruments do the talking, especially in the hands of some of the top country music arrangers like Don Rich. Originally it was done with the fiddle, the devil's instrument so called, that mimicked the human voice. Or sometimes the harmonica. But now the steel guitar has become the instrument of choice.

Claire: But why must so many of those songs dwell on sadness?

Alice: Because it draws on one of our strongest human emotions. That sunset we are now seeing across the lake may be very pretty, and the muffins we are about to eat may be quite tasty, but I think you would be hard put to write a hit song about either of them.

Bob: Or a best selling novel.

Alice: Or an opera. Even the so-called lighter classics are apt to have at least a few sadder moments, and they are often the one's you're most likely to remember. And then

there are the film classics. Remember the poignant final scene in Chaplin's *City Lights* when the flower girl recognizes Charlie. Or take the music of composers like Schubert. In spite of the exuberance and joy in so many of his symphonic works and chamber music, to my mind there is an undercurrent of pathos that runs through most of them, and some passages even move me to tears.

Claire: But do you think that was Schubert's intention?

Alice: Oh well, I doubt it. I think a lot of that takes place inside our own subconscious. You see, I believe that we all have stored somewhere deep inside our incredible brains the amazing ability of responding to music in depth emotionally. But for some unknown reason, only a gifted few achieve the rare talent of composing really great music. For the rest of us, we can only listen in marvelous rapture.

Claire: So you're saying the receptive and emotionally tuned-in listener is just as important as the gifted composer. Never looked at it that way, but I suppose so.

Alice: Consider this. Ever noticed how a song that's easy to sing and easy to memorize has a much better chance of becoming popular. For a contrary example, look how many pop singers have trouble singing our national anthem at sporting events? There have been some famous incidents. Watch closely you'll see that many of them now use a pre-recorded rendition and just mouth the words for the performance. The octave and a half range spells trouble right away. Our favorite songs, including those just mentioned, are rarely much over an octave, if even that. And then those three accidentals and five slurred words in a row—more trouble. You take unpoetic lyrics woefully mismatched with an unmelodic score, and no wonder it's hard to memorize. Furthermore, we don't even have a standard version any more. You now hear different notes, strange chords, and especially different meter, usually slower than march tempo, and irregular besides.

Legend has it that Francis Scott Key penned those lines while witnessing the siege of Fort McHenry by the British Navy. But it turns out he wrote most of them in a hotel room later on—his amateur attempt at poetry. Then his brother-in-law had the bad idea of trying to set them to, of all things, a British drinking song. *British!* Trying to match existing lines with an existing melody almost never works. How many other national anthems do you suppose end with a question mark? And on a *descending* line. Hard to imagine what prompted Congress to make it our national anthem. Usually we hear only the first verse. Care to hear some of the other actual lines?

Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution

No refuge could save the hireling and slave

From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave

Now (*spoken sarcastically*), don't those lines just get you fired up with patriotic fervor? (After a pause while the campfire gets fired up instead, Alice continues.) I think some songs go too far to the other extreme—overly simple and repetitious. Whenever we sing "Happy Birthday" to some friend, I am left wondering why we couldn't have come up

with something at least a bit more musical and poetic. Einstein made some interesting observations about music. He was especially fond of Mozart. Said his compositions were so mathematically perfect that you couldn't change a single note. It was almost as though they had existed for eternity, and all Mozart did was discover them and write them down.

Bob: And you could probably say the same for any of your favorite pop songs, including the lyrics. Once they become imbedded in your memory, it seems as though you can't change a single word or note without diminishing it, almost as though they were always meant to be that way.

Don: Now here's something interesting. If we're talking about just the written musical score and not the performance, in theory at least, a computer could be programmed to print out every conceivable composition. Included would be all the masterpieces of the past, even including the one hundred or so of Bach's cantatas that were presumed to have been lost, not to mention all those great works hopefully yet to come in the next musical renaissance.

Claire: Then why hasn't that already been done?

Don: Because it would take an eternity and you would end up with a stack of papers at least from here to the moon and beyond. Who is going to sort through them? And besides that, who would have the talent to recognize a masterpiece when they found one? Only a musical genius like Mendelssohn, whose time might be much better spent composing.

Alice: And remember, we said *almost as though*. I think a lot of musical appreciation really depends on what takes place inside our own brains. I've had the same reaction to Mozart myself when playing his Clarinet Concerto. Thousands of notes, but play just a single wrong one and it will jump out at you. Same story with the Clarinet Polka. You have the feeling that it could never be improved. But bear in mind, that happens only after you know it by heart; never on first listening. So it's got to be partly in the listener.

Now here's an example of what I was saying about orchestration. When I was taking a course in music at Northeastern, Professor Shapiro asked each of us to bring in the score of some favorite but relatively unfamiliar brief solo passage from an orchestral work and play it on an instrument of our choice. Just for fun, I played a string of twenty-four identical sixteenth notes in **b** above high **c** on my flute. It brought a few laughs from my classmates, but when Professor Shapiro heard it he smiled. He instantly recognized it as a solo passage in Bach's Cantata Number Eight, and he agreed with me that it was one of the most sublime parts for flute that Bach ever composed. But you have to hear it in context to appreciate it. Accompaniment can be so important.

Don: Just like on canoe trips! Alice, this has been one of our more entertaining campfire sessions. I think you ought to write some of these things down.

Alice: Perhaps I will sometime. Now let's have some cranberry muffins while they're still hot.

Camp Nine: *Labrador Tea*

One of the portages the party has made on this day was through open brushy country with no sign of a trail. In a few places they had to force their way through dense thickets of Labrador tea. Claire, being the smallest and lightest of the four, had more trouble than the others, and she was heard to utter a few graphically descriptive words better left unquoted.

Alice: Claire, that plant you were swearing at and calling tanglefoot is actually Labrador Tea. If we had been here a month or two earlier, we might have seen it in bloom. Must be quite a sight. I've also heard that the flowers are very fragrant and attract bees, though perhaps not up here.

Claire: Did I hear the magic word tea? If we run out of ours, heaven forbid, could we brew up some from those curly little leaves?

Alice: Actually we tried it once just as an experiment, and we didn't care for it at all. Later I did some research and found there are two closely related plants up here, both called Labrador Tea. The more common and presumably drinkable one is sometimes called Indian Tea, and the less common one is called Northern Labrador Tea. I'm not sure now which one we tried. I've got some notes about both kinds somewhere here. Let's see if I can find them. (Alice searches through her papers and finally finds them.) Here we go. The drinkable species has the Latin name *Ledum groenlandicum*, and the other kind *Ledum palustre*.

Don: Sounds like a good example of why we have Latin names, to eliminate confusion. Right?

Alice: Hah! In most cases, yes. But in this particular case, there is added confusion, because Northern Labrador Tea has now been placed in a different genus, *Rhododendron tomentosum*, which several sources describe as poisonous. As for the more common kind, I have one paper here that mentions it being used for everything from a favorite beverage of the Eskimos and Indians to brewing beer and tanning leather. (Pause) Ah, here's another that mentions it as a cure for all sorts of things from colds to tuberculosis, and as a repellent of moths and mice. Yet another says the tea can cause severe headache and symptoms of intoxication, but unlike its cousin, it is only *slightly* poisonous.

Claire: I think I'd rather skip it and stick with our Liptons. By the way, I've always been curious how the scientific classifications are arrived at, especially those that change.

Alice: It's a lot more sophisticated than it used to be. Now they're using DNA and other technology. One problem is that there are so many species of living things, with more being discovered all the time. Care to guess how many?

Claire: Hundreds of thousands?

Don: I'll say millions.

Alice: Nobody knows. There is no central library, and even if there were, it's hard to know if the same species gets listed multiple times. Estimates range from a few million all the way up to a hundred million. More to the point, you might ask what exactly is the definition of a species. Or perhaps even more to the point, what does it matter, really?

Don: What it matters is that they all had to fit somehow into Noah's ark, either two of each or seven, depending on which version in Genesis you prefer. Come to think of it, I suppose Noah could have left out plants, insects, microbes, and all other living things not mentioned in Genesis, if that would have helped.

Bob: Do you suppose anyone actually takes those fables seriously?

Don: Only about half the population of the United States, according to one survey I've seen, including many university professors. Hard to believe, isn't it?

Bob: Aren't they what would be called Creationists?

Don: Interesting you should ask. Recently, with all the fuss about the teaching of creationism in our public schools, I spent some time trying to find out for myself what that word meant. There is no simple definition of "creationism" because the term now covers a wide range of beliefs, many of them mutually exclusive. Some sources group them into three or four main categories, and each one of these is further subdivided according to their particular beliefs and disagreement with the others. Adherents to the most extreme version base their beliefs on their literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis, including the creation of the entire universe and all life therein in a few days about 6000 years ago. Similar to this is a version that backs off slightly and replaces the 6000 years with thousands of years. Without attempting to list all the other numerous variations on this theme, at the other end of this spectrum are those who accept geological time and evolution of all living things *except* for mankind, believing that we have been created separately "in God's image," whatever that means. Those who accept the notion of biological evolution but believe that its course was influenced along the way by supernatural forces would probably not be considered true creationists. The one belief most versions of creationism have in common is the rejection of biological evolution. They also place much faith in Noah's flood around 3000 B.C. to account for fossils and geological features. And yes, most of them do indeed believe that dinosaurs stalked the earth alongside our human ancestors a few thousand years ago. Apparently all of this is based on their trust in the Book of Genesis as the ultimate source of knowledge.

Bob: Interesting. Do you know any creationists?

Don: Actually, I guess you could consider me one, in a sense. The way I look at it is this: Either the whole universe came into existence about twenty billion years ago, as most cosmologists now claim, or else it has existed for eternity.

Alice: Or something even more unfathomable.

Don: Exactly. Either way, I am left with the most profound sense of awe, of something way out there completely beyond human comprehension. I call that Creation

with a capital C. (There is a pause while Don and the others gaze upward in awe as the sparks from the campfire swirl aloft and dance among the stars.)

Bob: What about classic Darwinian theory of evolution. Isn't it taught in all our public schools now?

Don: Most if not all, but sometimes reluctantly, and likewise rejected by about half the populace, according to some surveys I've seen, in favor of some version of intelligent design or whatever the hell you want to call it. Actually, I'm a confirmed skeptic. I don't think either side has all the answers. (Pause.) Consider this, Bob. Remember playing with model airplanes as a kid? What's the longest flight you can remember?

Bob: Oh, I suppose less than a mile.

Don: Now suppose someone, perhaps the military, needed a very small unmanned spy plane to fly as high as 20,000 feet and halfway around the world without refueling. Possible?

Bob: Oh perhaps theoretically, with enough development effort and huge funding, but how small? I think we're talking a sizable model, approaching that of a manned plane. I'm not really up on the latest technology.

Don: How about less than half an ounce.

Bob: Absolutely impossible. And what kind of fuel did you have in mind?

Don: Oh, I forgot to tell you. No fuel supplied. It makes its own fuel before taking off.

Bob: Clearly far beyond what is possible, even with the most advanced technology.

Don: Who said anything about technology? Oh, another thing I forgot to mention. The whole process of development is to be by completely random change, tossing out the ones that crash or don't work at all.

Bob: Starting from what?

Don: Ultimately, just minerals.

Bob: OK, what's the answer?

Don: Check out the 12,000-mile migration of the blackpoll warbler. And if that isn't enough to give a man religion, consider this. Suppose the military says oh no, that's much too big. How small could you make a spy plane with camera and navigating system capable of flying, say, across this lake?

Bob: OK, I give up. What's the answer this time?

Don: Less than two-tenths of a millimeter. In other words, practically invisible to the human eye without a magnifying glass. That would be some kind of parasitic wasp, nature's smallest flying machine. And speaking of miniaturization, those design plans are contained in DNA much too small to be visible to the human eye and measured in fractions of a micro-ounce. It does make you pause and wonder.

Alice: Isn't nature just amazing! I truly believe there's far more technology contained inside a seed than in any supercomputer, and at one-millionth the mass. Actually more like one-billionth if we're talking about the smallest seeds. Some giant tropical orchids come from seeds weighing less than a microgram and are so tiny they can be seen only under a microscope. What I find even more amazing is that all this is encoded in far fewer bits than it takes to even just download a photo on your computer. That's miniaturization far beyond human comprehension.

Don: Here is something I find even more baffling. A few months ago, while we were waiting in Claire's gynecologist's office, Claire noticed me staring at a magnificent large full-color chart on the wall illustrating in exquisite detail all of a woman's—well, you know—parts. It even included dozens of exploded views with yet more detail of complicated looking organs you or I never even imagined existed. When Claire asked pointedly what I found so interesting about it, I told her it was not what she was probably thinking. I was pondering how the complete plans for anything as complicated as that, and much more, could be carried in only three billion base pairs of DNA.

Alice: Many of which they say are not even used?

(Pause for fire play.)

Don: More recently I have been reading about something even more baffling—the wondrous and completely invisible architecture of the human brain, so incredibly complex that now whole books are being written on just the latest finding of what goes on inside. All coded in far fewer than a billion base pairs. Seems impossible to me. Added to that is the still unsolved question of how it all evolved in the first place, and the even more puzzling mystery of how something as mundane as simply a long string of chemical base pairs gets translated into something as profound as, say, falling in love or rapture for the arts. But for me, speaking as a theoretical mathematician, the biggest mystery of all is how an essentially one-dimensional DNA code gets converted into plans for a three-dimensional organism or, even more mystifying, a multidimensional mind. There must be some additional input not yet understood, at least not by me.

(Another pause while the fire gets yet more adjusting.)

Alice: Now here's a question to ponder: What's the difference between a plant and an animal?

Claire: Well, for one thing, I think we can safely assume that most animals have some form of intelligence that plants certainly lack.

Alice: How sure are we of that? A plant seed can lie dormant for years and then sprout when the conditions of moisture, temperature, and season are just right. From birth or even before, it knows up from down, light from dark, how to grow, how to feed itself, repair itself, attract birds and some insects while repelling others, and how to disperse its seeds in an amazing variety of creative ways. How many animals do you know that can do all those things? If that isn't a form of intelligence, then I don't know what is. I've know some gardeners to develop such a personal relationship with their plants that they

believe plants can sense pleasure and pain. I wouldn't go that far. But then, who really knows?

And so, with that we leave our little party of philosophers staring pensively into the campfire and wondering about the many unsolved mysteries of the natural world.

Camp Ten: *Claire's Crematorium*

On this overcast day, with storm clouds blowing in from the south, our friends are nearing the end of their journey. With gentle tailwinds, they have enjoyed an easy day of cruising down the broad valley, their river now much enlarged by tributaries. But alas, their cruise has come to an abrupt halt. The wooded slopes on either side have given way to rugged granite outcrops that pinch ever closer. As they round a bend, heeding the ominous sounds coming from downstream, they beach their canoes to scout ahead. From a rocky vantage point they can see the river gathering momentum and plunging out of sight into a deep gorge. It comes as no surprise because the contour lines on their map show a drop of two hundred feet in the next ten miles. In the planning of this trip, after studying the maps, Bob had proposed avoiding what would likely be a long and arduous portage down through the gorge by following a circuitous detour through a chain of lakes. After scouting ahead to inspect the start of the gorge, they pitch camp a bit back upstream, away from the thunderous sounds, which can grate on one's nerves. Around the campfire that evening, after yet more perusing of the map, they discuss the situation and all agreed on Bob's scheme. But most of the evening chatter is about the worrisome survey marks and helicopter landing site they have unexpectedly come across there. They are camped almost within sight of them, and a light drizzle adds to the gloomy aspect that even the blazing evening campfire can't completely dispel.

Bob: I knew that Hydro-Quebec had been surveying many of these northern rivers for power potential, but I didn't expect to find them working this far north, at least not this soon.

Don: I've been studying the map, and I can't see where there's much room for a hydro reservoir in this valley without it spilling over into the next.

Bob: I noticed that too, and I think I know the explanation. Any hydro station this far north would probably have to be massive in order to justify the long transmission line south. I think the plan might be to dam up all the rivers in this watershed and divert most of them into one huge reservoir farther downstream. It's already been done in the James Bay watershed and elsewhere.

Claire: So what does that mean for the future of wilderness canoeing, here or anywhere else?

Bob: I would say it's just about finished, at least as we think of it. But then, this process has been ongoing for ages. Read the accounts of Downes or Patterson or Merrick, all less than a century ago. What we're doing now wouldn't even be considered wilderness travel by their standards. Look how we got here—automobile and train.

Claire: And going back by plane, thank heavens. But do you think we really need all those dams?

Bob: Well, let's suppose we switch over to nuclear power and not build any more hydro dams. Then you've got mining. We're just lucky we haven't run across any prospecting or test holes on this trip. More mines are being dug up here all the time. Now they're looking for rare earth deposits for the electronics industry. And then you've got roads and railroads to the mines, and new mining towns for all the workers.

Claire: Then why not make this whole North Country into a national park, off limits to mining and roads? Oh, I know, it's just a utopian idea that's been proposed many times already, and it's never going to happen.

Bob: And even if it did, you've got fishing and hunting camps, motorboats, lodges, helicopters, tourism, professional guides, and worse still all sorts of regulations to go along with them. Usually even more rules and restrictions after the government gets involved.

Alice: One thing that has limited all this so far has been our little friend, the black fly. For a long time the Canadian government has been looking into ways to eliminate the menace from such places as fishing camps to bolster the tourism business. Evidently no one's come up with a way yet, especially one that doesn't eliminate the fish and other wildlife at the same time. But repellents are getting better all the time, and I think it won't be long now before you see sporting camps sprinkled all over the North Country, even along the way we've come. We're lucky to be doing this now. Our children never will.

Claire: Ever wonder what the world will look like a thousand years from now?

Alice: When we were born, the world population was about two billion. Now it's a little more than triple that. Some projections have it leveling off at nine billion around the middle of this century. When that happens, it may be hard to justify much park space and wilderness, so much land and so many resources will be needed merely keeping them all alive. Canada now has just about the lowest population density of any country in the world, so it's likely to be absorbing a sizable portion of the coming hordes.

Don: We know a couple, both of them Ph.D.s, who have decided not to have any children, doing their part it seems to save the world from overpopulation. But then their doctor says that's foolish because other couples will just fill the void with more babies until some practical upper Malthusian limit is reached, either by starvation, warfare, disease, or whatever. I suppose he has a point.

Claire: But then you get into the touchy question of eugenics, and that's where the trouble begins. That same doctor says that, on average, those in some of the more impoverished third world countries now tend to have the most babies, likewise those of low income and on welfare in our own country. And he raises the question: Are those really the types we would prefer to be populating the world?

Bob: That's a tough question. But just consider for a moment who are the really big troublemakers in the world today, from Wall Street to Washington to the Middle East. They are the upper income and college educated. Look who among our population are most responsible for manipulating the financial markets, building nuclear bombs, or

torturing prisoners. So who is to say which ones among us have the best DNA to contribute to human destiny?

Alice: Some biologists even go so far as to say it would be hard to find much significant difference in the heritable traits of different groups in our population as far as human destiny is concerned.

Claire: But saying something is hard to find is a helluva lot different from concluding it does not exist. And how come these pseudo-scientists never explain how they arrived at some of these amazing conclusions, beyond always being politically correct.

Alice: Well, along those lines, here is something to think about. Suppose, for example, that you and all your descendants were to have two children per couple, so in each succeeding generation the number of your offspring doubles. A thousand years is about forty generations, and two to the fortieth is about a trillion. Considering the present trend toward interracial and international mixing, what that means is that a thousand years from now every person on earth will be mating with a close or distant cousin, and they will all be carrying a bit of your DNA, for better or worse.

Claire: Perhaps we should all prepare a letter of apology.

(Pause while the campfire gets attention and the rain tarp gets adjusted.)

Alice: Here is another way to look at it. In the past thousand years the human population has increased only about twenty-fold to the present. I say *only* because the number of one's descendants is just slightly more than double, on average, to account for that low exponential rate of increase. Again that's about forty generations. What that means is that we've necessarily been mating with our cousins for most of that time. To put it another way, we are probably all direct descendant of not only William the Conqueror but of nearly every other western European family line from that time. Go back to the time of Christ, and it follows that nearly everyone, at least in the western world, is probably a direct descendant of almost anyone living at that time.

Claire: Oh my God!

Don: Never mind, Claire, we all know what you're thinking. We really don't know for sure whether or not Jesus had children.

Bob: Speaking of overpopulation, some European countries are so short of space to bury their dead that they stack them on top of each other.

Claire: So what's wrong with cremation?

(As she says that, Claire gleefully throws more wood onto the blazing fire.)

Bob: Religion of course. God's angels might have more trouble gathering you up by your ashes and transporting you up to heaven. Much neater task with a whole body, especially if embalmed.

Claire: You must be joking.

Bob: Perhaps I trivialized it a bit, but something along those lines has found its way into the official dogma of many religions. The Catholic Church has long opposed cremation, and Mormons even more strongly. They apparently believe you will actually need your physical body in heaven. And Islam, which is already the world's second largest religion, and probably soon to become the largest, forbids cremation altogether.

(Claire stokes the campfire even higher, sending up showers of sparks.)

Don: Really now, Claire, don't you think that's enough?

Alice: So here we are, staring at Claire's blazing bonfire and talking about cremation. On that cheerful thought I think I'm about ready for bed.

So while the others retire for the night, Claire sits staring wistfully into the fire, pondering the perplexities of the world's religions.

Camp Eleven: *Beyond the Passes*

The wind has shifted during the night and is now blowing fresh out of the north. The sky is still overcast, but as our friends prepare to break camp, patches of blue are starting to show. Bob has suggested that they all scout about to look for the start of a portage trail. He and Alice hunt downstream while the other two head upstream. They have now all returned to report their lack of success.

Claire: Not a trace of one. What makes you so sure there ought to be a trail here?

Bob: Just look at the map. In the old days, trappers from the coast would very likely have come up this way to reach their trapping grounds in the headwaters. I think we need to look farther uphill, away from all these alder thickets.

(They resume the hunt and finally find faint traces of an old trail.)

Don: Portage trail or game trail?

Bob: Hard to tell sometimes. Let's follow it for a bit if we can and see if it maintains a compass bearing. I'll bet an Indian could tell in an instant. They could see things that we can't. Thoreau mentions how his talented guide Joe Polis could find his way in a straight line through the deep forest to some far distant lake or camp on a completely overcast day, without a map or compass of course. You and I would soon end up walking in circles. It's always been a mystery to me how they did that.

(Sure enough, the old trail leads them to the first in a chain of small lakes nestled among the hills. By mid-afternoon, following the ancient trappers trail as best they could, they have reached the last lake in the chain. On the final portage of the day into this lake, the loads have been reduced to three per portage instead of the usual four, so the two women are given a break while Bob and Don go back for the canoes. While Claire makes notes in her logbook, Alice wanders off exploring for plant life in an old burn. Instead of looking for a campsite near the outlet, Bob suggests they veer off course and explore the west shore for one. The others are not sure why but go along with it, figuring that Bob must be up to something. Luckily they find an excellent site on solid rock ledge. The early hour affords extra time for relaxing and enjoying the picture-perfect afternoon with bright sun, fluffy clouds, and a fresh breeze out of the north. The change in the weather has sent the black flies into retreat, so Alice and Claire take advantage of this by bathing in the lake. Meanwhile, Bob and Don go off to round up an ample supply of firewood for what may turn out to be their last camp in the bush. They are now seated around the fire, engaged in the customary evening chatter. Bob has been studying the map.)

Bob: Looks like smooth sailing all the rest of the way to tidewater. Should get there late tomorrow.

Alice: Just as well. We're nearly out of flour. I've been stretching it with pancake mix, but that's getting low too. Hadn't planned on so many blueberry pancakes I guess.

Don: Seems funny in a way. You come up here to escape civilization, live the primitive life, back to nature, and all that. Yet always in the back of your mind you realize it's all a charade and you can never break that tie. Ever wonder how long we could survive up here if we had to for some reason?

Alice: Such as?

Don: Oh, I don't know. I'm just being hypothetical. Perhaps some cataclysmic natural disaster, or transportation breakdown, or whatever.

Claire: Oh no, I know what it would be. Some damned fundamentalist religion cult has suddenly gained control of our government, and we all face trial and execution for blasphemy.

Don: Especially you Claire!

Bob: I've often wondered about long term survival up here in the wilderness. I guess it goes all the way back to my Boy Scout days. If anyone could do it, you might expect the Indians and Eskimos to. The fact that even they had to be rescued and moved to government relief settlements casts doubts that it's still possible to live entirely off the land. If you were planning ahead from the comforts of home, what would you bring—tools, fishing gear, a gun and ammunition? But tools wear out, ammunition supply gets exhausted, fishhooks get lost. You might as well face doing without any of those right from the start. Either that or have a community large enough and with enough natural resources to mine and refine metals, and manufacture everything from textiles to gunpowder.

Claire: And how large might that be?

Bob: Who knows? Hundreds? Perhaps thousands. And mostly highly skilled in some essential trade. But even then you face the scarcity of natural resources. Depends also on what you're willing to do without—hospitals, communication, libraries, electricity.

Alice: And then you've got to consider food supply. Can't live off blueberries, especially in winter. Not many vegetables can be grown this far north. Maybe potatoes *if* you had the right soil, but take a look at the topsoil here. There isn't any. But above all, the sub-arctic climate and short growing season. Perhaps there's some technology for growing things under glass up here, but that's *if* you've got enough glass and enough sunshine.

Don: And fuel supply. Too many *ifs*. I read recently that some group has come up with the idea of creating independent communities that would float around in the ocean on completely self-sufficient artificial islands.

Alice: But for what purpose?

Don: I gather that the whole idea is to establish some sort of utopian society free from the oppression of existing governments, especially their own, which evidently they

view as hopelessly beyond salvation. Obviously the technical challenges are huge, if not insurmountable. Not sure how many of those they have even seriously considered. Probably need to first find a lot of wealthy sponsors willing to finance what probably amounts to little more than a philosophical science project with no practical application.

Alice: Even if one could solve all the technology for energy and food supply and a hundred other things, I think the biggest challenge would be social psychology. You're expecting members to give up most luxuries and pleasures such as friendships and travel to live tightly packed together in a virtual prison. But for what purpose? Added to all that stress, look at the types that would most likely be attracted—highly opinionated antisocial outcasts, waiting impatiently for their own unique version of utopia to dawn. I hope they plan on having enough lifeboats.

Don: The idea of agrarian self-supporting intentional communities was popular with some of our hippie friends in the 1960s, but most didn't last very long. They grew most of their own food, but couldn't earn enough with crafts like pottery or jewelry to even pay their local taxes. One I knew got busted for growing pot, and some others ran into conflict with local zoning laws and building codes.

Bob: I think the whole concept of self-containment runs against the tide of history. Do you ever wonder why civilization has advanced so much faster in some parts of the world than others? Some racial supremacists claim it is in the genes, especially theirs, but then they have no explanation of how it got there in the first place. One explanation I have heard is that civilization has advanced most rapidly where populations have been denser and people have traveled about and mixed freely. It's been slowest where the peoples have been more isolated, often because of geography or harsh climate. When I first heard it I was skeptical. But there does seem to be a lot of evidence to support it.

Don: I can't imagine living in a place where one is not free to travel about. I suppose the only reason it wasn't written into our Bill of Rights was that it's so self-evident.

Claire: Europe is now ahead of the rest of the world in that respect. Don and I have biked all over Europe including the former Iron Curtain countries without having to deal with a single border crossing gate. Now if only Canada and the U.S. would do the same. Right now we seem to be moving in the opposite direction. I shudder to think how thoroughly we'll get searched at the border on our way home.

Alice: Well then, here's something more pleasant for us to think about—dessert time!

(Alice has secretly prepared a special treat for the evening, which she now serves.)

Claire: Wow, raspberry turnovers. What a surprise! But where'd you find the berries?

Alice: Remember at the end of the last portage when I went exploring in the old burn? Loads of raspberries. By the way, we're nearly out of sugar, even though I packed an extra pound this time. Used a lot in the blueberry pies.

Bob: A friend of mine who once worked for a canoe camp in Ontario had some interesting things to say about food planning. He noticed that at the end of a trip, typically

all the boys would make a beeline to the nearest store to fill up on candy bars and sweets, sometimes even to the point of making themselves sick. That indicated to him something lacking in their diet, so he made it a practice to always pack plenty of sugar. The adults on the other hand were more inclined to go to a restaurant and overstuff themselves. He said that was also something to guard against because it would often go down badly and have an adverse effect on their otherwise pleasant dispositions.

Don: Yes, I've noticed that too. But I think the decline in spirit can also be partly attributed to facing the dismal prospect of returning to their boring jobs and everyday lives, which is bound to be a letdown after a good trip. And just getting back can often be the most stressful part of the whole trip.

Bob: As well we all know. And now I have another treat for you, even if it can't quite match Alice's. Have you been noticing how the sky to the east keeps getting brighter? Keep looking. According to my reckoning, something big should happen any minute now.

(They all sit quietly and stare across the lake at the jagged spires of black spruce on the far ridge silhouetted against the ever brightening sky. The only sound is the crackling of the fire. Then a speck of bright light pierces through the distant trees. Slowly the full moon rises above the skyline and its reflection dances in the gentle ripples of the lake.)

Claire: Well we figured you had something like this in mind when you detoured us to this campsite, and it's certainly worth it.

(Long pause while everyone sits quietly, spellbound by the moon glow.)

Don: It seems funny now, but back in the comic strip phase of my boyhood I used to fantasize about flying off to the moon and beyond. When you were Buck Rogers, you didn't need much in the way of rocket fuel or life support. Just press a button and away you went—swoosh! But after man landed on the moon, that adventure lost all its appeal. Now all I can think of is what a waste of our nation's resources all that was, when back then we could do it for nothing. Now instead, I imagine leaping off mountaintops and soaring like an eagle in my imagined hang glider, which I suppose all goes back to my childhood passion for flying model airplanes.

Alice: My most endearing flights of fancy tend to be associated with music. The Sinfonia from The Christmas Oratorio never fails to move me. Not sure exactly what Bach had in mind, but I always imagine myself a shepherd in the Holy Lands tending my flock and watching in awe as the constellations slowly making their way across the starry heavens. Oh, so many others too. There are parts of the St. Matthew Passion that to me have more to say about Revelation than the Bible itself, and the final chorus, "In Tears of Grief," moves me profoundly, almost like an out-of-world experience. I can't imagine what life would be like without all those treasures from the great masters of the past.

Claire: Well I certainly can't match either of those. I sometimes imagine the two of us building a sailboat and sailing off to some South Sea island, to spend our final years living on coconuts and shellfish, and basking all day naked in the sun. But now I'm

having second thoughts. Find me one island that is still like it was in Gauguin's time. But then, I suppose when we imagine, anything is possible.

Bob: I think my favorite fantasy probably started out as a recurrent dream going all the way back to early childhood and probably inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Where Go the Boats?* It's undergone several variations over the years. The way it usually goes, we set out on a canoe trip down some river "that flows along forever," northward through ever more wild and mountainous country and eventually into completely uncharted wilderness. And then we just keep going on and on.

Claire: Don't you eventually run into the icebound arctic seas?

Bob: No, that's the whole idea. Nobody knows where it goes. It's all a sort of utopian terra incognita, a mysterious land of dreams. I think that part of it goes back to one of my favorite passages from *Kim*, where Kipling writes of the "mysterious land beyond the passes of the north." I read it way back in my teens, and that's the one line I remember from the whole book. Funny how little treasures like that stick with you all through the years.

Claire: Not only stick with you but make life all the more worth living and loving.

(The fire has now died down to a bed of glowing coals, and a stillness has settled over the scene. The view across the lake is now enhanced by slowly drifting clouds fringed with moon glow. As the others stare at the spellbinding scene, Claire starts to sing one of her mother's favorite hymns, and the others join in.)

*For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the love which from our birth,
Over and around us lies.
Lord of all to thee we raise,
This our hymn of grateful praise.*

*For the beauty of each hour,
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale, and tree and flower,
Sun and moon, and stars of light,
Lord of all to thee we raise,
This our hymn of grateful praise.*

And so, the time has come to leave our friends sitting around the campfire, staring at the moon, and singing some their old time favorite songs while enjoying Alice's raspberry delights. Hope you have enjoyed them too.