

Raven's Day

We were surprised to see the line of trucks ahead of us moving steadily along the Spine Road between Prudhoe Bay and Kuparuk veering off sharply to the right, in an apparent detour. The trucks, all diesel-fueled, utility, American-manufactured, were cloaked with frozen exhaust wafting up raggedly from their tailpipes on currents generated by the rotation of tires over ice-glazed roadbed.

"What is going on?" I said. I turned stiffly on the truck cab bench towards Shannon, hampered by my cold-weather gear and mandatory safety glasses. Since we left the Aurora Hotel less than fifteen minutes earlier, the cab of our rented truck remained cold enough for our breath to freeze into small clouds around our faces when we spoke. Shannon and I had flown in from Anchorage the day before to perform routine compliance inspections for selected North Slope oil production facilities. As the more experienced inspector, Shannon elected to be the driver for the eighty-mile journey round-trip from Deadhorse to the field. Due to the cold and lack of mobility, Shannon and I mostly addressed our remarks to each other towards the windshield as we faced forward, giving our conversation an odd, impersonal tone.

Shannon shrugged an answer to my question. "Don't know. Water truck doing road-grooming, maybe a rig move."

I scowled. "I checked the schedule while you were warming up the truck. There was no rig move on it." I knew I sounded defensive. As the rookie, I should have been the one to suffer my way out to the frozen truck at the hotel and start it. Shannon assumed I had done so, a half-hour before we were due to leave, as was customary. Ten minutes before departure time, she realized I hadn't got around to starting the truck yet and so she ran out to get it going, shooting me a look of grim annoyance as she left the mudroom. This meant that the truck would be frigid

for the first fifteen minutes, not to mention the fact that it would cause additional strain on the engine. I felt guilty, knowing that I was already not making a good impression on Shannon as an assistant inspector.

We approached the turn-off junction where the traffic ahead of us turned off, so Shannon cranked the steering wheel sharply to the right with a fair degree of difficulty, directing our truck to a side road near a storage connex. We circled on a turnaround and queued up in a line of trucks, work vehicles, and buses, waiting to resume our westward travel. In our truck cab, the air was finally yielding its chill to the engine-warmed drafts pouring in through the open vents, but outside, the near dawn air was utterly still and thirty degrees below zero, maybe colder. We were impatient, due at Kuparuk for a meeting and Ooguruk for an inspection of the containment around newly-installed flowback tanks. The fuel we carried was sufficient for the trip, but not for an extended idle on the way. Shannon slumped into her overcoat, face impassive, clearly not in a mood for light conversation. To avoid irritating her by asking questions, I concentrated on watching the southern sky where the sun was making its reluctant appearance, preceded by spears of light in hues of rose, then salmon, and finally saffron. The perfectly round, blood-red face of the sun rose slowly into the petal-soft blue of the sky and, from my vantage, appeared to be slashed by the horizontal lines of a pipe rack as it stretched out across the white landscape between our truck's location and the horizon. The rising light of the morning also revealed outlines of fellow travelers, clad as we were, in heavy Arctic gear, barely visible through the milky windows of other vehicles near us.

We heard the rig transport approaching us before it came into view; a low sustained sound, oddly lacking any recognizable characteristic of typical engine noise. I smacked my gloved hand on the dashboard, my annoyance evident. "What is this?" I asked. "There was no rig move

on the schedule. What are they doing?" The realization that I was repeating my earlier comment and probably reminding Shannon of having to start the truck herself made me feel foolish as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

Shannon drawled, "When they find out you weren't informed about moving the rig this morning I am sure they are going to be really apologetic." The sarcasm in Shannon's remark made me wince, but I still couldn't help groaning with impatience. I felt one-hundred percent focused on the tasks of the upcoming day, eager to redeem myself, and was anxious to get started.

In the truck ahead of us, a snowman-shaped individual, probably male, given his size, and devoid of any identifiable outward human characteristic left the warmth of his cab and stepped out onto the crunchy snow. He upended a styrofoam cup and a small stream of brown liquid trickled out, freezing before it touched the ground. His action prompted Shannon to sit up straight, finally showing some animation.

"Those guys are trained not to do that." she said, indignation making her voice rise.

"Really?" I asked with surprise. I had been contemplating getting rid of the dregs of my coffee the same way. "But it doesn't look like there is any creamer in it."

Shannon shook her head, still frowning, "Doesn't matter, it is still considered littering, feeding the animals."

"Huh." was all I could think to say. I knew that Shannon was extremely knowledgeable and experienced about North Slope practices, particularly environmental regulations. That was one reason I tagged along with her on inspections. I was a little awestruck by her technical expertise, her efficiency, and her unwavering adherence to every rule. When I traveled around the oilfields in her company, I literally felt like my brain became heavier from absorbing all of

the information I took in while I watched her do her work. I secretly thought I would never be able to do as well when I was out on my own.

The deep drone of the rig transport vehicle suddenly increased in volume to a level that made conversation difficult, although, curiously, its pitch did not rise, remaining at the low-frequency end of audible for the range of human hearing. The man in front of us got back into his truck, taking his empty cup with him, but leaving the brown ice chips on the ground where he had been standing. We could just see the transport with a drill rig resting on its side on the flat bed of the vehicle round the curve to our right and move towards us at an impossibly slow pace. A person walking at a brisk pace could have easily kept up with the enormous transport. The vehicles lined up in our queue, that had previously seemed so imposing and utilitarian were reduced by the visual contrast between the rig and its transport to insignificance, even frivolousness.

Everything to be seen on the landscape at that point was men, machinery, the product of capital investment, and specialized engineering. From the gathering centers, which resembled castles in the distance, to the web of pipelines crossing and crossing again the flat white landscape, to the vehicles and hulking forms inside them; it all seemed futuristic, devoid of nature, empty.

Shannon smiled unexpectedly and her face glowed with pleasure. She pointed a gloved hand towards the top of the rig as it sat on the huge transport. I squinted and ducked my head, trying to see what she was indicating. "Look!" she shouted, "Ravens!"

Suddenly, I saw what she was pointing at. Two ravens rode on the rig, taking care to stay out of sight of one of the operators who was sitting high above the transport, facing the opposite way, in the direction of travel, speaking into a walkie-talkie while managing the load. The deep cold of the early morning air seemed to suit the ravens and they showed no sign of making any adjustment to the conditions. They sat there, perched, patient, and watchful. As the transport

drew near the turn-off where our truck was waiting, the ravens' heads suddenly turned in unison toward us and they launched themselves into the air, flapping their wings in sequence. They circled the rig transport, widened the arc of their trajectory, adjusted their altitude, and flew over our parked truck, moving now in tight turns. The slightly smaller raven, I thought to be a female, disappeared from our view somewhere we couldn't see and the other raven dove down on the small brown spot which was barely visible on the ground in front of us, the remains of the coffee or tobacco juice, emptied by the man who had earlier left the truck cab. The raven seemed to sense that we were watching him intently. He was a very large, handsome raven, with an extraordinarily long beak and glossy feathers. His bright black eyes regarded us with a kind of mirthful triumph as we shared a long look before he vaulted back into the air, his brown prize grasped firmly in his beak. As soon as he flew away, we caught a quick view of his companion as she flew frighteningly close to my side window, following him, as I caught a glimpse of something silver extending from her beak. Even over the thunder of the rig transport, I could hear her wingbeats as she flew by. My mouth dropped open as I turned to Shannon.

"What was that raven carrying? That silver thing?" I shouted.

Shannon shouted back, "Probably a gum wrapper. They watch for garbage people leave in their trucks and glom onto them if they see anything there. That is why people are supposed to keep all garbage inside the cabs."

The rig had now almost drawn abreast of the line of trucks. We watched as drivers ahead of us shift to erect sitting positions as they prepared to shift into gear and resume their journey. My eyes were still drawn to the pair of ravens, now back on their perch on the rig, enjoying the treats they picked up from their excursion to our line of trucks.

With the transport rumble gradually decreasing in volume, Shannon and I were able to speak in a relatively normal conversational tone. Shannon settled her safety glasses on her nose and glanced ahead, signaling her turn right to resume travel on the Spine Road.

I said, "Are the ravens tame? They seem so much at home."

Shannon explained, "Ravens came up with the infrastructure on the Slope. They have become really well-adapted to the environment up here. They build nests in the oilfield structures that are tall enough to suit them. They ride the big trucks when it is cold, so they don't have to expend energy flying. The ravens know that when the transports pass waiting trucks they can fly off, pick off a juicy tidbit or two and get back on board before the transport gets too far." She said this with admiration, although there was a tinge of ruefulness in her tone.

As we moved away, I watched the transport with its two unauthorized riders sitting easily on a high shelf. I thought about how nature has its ways of adapting and overcoming man's efforts, even in the face of overwhelming human control. I mused to myself, thinking that the North Slope is a place of contradictions. Man seems to have conquered nature in this place, but looking at it another way, man is just another condition for nature to work around as she continues her endless cycle of adaption and survival. The land, the weather, the animals and birds flow around installations like a stream flows around a rock in the river but most of the time, men do not see these subtle adjustments the wild world makes. Men measure the net gains and losses; one population declines, but another thrives. The cycle continues.

I craned my neck to get a final glimpse of the raven pair as they headed to some unknown destination. I wondered if they would stay there or ride the next transport back for another garbage treasure hunt. It seemed like they would take advantage of whatever place they journeyed to. Looking at it another way, wherever they went, they were home.