

the road to patagonia
in search of the americas

a proposal for a travel memoir + digital extensions
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THE ROAD TO PATAGONIA

Why this book? why now?

Three things.

First, I remember the painting: I was no more than six, a chubby asthmatic kid, housebound, because in those pre-inhaler days—JFK was just new in the White House—you kept your kid inside for fear he or she would suffocate from an attack.

I read like a demon, everything, to fill the time, looking for connections: the dictionary, encyclopedias, magazines, Dr Seuss, cereal boxes, anything. I was an omnivore.

The painting sticks to my memory, decades later, like honey, something sweet and innocent and trusting in it, something pure, something about what a shut-in thirsted after most of all: discovery.

And they were walking on water, these people.

For a Catholic kid, the vision of a clan of adults and children appearing to walk on water, well, *that* was an attention-getter right there. And there they were, a couple of families in bearskins and sealskin boots, striding purposefully from left to right, through the water, full on the page of one of those kids' books of an improving nature: *The How and Why Book of Indians*, it may have been.

The water they were crossing was the Bering Strait, some 12,000 years ago.

These apparently dry-shod folks had come to the Americas, the first of their kind, so my *How and Why* book said.

They were the forebears of the long-obliterated tribes of my part of New York State: the Wappinger, the Lenni-Lenape, the tribes who'd been wiped out by disease and the not-so-pacific Pilgrims who'd already migrated west from the Massachusetts Colony.

I was seeing a history no one had ever taught me before, as if I could see into the woods and hills and sky of my world in a new way.

I'd stumbled across an alternative view of the world around me: a wheezy over-verbal Canadian kid growing up in an Anglo-Irish-Liverpudlian household in Poughkeepsie NY, an IBM brat yet to see the inside of the wild days to come in America.

The Cuban Missile Crisis, the assassination of JFK, The Beatles (from my parents' hometown of Liverpool), the Vietnam War and the election of LBJ, the horrors of the race riots of 1965, the rise of the anti-war movement, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy...all that was still un-lived.

Second thing.

I have a strange and wonderful relationship with an exceedingly wealthy man, whose art collection, when I first met him, lived in a vault high atop the office tower his company owned in downtown Toronto. We shared occasional meetings, brainstorming sessions about art, history, our children but history most of all. We never speak about business, his world, the moving around of money. One of these visits, he was late; his schedule is impressionistic: he lives his days in shorts and Reeboks, so I wasn't surprised, not least because of his romantic entanglements.

We had been introduced in a circuitous way, through a mutual friend, a well-known psychiatrist also deeply interested in the power of art and creativity in our lives and the lives of our children. Our first conversation ran to nearly four hours and covered all manner of deep concerns, notably where certain paintings he wished to procure might be. We parted friends and shared an odd but quite moving correspondence together until we were to meet again a year or so later, again at his office tower.

In lieu of our meeting starting on time, I was asked if I'd like to see the vault where the art collection was stored by my friend's curator, a lovely and calm young woman of Mediterranean features. She escorted me to the vault door, an impressively secure thing that made me think of thriller films and intelligence officers and turning door handles that led to corridors of secret power.

Those musings died quickly when the vault door swung open and I found myself in a small museum-grade room of pin-lit display cases, hushed and softly lit. One object struck me instantly, to my left, the first art object in sequence and the most mysterious.

Flattish, disc-like but wholly irregular, perhaps five inches in rough diameter, complexly beautiful in its golden-brown patina, the object looked like one of Alice's magic mushrooms, drawn by Picasso. "I can feel something coming off this," I said to the curator. "What is it? It's remarkable."

"Everyone says that," she replied. "It's a manatee jawbone. It's been worked and then was buried for some 10,000 years, the experts tell us. It's the oldest known piece of art from the people who crossed the Bering Strait." She went on to say that these objects are exceedingly rare and were a particular passion of my friend. This piece was thought to be a kind of talisman for the people walking to the Americas; it had no utility as a tool. It was too beautiful for that.

The disc's effect was hypnotic. I managed to edge away and was invited to spend my time waiting for my friend in what must be one of the most astonishing private art repositories on the planet in the next room. Standing next to the open drawer of a mapcase-like set of drawers that ran the length of the long galley-like space, I read Lord Nelson's love letters to Lady Hamilton, laced with peremptory orders on maintaining garden and grounds; saw several paintings racked at the far end of the room, including a Rubens I knew had set records for its price at auction.

But nothing compared to this hauntingly simple piece of bone, glowing in its pool of pin-light, its coloration reminding me of the walls of Old Town Warsaw's Honey-maker's Street: a deep, multilayered and complex yellow-gold-amber, pocked with the porosities of the bone itself, like dark stars in a sunset sky. To this day, I'm fascinated by its power.

Third thing.

I was trained as an immunologist, a discipline I loved for its marriage of information and life itself, not least because I'd had so many allergies and blood tests as a child, immunology was a natural curiosity. In the course of researching a possible expedition across the Bering Strait some 15 years ago, I discovered a map of the genetic patterns of the earliest settlers of the Americas, drawn from DNA research performed in a half-dozen countries on the trail from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego.

The map showed a spine of migratory patterns of the first peoples, from Alaska down the British Columbia coast, down the US Pacific Coast, to Mexico and Central America, down the windward side of the Andes, through Ecuador all the way to the southernmost tip of Chile, the last of the Americas, stopped only by the ice-desert of the Antarctic. All manner of arrows arced off the main spine, eastward and southward, the root migrations of the Inuit, the Mandans, the Sioux and the Cheyenne, the Aztecs, Mayans, Incans and tribes whose names I'd never seen before.

Then, a coincidence: my then-wife and I had taken Russian lessons—she's Russian-Canadian—and were and are deeply Russophile; we were introduced to a Russian family in our hometown who had well and truly defected through Vienna at the height of the Cold War. The father had a military background and his exit was hair-raising; the mother was Jewish, which made getting out even more difficult in the days of Soviet anti-Semitism. With their young son, they escaped through Vienna's Westbahnhof Station, where so many Cold War dramas, big and small, played out.

We had a meal together at their home; in the course of the lunch, the father told me the story of his PhD. Shyly, he showed me his "monograph," an academic pamphlet, pages of Cyrillic on thin, browned-off Soviet-era paper, years of philological detective work that comprised his post-doctoral servitude... all about the indigenous languages of Siberia, the root language, he said, for all the languages of the Americas.

These ancient and unique languages, today almost extinct, were the nexus for all the languages of all the native peoples of the Pacific Coast of the Americas. My Russian friend had what my fellow investigative journalists call "the turnkey story" to understanding the hows and whys of the first peoples of the Americas.

So: three things.

None of this would have amounted to anything if I hadn't fallen madly in love with the Sprinter. There it was, black as anthracite, stealth in aspect with its blacked-out windows, towering over all the other liquor store parking lot vehicles, at rest and at once graceful and thuggish, a panther of a machine.

(END INTRO)

MARKETING OVERVIEW

THE ROAD TO PATAGONIA

log line: their last summer together, a writer father and his photographer/videographer son reproduce the migrations of the Siberian indigenous peoples across the Bering Strait, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, in search of the other Americas— in a 4x4 Mercedes Benz Sprinter van they converted themselves, seeking indigenous and native stories about climate change, politics, family, and life itself via interviews in/near public libraries across 16 countries and the condominium of Antarctica.

85,000 words

six maps

two graphics

extensive digital collateral media, including pre-publication blog, SPOT tracking website plug/in; postings to YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter storytelling by both father and son in #vanlife space, which has social media footprint internationally, in English alone, of some 4mn.

an e-learning, for-credit, online learning project to capture and share the learnings from the trip is underway; conversations are in progress with my alma mater, Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie NY, to teach an independent study seminar stemming from the trip and collateral research

two Canadian documentary photographers have volunteered to film the trip in progress: Dan Bowman of Toronto and Russell Monk of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Once logistics are detailed, an independent film project launches

social media launch (*documenting van conversion and initial planning stages of trip*): September 01 2017

first draft delivered: Dec 31 2018

Overview/positioning:

The author is a multi-award-winning brand communications/digital content strategist, a media technologist, a thrice-published crime novelist and former CBC investigative journalist with work date-lined from three continents, including Cuba, Russia, Poland, Hungary and the civil wars in former Yugoslavia; he's also a produced screenwriter, specializing in black comedy.

The Road to Patagonia is inspired by two classic travelogues, Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* (1977; still in print) and Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* (1935; still in print). The spirit of the book owes much to John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* (1962; still in print).

Overview/structure:

The book encompasses six main narrative threads, all braided about the core travelogue, the seventh narrative, itself in day-date diary style, echoing Byron's classic format.

1. **how to prepare for and drive the 20,000 miles of Pan American Highway** (there is no such thing, actually) from the Bering Strait to the penguin rookeries of the Tierra del Fuego coast of Chile and live to tell the tale
 1. audience: 10mn in English, skews male; #vanlife on YouTube has over 2mn followers. Subject of major feature piece in April 27, 2017 *The New Yorker* (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/24/vanlife-the-bohemian-social-media-movement>)
 2. This is the doable aspiration for those (a) who want a cheap adventure with their lover (millennials and boomers alike) but also (b) for those of any age who cannot climb Annapurna, k2 or Kilimanjaro.
 3. Twenty years ago, the disaffected middle class male attempted screenplays. These days, the aspirational piece is the ultra-long road-trip, the tougher and more challenging, the better—preferably with a female companion. (This is the formula for a half-dozen YouTube #vanlife video hits with 500K hits or more.)

2. **The father-son quest piece:** an extrovert divorced writer-father, and introvert son, a musical prodigy and gifted photographer, discover life as lived in dozens of micro cultures, from the Bering Strait Inuit fishermen to the indigenous peoples of Chile—and each other. A kind of a love story. Bro-comedy and guy-complications ensue. Nikolai, 18, will be conversational foil and creative collaborator.

3. **The indigenous DNA-languages thread:** The father, a trained immunologist, traces the DNA clues which reveal the pattern of migration from central Siberia to the tip of South America. These genetic clues, subject of much obscure but fascinating research, are meshed with an analysis of the present-day situations of the descendants of the indigenous Siberian peoples as lived in inner-city Los Angeles, the Baja, Chiapas, the Yucatán, Panama, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile.

In parallel, an examination of the lost/dying languages (fading echoes of their Siberian linguistic forebears) as expressed through story and syntax. Not professional philology but rather a conversation starter amongst people who represent the last of their kind and last of their native tongue.

4. **An analysis of climate change, as related by the indigenous peoples en route:** Stemming from the conversations sparked by #3, I'll examine indigenous social history, myths, and lived experience on the land and on the sea, urban and rural, rain forest and mountain hamlet. The investigative technique is predicated on the concept that those closest to the land understand the disruption of the earth's rhythm's best. An ethnographic excavation of some of the most ancient parables and dreams on the continent—all in aid of framing the overwhelming crisis of the earth's climate change in human terms. No solution but perhaps an inspiration, from the wisdom of those who were here first and closest to the stories we of The First World, consciously or not, have chosen to ignore. The beating heart of the book.

There were six women.

That's the irreducible number of mothers who bore the first children of the Americas, a certainty of a number anthropologists and serologists and geneticists have reverse-engineered from the genomic studies.

Just six.

We know this from the pool of blood types identified and extrapolated from mitochondrial DNA studies of (coincidence) six nations. From these genomic back bearings, we know, some 12,000 years after the fact, that the west coast First Nations, from the rainforest tribes of the British Columbia to the southernmost tribes who transited the Andes for the Patagonian plains are all cousins—and not distant cousins at that. Their bloodlines tell the tale.

But what of the languages of these myriad tribes and clans? How do they relate to the root languages of Siberia millennia ago?

Most of all, what of the myths and stories midwives by these fragile languages, many of them extinct and many more but a few elderly voices away from vanishing?

What do those myths and stories tell us about humankind's relationship to the earth and the seas and the sky? What wisdom is there to be had, this late in the day, as the ice-packs and permafrost melt and the great ice-fields of the north contract, of man's role in caring for what was, but 12,000 years ago, primeval?

5. A political pilgrimage through the Americas in time of Trump: an analysis, entirely anecdotal, unashamedly biased, targeting the eccentric and the marginalized, from the natives of Little Diomedes Island on the Bering Strait to the fisherfolk of Tierra del Fuego 18,000 miles south, and laced with sharply etched portraits of the local commentators, a snapshot of the history of two continents through the lens of two travellers bent on getting under the skin of the countries they're visiting.

Emphasis on the lost and the lonely, the members of populist/resistance movements, social activists, poets, visual artists, philosophers barroom and otherwise, and (God help us), the inevitable media types—the undiscovered stories of the Americas, prised open in the spring/autumn (depending on hemisphere) of 2018.

The narrative ends with a visit to the Antarctica astrophysics microwave antenna project, co-run by an old high schoolmate, Prof John Carlstrom of the University of Chicago (http://www.uchicago.edu/features/south_poles_next_generation_of_discovery/) and some small thinking about that other migration—the Big Bang.

6. The librarians: The connecting through line isn't the imaginary Pan American highway—it's the dozens of public libraries I'll visit, way stations on the route south, their resources and community intelligence (interpreters, fixers, access to interview subjects, domain experts and storytellers and just plain interesting local characters) the wellspring for the local research I'll be doing. The libraries will be my life-line and story-engine. My consulting work at present has opened international networks of librarians, researchers and information scientists. A *Road To Patagonia* advisory board has been struck, with founding members from the American Library Association and the Federation of Public Libraries of Ontario.

CHAPTER ONE | SAMPLE ONLY

Off the tongue, the name sounds like something out of Greek myth: Little Diomede.

It's not. Little Diomede (which, apropos of nothing, spell-corrects to Doomed) is named for a Russian Orthodox martyr, whose feast day—August 16—was the day Vitus Bering discovered the island in 1728. There are two Diomedes, Big (Russian, uninhabited, about 10 square miles in landmass) and Little (American, population 105, about four squares, stem to stern) on either side of the International Date Line, two pinprick-big islets, barely two and half miles apart, Russia practically touching America, kissing-close.

The local dialect captures this far better than a long-forgotten martyr: 'Inalq' covers both islands and translates, well-flavoured with the locals' directness, as *'that one over there.'* Sums up the state of play in a place where distance is everything to a homebound fisherman deep in a roiling fog—and nothing, in mid-pea-soup fog on a townsite you could punt a football across with a good tail-wind.

They're bang in the middle of the Bering Strait, these two discs of dead volcano. The same sea tugs and tears at the same rock, the same fog curls and eddies over each Diomede, the same salt sea-air chills the granite plateaus mirroring one another across the Arctic reach. Out here there's raw blunt nature, relentlessly in your face. There's barely any green, nary a tree and nothing that resembles landscape. It's a bloody great big rock, the last gasp of the magma upheavals that bridged the Russian mainland to what is now the Alaskan coast some 12,000 years ago. Then as today, the climate shuddered and the waters rose and the land-bridge vanished beneath the wave-tops.

Which brings us to the denizens of Little Diomede.

The tiny hamlet of Little Diomede is an afterthought geologically, a semi-circular shelf of volcanic rock, canted well past the horizontal, appended to the greater body of the tiny island, itself uninhabited. Canny, dour indigenous fisherfolk live on Little Diomede and why not? Some of the best commercial fishing in the world is to be had here; the Diomedians fish the old fashioned way, in longboats, with sieve nets.

Their homes are the clapboard kind you see all over the far north, painted in primary end-of-the-run paint, robust timbers and windows and doors shipped in at God knows what expense, set on pilings or stilts against the lay of the land, which drops off, Moscow Metro escalator-steep (you jump-skip-ski down; you don't walk) like a black diamond ski trail, down to the boiling waters below.

No place for the timid: these folks lock eyes with you like they mean it. Not unfriendly, just measuring you, rather like a congenial hangman calculating the drop for your dispatch. They're a skeptical bunch, the Diomedians, like small-town farmers reckoning their horse rather more use than you or wondering just how long the landlubbers would actually last out there.

Not long, their bemused eyes say, not long. They're witty, unblinking and think the outlanders come to their sliver of the universe are clearly out of their minds. Who comes here who doesn't have to fish, who doesn't, in their bones, deeply love the sea and the cold and the fog and the sheer perversity of this tough but somehow pure life? It's a chill sun up here, promising heat but delivering only a ceramic disc: the sun, as the local saying runs, lies.

Is that to romanticize things? Hardly: if you live here, you commit to a life deep in the rhythms of the sea, beneath a sky that spins weather systems of bone-chilling mists, rain-fronts, grey and great as battleships, and winds that mill the lethally cold waters into knife-edges of fast-moving swells, swells that batter even the most stable Coast Guard cutter. It's no place for the old or the agile or the inattentive. Make a mistake out there and you're dead. Period.

They've never seen a Sprinter van, except perhaps on the handful of internet-accessible computers on the island, connected to the outside world by dead-slow-stop satellite hook-up and hellishly expensive. And Chile and Tierra del Fuego might just as well be Mars, 15,000 nautical miles to the south.

I befriend a dog, half-Husky, half something else, named what sounds like Bruce. She falls madly in love with me, sitting next to me, her head on my thigh, her pale brown eyes open with unstinting affection. She's inescapable, bound to me by an invisible canine gravity. I scale the path down to the water's edge with her, a route she knows by heart, alternatively nuzzling the back of my calf and skipping ahead like a chamois, performing a kind of Marseilles toe-dance on the slick granite, oblivious to the danger of the carnivorous waves below, their impact like field artillery in the distance. She's immortal.

I stop and brace myself against the wind.

That's Russia over there. Or at least the human-free brim of that vast country, a fallen soufflé in shape, melancholy and bereft of even a sea-gull. All manner of thoughts tumble through my mind: I think of Chekhov and his voyage round the Siberian prison system on Sakhalin, his cold fury at the horrors he saw, a genius writer-physician and observer of the world of St Petersburg, taking in the mediaeval barbarism of the standing cells and the inhuman mining and logging camps and the stone-cold fortresses where men broke in the night and revolutionaries like Stalin quietly nursed the banked fires of their coming revenge on the Romanovs.

I take inventory of the Russians who've changed how I think and feel: Meierkhold, the theatre genius, martyred by Stalin in the last gasp of the purges in February 1940; Anna Akhmatova, the poetess of Purges and Joseph Brodsky, her heir to the crown of Russian verse; the filmmaker Tarkovsky, who seemed to audit dreams and transmute them to floating images that linger in the mind like woodsmoke on a rainy mountain day; the composer Shostakovich, whose music, shards of nervous energy and emotion, somehow echo the tense neurosis of a full heart and a working mind in Stalin's time, when truth was something invented by the day.

Then there's the dancers, the incredibly skilled and powerful Nureyev and Baryshnikov and Pavlova, perhaps the greatest of them all, creatures of flight and spin and other-worldly grace. *The last of the Romanovs, tsar of all the Russias*, I think to myself. How small Russia has become in comparison, mean, criminal and cannibal, no place for the old or the young. The wind shifts and with it my mood.

What've I missed here in postage-stamp Little Diomedea? I'm leaving in an hour, with dozens of my investigative journalist questions rolling around my forebrain unposed. Is there a priest here? Police? And what of telephone service—is there a party line or what? How many phone numbers are there here? Is there a phone book? I blink into the press of the west wind. And there's no bank. Do folks barter or what?

In the distance, there's the hollow resonant thump of a basketball on tarmac and the peal of kids' laughter. I look up. The clouds are fissuring like cheddar: there might actually be blue sky up there but I'm never going to see it. A haze of fog edges between the two Diomedes, making southward, a caught breath of Russian mist that slips across the water and steals the sun. I shifted my faithful blue Deuter backpack and took my first step towards the waiting ferry onbound to the mainland and a date with Nikolai and the Sprinter.

That was the beginning.

(END SAMPLE from CHAPTER ONE)

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**How does this saga of compelling myths, great voyages and perilous Ice Age treks end?**

We'll do what the first migrants themselves did, seeking a new home, perhaps meaning for their hardships as they walked the long miles across ice pack, desert, and mountain trail: as Dante did when he emerged from the Inferno, we'll look to the stars.

The ferry from Tierra del Fuego to Antarctica is, mile for mile, one of the most expensive on the planet. But what we'll examine there staggers the imagination and dwarfs the great good fun of watching Emperor penguins amble across the ice-pack of McMurdoe Sound. (We'll do that too. I adore penguins.)

The end of the Big Drive isn't the #vanlife destination of the ash grey beaches of Tierra del Fuego: the story ends with the great microwave antennae of the University of Chicago's Big Bang project, the mapping of microwave radiation created in the slivers of time as the universe itself was created, billions upon billions of years old, literally the oldest information ever.

This project, run by an old high school chum and fellow swing band musician, John Carlstrom, brings into sharp focus the immensity of the human imagination, the very engine of ambition for those first few families to leave Siberia and embark on the Long Walk across the Bering Strait or set sail from what's now the coastline of northern China and the Koreas, to an uncertain landfall across a hostile Pacific, towards where mornings are born.

Carlstrom's project translates fractional changes in almost impossibly ancient intergalactic wavefronts, his computers parsing out the beats in radiation waves which are literally the fingerprints of the beginnings of time itself. His massive antennae are taking the pulse of infinity.

The Big Drive in that sense never ends: it's humankind's open-ended quest through time and space for what lies beyond—not the imagination: no—but rather the next curve in the path, down the next vale, seeking a switchback route through the ice-field ahead, gazing across the other side of the shining river and into the shadow of the trees, transiting the Pacific's numberless waves to the knife-edge of the horizon, to a new world.

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