

JONATHAN ELY CASS

## YUKON GONE

B

On my flight from Toronto to Vancouver, fortune sat me next to B, an artist, welder, and metalsmith based in Squamish, British Columbia, who was returning home after a romantic rendezvous in Kapuskasing, Ontario. B works out of a well-styled shipping container powered by a nearby muffler shop, where she creates beautiful pieces that shimmer and dance in the light.

B was born in a ditch in Regina, Saskatchewan (“the town that rhymes with fun”) on August 29th, 1971 (“Michael Jackson’s birthday”). Her father, a sign painter by trade, left her mother in the truck while he stole a potbelly stove from a neighbouring field. When he came back, she had given birth to B by the roadside. They brought home a baby and the stove.

Her father died when B was 9 years old. As a result, her mother had to work two jobs—as a secretary at Monarch Marketing Systems and as a server at The Chicken Hut—so B had to take care of her little brother until he was 14. Even when her father was alive, life was hard. Her mother would drive B and her little brother around in their nighties when he would get drunk and “huck stubbies (short, famously Canadian beer bottles) at the wall.”

B and I hit it off immediately. It might have had something to do with the fact that I was sick-hearted from a recent relationship and that airport security had just broken my main camera. Already a bit sad and now crushed at the prospect of heading to Whitehorse with only my backup camera, B’s tenderness came through. Within minutes of meeting me, she started to massage my back and shoulders. An impish smirk—that I would come to know as her signature expression—crossed her face as she said, “Ooh, you’re crunchy man.” Yes, I was crunchy. I couldn’t remember being so tense. My body had been clenched like a fist for weeks.



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B is what some people would call a “modern” woman, as she sees love and sex as separate, divided by a wall only she can take down or rebuild. She is also kind and generous, as she bought us three small bottles of champagne to share on our flight. Her grey-blue eyes would widen and shine when saying things like, “I would go to the end of the world for anybody” and “imagine if everybody just helped each other.” But her brow would furrow and she would grow cold when talking about men who treated her as less than equal or wanted more than she was willing to give. B wanted equality from men, saying “we should learn and share together . . . use each other as a little ladder, y’know?” (making tiny climbing gestures with her hands). She also wanted honesty: “If we have to go bury a body, tell me we gotta bury a body. Just be honest with me. Tell me anything. I don’t want to judge you.”

People put up walls to protect things of value, but B puts up walls to protect herself. It can say a lot about a person when they’re guarded. It can sometimes say they feel more deeply than most. I could tell B’s heart was big.

When we were landing, the passenger in front of B failed to put the seat back in its full upright position. Shrugging off the passenger’s disregard for her safety, B looked over at me, rolled her eyes, and said, “I look pretty good with a black eye and a chipped tooth.” Somewhat cheekily I said, “I don’t wanna know the story of how that happened.” With a big grin, she replied, “Which time?” We parted ways at Vancouver International Airport, after sitting together for a portrait. I yelled down the terminal, “Take care B!” Later she would tell me that meant something to her. Take care B.

## NICOLE

Sitting directly across from Nicole Bauberger, it didn’t take long for me to realize that she was one of the smartest people I had ever met. Within minutes of meeting her, she said a number of things that had the heft of truth. I felt slow compared to her, but I did my best to keep up for the five hours we spent together.

A skilled painter, Nicole built up her technical chops working for painter David Bierk, reproducing the paintings of old masters. This experience is evident in her work, as her oil paintings have a dynamic topographical quality, much like the Yukon landscape itself. Her brush strokes expertly rise, fall, and flow—with peaks, valleys, and rushing swirls—retaining the motion



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of the moment that inspired them. Nicole began visiting the Yukon in 2001, painting over the summers, and she finally moved to Whitehorse two years later from her prior home in Peterborough, Ontario.

I asked her about the stereotype that people who choose to live in the North are fleeing society (or people in general). According to Nicole, the people who make up the human landscape of Whitehorse are more prevalent simply because there are fewer of them. I had already found this to be true. Even on my short walk, from one edge of Main Street to the other, I saw three people from my plane. With a population of roughly 22,000, it's big enough that you can go without knowing your neighbours but small enough that you can recognize a stranger. (Apparently, even the ravens know who's new in town.) If I were seeking solitude, then I wouldn't find it here, as there were more people for me to notice and more people to notice me.

Nicole took me to an art installation that she had helped to create in a suburban, single-storey duplex surrounded by a split-rail fence. There were bits of blown-out tires hanging from the trees, and the shreds resembled ravens. She explained that even the property owner had forgotten what they were doing there, nearly cutting them down. I probably wouldn't have noticed them myself if she hadn't pointed them out. There, revealed partly by my own ignorance, lay the brilliance of the work.

Ravens are important to many First Nations communities, including those in and around the Yukon. Nicole's collaborator, Teresa Vander Meer-Chasse, was the conduit to those communities. Born in 1992, Teresa described herself as a "proud Nalt'si (Crow) member of the White River First Nation of Beaver Creek, Yukon, and Alaska," and an "Upper Tanana visual artist." Despite the apparent age difference between the two, Nicole and Teresa worked as equals, freely exchanging ideas. If anything, it was the younger Teresa who seemed to function as mentor.

Conducting workshops with local First Nations communities—in Whitehorse, Haines Junction, Destruction Bay, and Beaver Creek—Teresa and Nicole would ask, "What does Raven mean to you?" Ravens have many meanings among these communities, as they can be "tricksters," "creators," "protectors," "communicators," or "scavengers." The meanings thus vary from speaker to speaker and from community to community, the stories residing within the words of the First Nations and other indigenous peoples, to whom they rightfully belong.

Hearing what Raven means to these communities had a profound im-

pact on me, as I began to feel that the world was a very different place. I was given the impression that Raven caused humans to confront a world they didn't expect—a world they were truly given—and learn from it. Thinking back to those tattered tires hanging in the trees, I wondered if they were just shreds of their previous form or something more. Was that raven who flew over my head capricious or communicating? The selection of tire shreds was brilliant in that way. Teresa said that the ragged rubber was “a horrible material to work with,” and Nicole added that “it's a material you can't buy.” At times risking their lives, compelled to gather shreds from the sides of the highway, it was “a material you're given.” It was from this broken and discarded material that they formed a greater meaning.

#### DWAYNE

Feeling lonely, I walked through downtown Whitehorse and then along the Yukon River to Midnight Sun Coffee Roasters. When I arrived, I immediately understood why it was so popular among the locals: it was cozy as hell. Still adjusting to the two-degree mid-mornings that I would learn were still considered “patio weather” in Whitehorse, the warm tones and friendly atmosphere—not to mention the smell of good coffee—was a welcome respite for this chattering “Southerner.”

While waiting in line to order, I felt someone pinch the fabric of my jacket. I turned my head to see a man intently feeling the red buffalo check of my sleeve. Without an ounce of pretense, and with his eyes fixed on the fabric, he asked, “Is that wool?” Then he looked at me for an answer. I quickly noticed that the man was dressed in a complementary collection of functional frontier layers—plaid, denim, wool—that are mostly faux-rugged fashion down South, but not here. I also noticed the array of practical pocket tools that lined the front of his coveralls. I replied enthusiastically and half-jokingly, “I can see we're both men of style.” He laughed, as did I. His name was Dwayne, and I asked if I could sit with him after we ordered. He said yes, with a smile, and so began one of the deepest conversations I had in the Yukon.

I explained that I was visiting the Yukon to talk to people, take portraits, do some writing, and look around. I asked if I could take his portrait, and he said no. “That's alright, you don't have to,” I replied, and we continued talking. I couldn't find my pen, so I told him I would use my phone to jot down

what he said. He responded, “My cell phone is at the bottom of Long Lake, if you wanna go fishing!”

It soon became apparent that he was a good, God-fearing man. Born in 1957 and having relocated to Whitehorse in 1982, he met his wife at Bible school. They had two boys and three girls, with twin grandchildren on the way. Now retired, he was a personal support worker and a commercial painter before that. His wife passed away in 2015. “I’m still not over it,” he said, as his eyes grew glassy. “Should you be?” I asked. “That’s a long time together.” His eyes widened, and I sensed any hesitation in talking to me wane at a greater pace. “I can’t believe I’m telling you this, but you’re easy to talk to,” he said.

Dwayne lived in a park model home located in Lobird, a small trailer court community carved out of the remnants of a WWII military base. The old radar station has been converted into the aptly named “Radar Apartments.” Lobird has an ancient septic and sewer system, separate from the city’s, that previously served the base. According to Dwayne, the water lines often freeze, and the chemicals they use to treat the water can taste “really nasty.” Despite the challenges of living in Lobird, and the recent loss of his wife, he said something I didn’t expect: “Every day, I feel privileged to wake up in the Yukon.” I could see in his eyes that he meant it. The way he said it had an added gravity that pulled my heart closer to the Earth. I slowly realized what my heart had immediately understood: Dwayne found peace in the wilderness, like I did. “They do call it ‘The Wilderness City,’” he said.

I told Dwayne that I felt the same way about wild places. I needed the solitude. I needed to be by myself. “One of the hardest things you can do is face yourself,” I said. His eyes widened while he nodded and repeated back to me: “It’s one of the hardest things you can do.” “But you gotta do it,” I replied. He repeated back, “But you gotta do it,” nodding his head once again. Even though he approached finding peace from a different place—from a place of faith—we met each other in the middle, miles away, years apart. Perhaps it doesn’t matter where you come from as long as you get there and there’s coffee.

Before parting, I told him something that occurred to me on my trip: “A portrait isn’t something you take; it’s something a person gives you.” He nodded once, looked away, and then said, “You can take my picture.” I rifled through my camera bag, wrestled the camera out as fast as I could, and took a light reading. He looked nervous through the viewfinder, almost frozen,



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and would not look at the camera. I could only get three exposures before I sensed the moment had passed. Then he shook my hand and said, “The Lord bless ya and keep ya.” Thanks Dwayne. God bless.

## MAX

I could not have gotten luckier with my guide, Max. Having grown up in the French Alps and explored remote parts of the Yukon professionally since 2011—in mineral exploration and as a guide—Max had the kind of musculature that could only be forged by mountains. At six foot three, he was tall, lean, and chiselled like a rail spike. He was also smart, having earned a Master’s degree in Biodiversity Conservation. Max had every reason to be macho, being a hardened “mountain man,” but he didn’t have an ounce of machismo or bravado. In fact, he was the complete opposite, pointing out how those attitudes can get you hurt or killed. He knew anything could happen, and it was his job to keep that front-of-mind. I told Max that I knew people paid him to show them around and keep them safe, but I wanted to learn how to hike in the Yukon. Anything he could tell me, especially if I was doing something wrong, was something I wanted to hear. He gave me a big smile, and the lessons began.

For my warm-up hike, we ventured to Miles Canyon, a “city park” unlike any city park in the world. It’s massive and, despite being only a few kilometres from the city limits, no less wild. (Ten minutes in any direction from Whitehorse and you’re in the wilderness.) A sign at the park entrance reminds visitors that “bears love these trails too,” replete with cartoon illustrations of a happy cyclist and an attentive bear, attempting to offset any excess fear of entering the park.

The Canyon is cut by the Yukon River, which moves fast like a broad expanse of molten blue glass, gliding down the gorge. Its seemingly calm surface is as plainly beautiful as it is deceptively dangerous, especially to the uninitiated or the forgetful. Miles Canyon still claims lives, having taken the life of a teen who underestimated its power as recently as 2015. Apparently, the extraordinary beauty of the Yukon is indivisible from its potential to cause death.

While Max was teaching me how to traverse the varied terrain of sand, stones, tiny rocks and boulders that comprise many Yukon trails, we came upon a woman, heading toward us, being pulled by a medium-sized mix of



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sled dog and whatever other hearty frontier breeds formed its jumbled pedigree. While I was wearing hiking boots, she was wearing department-store thong sandals. We approached each other from opposite ends of a sandy, narrow ledge, only wide enough for one-and-a-half travellers—sheer rock face to our left, deadly gorge to our right. Not wanting to be caught between a bouncy pooch and the river below, we stood as far to the left as possible to let her pass. She staggered along the ragged edge of the slender path, flirting with falling into the gorge and into the rushing water below. Almost losing a sandal, she gripped and slipped her foot back into it, in one direction, while her dog pulled her in the other, and slightly down into the gorge. She smiled and laughed as she tottered by. After we passed, Max whispered, “That lady? She’s gonna die.” He took no joy in telling me that. It was just another page in Max’s lesson plan.

The following day was the big hike: King’s Throne, a day trip up a 1500-metre mountain in Kluane National Park, which is home to Canada’s highest peak (Mount Logan) and the world’s most genetically diverse population of grizzly bears. The reserve straddles 22,000 square kilometres of the Yukon and Alaska. I had been training for the trip, but I was still nervous. Driving up to Kluane, the enormity of the mountain, shrouded in clouds, elicited almost involuntary speech: “We’re going to climb that?” I asked. Max replied with a stern, “Yep. That’s where we’re going,” as if to say, “Get over it, kid, because you’re going up there.” The photographs I had seen didn’t do it justice. The peak of the mountain had been carved into a massive “seat” by the melting of an ancient glacier that formed the expansive Lake Kathleen below it. The mountain resembled a giant throne of an olden god, who sat head and shoulders above the clouds, presiding over a seemingly infinite landscape.

Arriving at the park entrance, we came upon yet another “caution” sign, but without the cute caricatures of Miles Canyon. This sign was more solemn: “It’s berry season: bear encounters are likely.” Being a daily hiker in Southern Ontario, I was happy to learn that some of my knowledge transferred to hiking in the Yukon. Max confirmed two things that were true, both in the Yukon and in Ontario. First, surprising a wild animal is much more likely in bad weather. There are many things to which a bear or wolf must attend when enduring the elements, and your clumsy footsteps are easily lost in the sound of falling rain, snow, or blowing wind. Second, you are always being watched by predators—not because they want to eat you,

but because they want to avoid the deadliest predator of all: humans. Just because you don't see them doesn't mean that they're not there, and it's safer to assume that they are. Looking down the relatively short path that was the start of our route up the mountain, I knew it was full of bears.

Early into our hike, Max mentioned that the park was closed for the season and that we were likely the only ones there. Surprised, I asked, "What if you lose it out here?" ("lose it" meaning have an accident). Max gave an answer I half-expected in his typical fact-of-the-matter tone: "They find you in three weeks . . . maybe." He then mentioned German hiker Till Moritz Gerull, whose remains were found three years after he visited Kluane in 2011. Like many Yukoners, Max reckoned that Gerull had come to Kluane to die, but Gerull's family had publicly disagreed: "We do not believe that he naively went into the wilderness, as it is represented in the Canadian press. There is no evidence of this, and he was not suicidal." And there exists an apparent cultural divide. From across the ocean, it might seem like Gerull simply went hiking alone and suffered an unfortunate accident, but for those living on the frontier, hiking alone in Kluane, especially without filing an itinerary, was suicidal. Max ensured that his partner knew when we were due back and that I knew where the first aid kit and satellite phone were. We had safety in mind at all points of our journey.

Heading up the mountain was easier than I expected, despite being very vertical at times. We just kept going, Max yelling to alert bears in the brush and using his binoculars to scan for them at each clearing. Upon reaching our rest stop a few hundred metres from the shoulder of the summit, I pulled out the black-and-white camera that had been broken by airport security in Toronto. I had learned to work around the damaged focusing mechanism back in my Whitehorse bedroom. Having imagined the photograph that I would take for weeks, I quickly "focused" and released the shutter in what felt like one swift movement, capturing Max's expression before he became completely aware of the camera in my hands. That shot was and is my photograph of King's Throne: a halo of clouds in the background, mountain man Max in the foreground, sharp as a tack, taken with a broken camera. This was the final lesson I learned in the Yukon: to embrace the life I had been given—all of it. Just because a thing is broken doesn't mean it can't be used to regain what you thought you lost. And perhaps that's the more interesting path.