

Going Alone (by Nick Jans)

I lay on my side, curled around a small campfire in the arctic dusk. A cold wind fell down the Cutler valley. Frost by dawn, I thought drowsily, and rose one last time to check camp. The canoe was safe on the gravel bar, and my gear tarped down. Across the river, a lone bull caribou trotted south toward the Kobuk. I scanned for any other movement, but the tundra stretched away, rising into silent blue hills. Nestling back into my sleeping bag, I felt for the comforting bulk of my rifle, and as I slid toward sleep, the last sound was the cold, endless purl of the river.

I was twenty miles into a three hundred mile trip, from the Cutler's headwaters and down the Noatak. I'd scarcely begun, but I'd already stumbled within thirty feet of a surly grizzly and come close to hypothermia. Before the journey was over, ten days later, I'd paddled two arctic rivers, met two more bears, and, after a day hike in the Noatak Canyon, had been unable to find my canoe for two panicky hours.

That's the shorthand version of things, a sort of highlight reel I could play back and embellish here and there, and call it the entire story. But when I close my eyes, the smaller details are what stand out, sharper than most of what happened yesterday. I feel the paddle again in my hands, see the sweep of rapids at Okak Bend, hear a distant wolf howl, taste the smoky tang of a lake trout stew I cooked at the mouth of the Nimiuktuk. I can even remember how I slept each night, and the dreams that rose and fell like gusts of wind.

I don't consider that clarity strange or surreal. Of course I remember almost everything. I was alone, in the fullest sense of the word. In fact, I went nearly two weeks without seeing anyone or hearing a human voice.

Yet my life over that brief time, rather than empty, was filled with a complete sense of where I was, where I was going, what I was doing, and why—rich enough, it seems from this distance, to justify my time on earth. I think of all the days, weeks, and months before and since, so cluttered with activity, from which I can recall so little. In a curious way, I haven't even been present for huge stretches of my own life. The reason is simple enough: I was distracted by the commotion of others, and by the racket I made around others of my kind.

The power of wild country to soothe and order the human spirit has been celebrated often enough, and rightly so. Leaving behind the clutter of our increasingly urban lives—the cell phones, computers, malls, and all that—is of course cleansing and therapeutic. But what's not often recognized is the huge difference between heading out with others and going alone. The experiences are so different that you can scarcely equate them.

As a species, we're social by nature, the instinct to bunch up and chatter welded into our genes. Cooperative effort lifted us up the evolutionary ladder, and not so long ago was necessary to our survival. We traveled, hunted, foraged, and slept in groups, defending ourselves against cave lions and conquering mammoths through cooperative behavior. An outgrowth was increasingly sophisticated vocalization, which enlarged our frontal lobes, giving eventual birth to speech, written language, technology, tribes, and nations. All that we've accomplished as a species, for better or worse, is dependent on our innate tendency to socialize.

No wonder we don't often venture out into the wild alone. The back-country guidebooks, common sense, and your mom all preach safety in numbers. In today's society, deliberately seeking wild solitude is the province of holy men, crazies, and mountain-man wannabes. Nobody ever says you're better off by yourself on a backpacking or float trip. Sure as hell not anyplace where the nearest help is a hundred of miles away, and big, furry meat-eating things roam in the night.

Of course, the advice is rational enough. You do need someone to apply a compression bandage or splint when you fall, and it's handy to have another canoe to climb into when yours gets wrapped around a rock. That said, the presence of anyone else, even a familiar and quiet partner, might as well be a wall between you and the country. Inevitably, we end up talking, or, even if moving quietly, making twice as much noise as we would have alone. Around others we have an entirely different mindset, and notice a fraction of what we might have of either world, internal or external.

Out on your own is another story. Over the course of a lone journey, forgotten instincts rise and become honed; vision and hearing intensify, along with the general level of awareness. What we sometimes call a sixth sense emerges—an inner voice that guides, warns, and often foretells with startling accuracy. You feel the presence of a bear before you see it, or find yourself able to navigate back to camp in absolute darkness. Times slows, and perception of its passing deepens. After a few days alone in the land, I often find myself flowing in and out of lucid states I can only describe as a form of meditation.

I remember the first time I glimpsed this quiet, other self. I was ten years old, at my grandfather's place in northern Michigan. We'd arrived the night before, after a long drive, preceded by a longer airline flight. I wore my clothes to bed, and if I slept at all, it was a couple of hours. Before the four A.M. alarm beneath my pillow could jangle, I was already out the cabin door in the darkness, fishing rod in hand, walking the narrow, quarter-mile trail that wound through pine woods to a cluster of trout ponds. I'd never done anything quite like this, and could hardly claim to have been a woods-wise kid. But I felt myself inexorably drawn, excitement overpowering fear.

At the salt lick I startled a whitetail buck; with a snort he crashed off into the brush, leaving me wide-eyed and shaking. On the sandy bank of the third pond I baited my hook and hunkered, waiting for my bobber to twitch. Minutes passed; an hour. Dawn paled the sky. The dark water steamed in the chill air, casting a white wall of mist. Wings whistling, a loon flew low overhead, trailing its wild, wavering call.

No matter that a trout never came to my hook. I walked home two or three hours later, overcome by the odd sensation that my body was glowing, forever changed in a way I can't precisely explain. Though I was just ten, I knew that the world had just whispered a secret, and I understood that only being silent and alone had allowed me to hear.

From then on I felt the inexorable pull to go out by myself. At first it was only for an hour or two of fishing, a small trip to a local pond or stream. Because my family had moved to northern Virginia, a suburban neighborhood practically in sight of the Washington Monument, the chances for escape were few. But I never forgot. College and a family move brought me to backwoods Maine, where I wandered and paddled and cast and camped, sometimes with others, but often making deliberate dodges and excuses so I could slip away. I wasn't being selfish; I only wanted to hear that voice again--and sometimes I did, though it refused to be summoned, and the words were often blurred.

I guess it was no coincidence (though it seemed so at the time) that I found my way to an arctic Eskimo village and made my home there. I ranged out alone into the Brooks Range by snowmachine, skiff, canoe, ski, and foot, timidly at first, expanding my range until a hundred solo miles was a minor jaunt, scarcely worth mentioning. I wasn't on some sort of inner spiritual mission; I merely connected one day and one year to the next, dealt with the cold and loneliness, and moved on.

More than three decades years later, I honestly don't know how many miles I've traveled on my own, but I don't consider myself particularly brave, and certainly not fearless. I've often had to force myself to pack my gear and step out the door. There are any number of reasons to

go another way--with a companion, or not so far, or not at all. Comfort and warmth, light and conversation are tempting distractions, and of course I'm susceptible to that genetic urge to shun being alone, like all of my kind. And I have to confess that as I grow older, I find myself less and less willing to head out on my own—I suppose a nod to my own mortality, which I take less and less for granted.

And yet, once out in the country, those fears fade away, along with human voices. I'm ten years old once more, silent in the dawn As I hold my breath, a loon passes overhead, trailing its wild cry into the mist. I listen for the song of its wings, and for the whispered words beyond.