

Excerpt: Into The Wild

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THE ALASKA INTERIOR

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Greetings from Fairbanks! This is the last you shall hear from me, Wayne. Arrived here 2 days ago. It was very difficult to catch rides in the Yukon Territory. But I finally got here.

Please return all mail I receive to the sender. It might be a very long time before I return South. If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild. --Alex.

(Postcard received by Wayne Westerberg in Carthage, South Dakota.)

Jim Gallien had driven four miles out of Fairbanks when he spotted the hitchhiker standing in the snow beside the road, thumb raised high, shivering in the gray Alaska dawn. He didn't appear to be very old: eighteen, maybe nineteen at most. A rifle protruded from the young man's backpack, but he looked friendly enough; a hitchhiker with a Remington semiautomatic isn't the sort of thing that gives motorists pause in the forty-ninth state. Gallien steered his truck onto the shoulder and told the kid to climb in.

The hitchhiker swung his pack into the bed of the Ford and introduced himself as Alex. "Alex?" Gallien responded, fishing for a last name.

"Just Alex," the young man replied, pointedly rejecting the bait. Five feet seven or eight with a wiry build, he claimed to be twenty-four years old and said he was from South Dakota. He explained that he wanted a ride as far as the edge of Denali National Park, where he intended to walk deep into the bush and "live off the land for a few months."

Gallien, a union electrician, was on his way to Anchorage, 240 miles beyond Denali on the George Parks Highway; he told Alex he'd drop him off wherever he wanted. Alex's backpack looked as though it weighed only twenty-five or thirty pounds, which struck Gallien--an accomplished hunter and woodsman--as an improbably light load for a stay of several months in the backcountry, especially so early in the spring. "He wasn't carrying anywhere near as much food and gear as you'd expect a guy to be carrying for that kind of trip," Gallien recalls.

The sun came up. As they rolled down from the forested ridges above the Tanana River, Alex gazed across the expanse of windswept muskeg stretching to the south. Gallien wondered whether he'd picked up one of those crackpots from the lower forty-eight who come north to live out ill-considered Jack London fantasies. Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing.

"People from Outside," reports Gallien in a slow, sonorous drawl, "they'll pick up a copy of *Alaska* magazine, thumb through it, get to thinkin' 'Hey, I'm goin' to get on up there, live off the land,

go claim me a piece of the good life.' But when they get here and actually head out into the bush--well, it isn't like the magazines make it out to be. The rivers are big and fast. The mosquitoes eat you alive. Most places, there aren't a lot of animals to hunt. Livin' in the bush isn't no picnic."

It was a two-hour drive from Fairbanks to the edge of Denali Park. The more they talked, the less Alex struck Gallien as a nutcase. He was congenial and seemed well educated. He peppered Gallien with thoughtful questions about the kind of small game that live in the country, the kinds of berries he could eat--"that kind of thing."

Still, Gallien was concerned. Alex admitted that the only food in his pack was a ten-pound bag of rice. His gear seemed exceedingly minimal for the harsh conditions of the interior, which in April still lay buried under the winter snowpack. Alex's cheap leather hiking boots were neither waterproof nor well insulated. His rifle was only .22 caliber, a bore too small to rely on if he expected to kill large animals like moose and caribou, which he would have to eat if he hoped to remain very long in the country. He had no ax, no bug dope, no snowshoes, no compass. The only navigational aid in his possession was a tattered state road map he'd scrounged at a gas station.

A hundred miles out of Fairbanks the highway begins to climb into the foothills of the Alaska Range. As the truck lurched over a bridge across the Nenana River, Alex looked down at the swift current and remarked that he was afraid of the water. "A year ago down in Mexico," he told Gallien, "I was out on the ocean in a canoe, and I almost drowned when a storm came up."

A little later Alex pulled out his crude map and pointed to a dashed red line that intersected the road near the coal-mining town of Healy. It represented a route called the Stampede Trail. Seldom traveled, it isn't even marked on most road maps of Alaska. On Alex's map, nevertheless, the broken line meandered west from the Parks Highway for forty miles or so before petering out in the middle of trackless wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. This, Alex announced to Gallien, was where he intended to go.

Gallien thought the hitchhiker's scheme was foolhardy and tried repeatedly to dissuade him: "I said the hunting wasn't easy where he was going, that he could go for days without killing any game. When that didn't work, I tried to scare him with bear stories. I told him that a twenty-two probably wouldn't do anything to a grizzly except make him mad. Alex didn't seem too worried. 'I'll climb a tree' is all he said. So I explained that trees don't grow real big in that part of the state, that a bear could knock down one of them skinny little black spruce without even trying. But he wouldn't give an inch. He had an answer for everything I threw at him."

Gallien offered to drive Alex all the way to Anchorage, buy him some decent gear, and then drive him back to wherever he wanted to go.

"No, thanks anyway," Alex replied, "I'll be fine with what I've got."

Gallien asked whether he had a hunting license.

"Hell, no," Alex scoffed. "How I feed myself is none of the government's business. Fuck their stupid rules."

When Gallien asked whether his parents or a friend knew what he was up to--whether there was anyone who would sound the alarm if he got into trouble and was overdue Alex answered calmly that no, nobody knew of his plans, that in fact he hadn't spoken to his family in nearly two years. "I'm absolutely positive," he assured Gallien, "I won't run into anything I can't deal with on my own."

"There was just no talking the guy out of it," Gallien remembers. "He was determined. Real gung ho. The word that comes to mind is *excited*. He couldn't wait to head out there and get started."

Three hours out of Fairbanks, Gallien turned off the highway and steered his beat-up 4 x 4 down a snow-packed side road. For the first few miles the Stampede Trail was well graded and led past cabins scattered among weedy stands of spruce and aspen. Beyond the last of the log shacks, however, the road rapidly deteriorated. Washed out and overgrown with alders, it turned into a rough, unmaintained track.

In summer the road here would have been sketchy but passable; now it was made unnavigable by a foot and a half of mushy spring snow. Ten miles from the highway, worried that he'd get stuck if he drove farther, Gallien stopped his rig on the crest of a low rise. The icy summits of the highest mountain range in North America gleamed on the southwestern horizon.

Alex insisted on giving Gallien his watch, his comb, and what he said was all his money: eighty-five cents in loose change. "I don't want your money," Gallien protested, "and I already have a watch."

"If you don't take it, I'm going to throw it away," Alex cheerfully retorted. "I don't want to know what time it is. I don't want to know what day it is or where I am. None of that matters."

Before Alex left the pickup, Gallien reached behind the seat, pulled out an old pair of rubber work boots, and persuaded the boy to take them. "They were too big for him," Gallien recalls. "But I said, 'Wear two pair of socks, and your feet ought to stay halfway warm and dry.'"

"How much do I owe you?"

"Don't worry about it," Gallien answered. Then he gave the kid a slip of paper with his phone number on it, which Alex carefully tucked into a nylon wallet.

"If you make it out alive, give me a call, and I'll tell you how to get the boots back to me."

Gallien's wife had packed him two grilled-cheese-and-tuna sandwiches and a bag of corn chips for lunch; he persuaded the young hitchhiker to accept the food as well. Alex pulled a camera from his backpack and asked Gallien to snap a picture of him shouldering his rifle at the trailhead. Then, smiling broadly, he disappeared down the snow-covered track. The date was Tuesday, April 28, 1992.

Gallien turned the truck around, made his way back to the Parks Highway, and continued toward Anchorage. A few miles down the road he came to the small community of Healy, where the Alaska State Troopers maintain a post. Gallien briefly considered stopping and telling the authorities about Alex, then thought better of it. "I figured he'd be OK," he explains. "I thought he'd probably get hungry pretty quick and just walk out to the highway. That's what any normal person would do."

