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Fall 2010

# Breaking into the Backcountry

Steve Edwards

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# Breaking into the Backcountry

*Steve Edwards*

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## *Acknowledgments*

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BREAKING INTO  
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## PROLOGUE

*January 2001*

THE CALL CAME FROM JOHN DANIEL, the contest's coordinator: I had somehow managed to win the PEN/Northwest Margery Davis Boyden Wilderness Writing Residency, whose prize was a small cash stipend and seven months as caretaker of a backcountry homestead in what John called "unparalleled solitude" along the federally designated Wild and Scenic Rogue River in southwestern Oregon. Thrilled by some validation for my writing, I didn't give much thought to what living in unparalleled solitude might mean or what I would have to leave behind. Honestly, I was just happy to have won something. That was last May. Now that the calendar year has turned a page and I'm only a few months from finally lighting out, some apprehension is setting in.

I'm from Indiana, born and raised. Indiana is the only life I've ever known. Aside from all the fishing trips my father took my brother and me on as kids, I've never been much of an outdoorsman. I've done typical midwestern things like chopping and stacking firewood, mowing grass, raking leaves, detasseling corn. And I've always loved the woods, its quiet and birdsong, the way sunlight filters through green maple leaves. But I know nothing of wilderness. The word itself calls forth such seemingly contradictory ideas. On one hand wilderness means a place of natural beauty and peace. On the other hand wilderness means a place of deprivation and danger. The wilderness is where people get lost and die. The wilderness is where people go to find themselves and be reborn. "There is an almost visible line," writes poet Gary Snyder, "that a person . . . [can] walk across: out of history and into a perpetual present, a way of life attuned to the slower and steadier processes of nature." And this is maybe what concerns me most these days—the thought of what it takes to swallow hard and cross that line.

During my mandatory visit to the homestead last summer, an overnight stay (the homestead's owners like to make sure their caretakers know exactly what they're getting themselves into), I saw a bear in a meadow. Since then I've been dreaming of bears, and the bears of my dreams have been killing me.

In one dream my mother has been to visit, and I'm going around closing doors and windows because a cold draft is blowing in. Before I can shut the last door, my mother's dog, Daisy—an old tan-coated retriever mutt—goes racing outside after a rabbit. I chase after her, and when I round the corner I'm taken aback: the dog is gone, and standing in her place is a strange tin-roofed structure, a kind of altar supported by four wooden posts, under which is an enormous black bear. The bear is sniffing the grass, taking a few tufts into its mouth. I realize that the bear hasn't seen or smelled me and for a moment feel incredibly lucky for

## *Prologue*

this glimpse of such a beautiful animal. Then out of the corner of my eye I see a dark blur. It's another big bear, and it's charging me. I feel its paws on my chest and neck, its great heft knocking me to the ground.

Though scary, the dreams add some excitement to a life that for me, at twenty-six, still living in the town where I was born, has begun to feel ordinary. Not terrible. Just sort of *ordinary*. I teach my first-year writing classes at Purdue, hang out with friends and family, check e-mail, pay bills. Once a week I drive to the veterans' home, where I am a volunteer. I talk with a disabled World War II vet named Rocky, a former bantamweight boxer in the navy who has a notebook full of poems he'd like Willie Nelson to make into songs, and I talk to Gene, a Korean War vet who is in physical therapy to learn how to use a new prosthetic leg. He tells me, every time, that he can't wait to go bowling. "I'm gonna bowl me a strike!" Gene says, sweeping his arm.

One day as we're talking I tell Gene I'm going to Oregon in the spring and that I'm worried about bears. "Don't take no shit from no bear!" Gene says. "Get a shotgun. Or a handgun. Or a bow and arrow!"

For more practical advice I have a manual that Bradley, one of the homestead's owners, sent me. It's complete with hand-drawn maps, descriptions of the water system and the cabin, the typical flora and fauna to be found along the Rogue, a bird list a former resident put together, who to call in case of fire, and the chores I'll need to complete. The agreement on chores is that in exchange for seven months at the cabin I'll do the equivalent of an hour a day of routine caretaking.

To get myself ready for all this—to clear my head of anxiety—I like to take long walks in a little park near the village of Battle Ground. It was here in 1811 that the Battle of Tippecanoe took place and Tecumseh's dream of an Indian confederacy was lost. There is an obelisk for the dead U.S. soldiers, a statue of

William Henry Harrison, a dozen acres of old oak trees. Across the highway is Prophet's Rock, a rock outcropping where Chief Tecumseh's brother Tenskwatawa, the Prophet, sang to his warriors and sprinkled them with a potion he said would make them invincible. I like to climb to the top of this rock and look out over the highway and across a field of stubble corn, some railroad tracks in the distance. It is bitter cold in January, but I come here anyway because it's the only place nearby that somehow approximates the quiet and solitude in store for me in the Oregon backcountry. On one such visit to the rock and its surrounding patch of woods, walking as mindfully as I can, I see from a distance four white-tailed deer munching frozen acorns under an enormous oak. They are velvety, gorgeous. I try to move closer, but they see me and retreat out of sight down a draw. Because I don't want to scare them toward the highway, I change direction and come at them from the east. Maybe they hear me or have caught my scent on the breeze. Maybe their flight instinct has kicked in. Next I see them from the top of a hill, they are running straight at me. Four full-grown white-taileds. They thunder by within feet of me. So close I can feel the sharp thump of their hooves hitting the ground, that vibration, in my chest. It is perhaps one of the most amazing things I've ever seen or felt, and, afterward, standing there with a racing heart, I only wish that someone else had seen it, too. That I could have shared it.

Returning to my pickup later that morning, I get the chance. A cop has backed himself into the little gravel parking lot to clock speeders. He's got a Styrofoam cup of coffee in one hand, a radar gun in the other. "Just saw four deer up there," I'll say to him, thumbing at the woods behind me. "Ran right past me," I'll say. "Close enough I could've reached right out and touched them."

I imagine the story might somehow redeem what for the cop, out here in the cold, clocking speeders on a nearly empty highway,

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is an otherwise ordinary, boring morning. If he likes the story and we get to talking, maybe I'll tell him about my trip to Oregon. It's the kind of thing people like to hear about—someone stepping onto a ledge. But as I head back to my pickup, ready with what I'll say, I start to wonder: What would it feel like if I *didn't* tell the cop about the deer I saw? What if I didn't tell anyone? How would it feel to walk around with the glimmer of that little story inside me like a secret? And so in the end, rather than pausing to chat, I walk right past the cop. I climb into my pickup and drive away.

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## GETTING THERE

BY MIDAFTERNOON WE'VE CROSSED IOWA ON I-80 and started north to South Dakota on I-29. It's the same route we took on a family vacation to the Badlands when I was fourteen, only on that trip we stopped and spent a night in Mitchell, home of the Corn Palace. Today we hit Mitchell and keep on rolling. All afternoon and into the evening the scenery is the same: the highway's broken white center line, semitrailers streaming west in plumes of exhaust, the flatness of the plains. Checking our mileage, I'm amazed by how far we've come and how far we still have to go. Riddle, Oregon, where my father and I will meet the homestead's owners at a gas station and follow them into the homestead, is 2,316 miles from my little hometown in Indiana. I can no more fathom this distance than I can fathom the distance from Earth

to the moon. And though I have poured over the manual Bradley sent me and spent the last few months reading everything I can get my hands on about the Pacific Northwest, I still don't totally know what to expect. The moon might actually be more familiar a place to me than the Rogue River canyon.

What is my father thinking as we drive along? I haven't the foggiest idea. Perhaps he's nervous about what could happen to me living alone for seven months in the woods. Somehow I doubt it. He stares out the window, taking in the changing scenery. He's thinking about whether a steelhead will take a night crawler. He's thinking this experience will make a man out of me. He's thinking that after the thirty-two years he spent in the pharmaceutical industry, there's no better way to enjoy retirement than by getting out and seeing a piece of the country. Or maybe he's not thinking anything, just resting and staring out the window at the changing scenery.

It's a comfort having him along. From time to time, I just look at him—this man I've always known. His shiny bald head. Sideburns beginning to turn silver. Big Popeye forearms with their gold hairs. This is the man who bathed my brother and me when we were small enough to fit in the tub together.

I've invited him along because I need help with the drive. I also want him to feel proud of me and to see this as an accomplishment. He's along, however, to make sure I'm not getting in over my head.

Fathers and sons.

On the second morning of the trip, we wake road weary and dazed in a Motel 6 in Rapid City, South Dakota. The day dawns bright and clear, a lucky break in April, and scenery that yesterday ran on an endless loop has somehow shifted overnight. We're in the Black Hills region. Along the horizon are pine-studded ridges and steep granite outcroppings. Touristy billboards tout Black Hills gold and jackalopes. Soon we cross into Wyoming,

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clipping the northeast corner: Gillette, Sheridan, the Bighorn Mountains. The land flattens again, but it's not like the fertile pastures of Iowa or Illinois. It's dry and dusty, wind beaten, dotted with scrub. I watch the long wire fences roll by and count pronghorn among the black cattle.

Midmorning we cross into eastern Montana, and my father perks up. We have entered the Crow Indian Reservation.

"I mean, we won the war," he says, waving a hand over the steering wheel at the surrounding hills and forest, the scattering of outbuildings far from the road. "I don't see why we don't just take all this back. We ought to be using this land for something."

"Just take it back?"

"*Something.*"

In Billings we stop for lunch at a Pizza Hut, gas up, and switch drivers. Not long after that, we come to a spectacle that makes it clear we're now in the West: the snow-covered Crazy Mountains in full sun.

From the Crazies it's not much farther (a couple hours) to Three Forks, Montana, where my father's friend the Six Million Dollar Man—a moniker earned after some oil deal he made in Wyoming—has offered to put us up for the night. His plush three-story house sits on 340 acres of sprawling marsh between two forks of the Jefferson River. In the distance the snow-covered peaks of three separate mountain ranges appear in faint relief: the Gallatins, the Bridgers, and Big Sky. It's a beautiful day for April, sixty and sunny, and up at the house, the Six Million Dollar Man greets my father and me with firm handshakes. He's wearing a flannel shirt, jeans, work boots. An unlit cigarillo hangs from his lip. We stand around the little trout pond he's had dug in his front yard, watching fish rise to the surface, and when he asks about the origins of our trip I tell him the story: I've somehow won a writing contest, and the prize is seven months as caretaker of a backcountry homestead in Oregon. When he asks what kind of

writing I do, I say fiction. He's just finished reading *Close Range* by E. Annie Proulx.

"Those are some tough stories," I say.

"That's Wyoming," he says.

"Who owns all them mountains?" my father wonders aloud, gesturing toward a distant range of snowy peaks.

The Six Million Dollar Man shrugs, says he doesn't know, says the government probably holds the lease. I tell him how impressed I'd been by the Crazy Mountains after the flatness of Billings. "The Crazies," the Six Million Dollar Man says, raising his eyebrows, nodding. "The Crazies are beautiful."

That night, after a meal at a rib joint in the little town of Willow Springs, I bed down in a sleeping bag in the Six Million Dollar Man's sunroom and can see huge wintergreen stars twinkling in the sky. Strangely, I don't feel far from home at all tonight. If anything, I feel closer. I think of the miles my father and I have driven, that life and land and sky, those millions of stories colliding like atoms in places I'll never know. By comparison, my own life seems small. My worries and fears, my hopes and dreams and aspirations. One more speck of dust in an infinite universe.

The next morning my father and I wake to snow. The flakes are dime sized and falling furiously. Nothing to do but take off and hope for the best (and pull over if we have to pull over), we pile into my truck and wave good-bye to the Six Million Dollar Man and his river-island homestead. Despite the snow, we make halfway decent time, flying down I-90 in a convoy of eighteen-wheelers. Signs appear for Butte and Deer Lodge. The road rises, drops, dips, and curves. Throngs of dark, snow-covered pines lean into the wind. Craggy peaks and ridges crowd the sky. The scenery so challenges my midwestern sense of scale and proportion that as morning gives way to afternoon I have no real appreciation of how much time is passing. As we round one bend, the city of Missoula appears, its grid of streets and houses nestled snugly in the valley

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below. Then we shoot north to the tip of Idaho and Lake Coeur d'Alene. We zip through the heart of Spokane and afterward are surrounded by wheat fields that stretch to the horizon.

All afternoon, I keep a foot on the gas. We cross the Columbia River at Umatilla and head west on 1-84, cleaving to a series of high bluffs that look out over the water. Another few hours snowcapped Mount Hood appears, followed by the Portland skyline and a snarl of commuter traffic. Everything here is lush and green—lawns, hillsides, trees. South of the city, we pass acre after acre of blooming tulips, like a postcard from Holland. The sky is blue, the clouds full and gray. Then it's down to the town of Corvallis and out to the coast. We drive by bucolic pastures and hobby farms, where gorgeous black and white horses stand perfectly still in fields of tall grass, where black cattle kneel under the spreading arms of an oak.

Since leaving the Six Million Dollar Man's house, my father and I have been watching the sky, calculating mileage and wondering if we'd arrive at our destination tonight in time to watch the sunset over the Pacific.

"Well, what do you think?" I say.

"Maybe," my father says.

Our final stretch of highway winds its way through the fir-shrouded coast range with the light fast fading.

About the time I think there's no way we'll make it before dark, the highway spits us out of the mountains and stuns us with a view of the ocean from a lookout on Highway 101 at Waldport. The water churns like a sloshing cauldron, and the air all around us is gray. But there, far out on the horizon, glows a slender band of pinkish orange where the sun has just now dipped below the edge of the world.

IN TYPICAL MIDWESTERN FASHION, my father and I have arrived a day early and now must decide what to do with the extra time.

There are any number of options along the coast: hike up Cape Perpetua, near Yachats, to the big lookout over the water; check out Sea Lion Caves farther south; drive dune buggies down at the Oregon Dunes National Recreational Area. In our hotel lobby we look at pamphlets and decide to drive another three or four hours south on Highway 101 to see redwood trees. We've driven this far, what's another few hours?

Highway 101 winds its way along the coast, offering stunning views of the water and the beach. Towns come and go: Coos Bay, Port Orford, Pistol River. I see old men in rain slickers mending fishing nets out on long, rickety piers. The weather is overcast and cool. The ocean is the color of pencil lead.

At the California border there's a checkpoint, and we think it might be a drunk-driving initiative of some kind, or possibly a manhunt. When we pull up to the officer in charge, he asks if we've brought any produce with us across the border. The confusion must show on my face. "Produce," he says. "Fruits and veggies." Then he explains that it's an effort to keep invasive insect species out of the state's billion-dollar orchards. We have some apples, I tell him.

"From the grocery?"

"Yeah," I say.

He waves us through.

After the checkpoint, we zip down to the Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park and take a driving tour. It dawns on us, as midwestern tourists, that we don't really know what a redwood looks like. Sure, we've seen the iconic pictures—cars driving through the enormous trunks—but nothing around here looks like that. The trees are extremely large with a red tint to their bark, but are they redwoods? We just don't know. And it's sad that we don't know. We pull into an empty campground parking lot and decide to walk around a while, stretch our legs. Whether the trees all around us are redwoods or not, this is an eerily beautiful

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place: wisps of fog flutter in the canopy of trees; a damp pine-needle smell rises from our footsteps. We have walked maybe fifty feet when we come to a picnic table whose legs have rotted out from under it. On the table's surface is the unmistakable evidence of bears: a series of long claw marks in the soft wood. And on a nearby tree trunk at eye level is a sign with a picture of a bear: YOU ARE IN BEAR COUNTRY. BE BEAR AWARE. I am suddenly unaccountably afraid.

In my heart of hearts, I know it's ridiculous. I should be able to point to a tree and identify it as a redwood. I should be able to take a stroll in bear country without a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. But right now—just a day before meeting the owners of the homestead and getting set up to live in bear country for seven months—I just can't. I'm afraid. There is an actual lump in my throat.

We take a last look at the picnic table with the claw marks and casually decide to cut our stroll short, keep driving.

As we head up Highway 199, back to Grants Pass (where we'll stay the night before meeting the owners in Riddle the next day and following them into the homestead), my cowardice sickens me. We've come all this way. Across the Great Plains, through the Rockies, along the Columbia River Gorge. Come all this way and for what? To be scared out of a campground by claw marks that for all we know could be ten years old? How in the world am I supposed to be a caretaker of a backcountry homestead when I can't even stand in bear country for five minutes without getting a lump in my throat? It doesn't bode well, and the whole way north I'm on edge, cranky. We take a room at a Motel 6, and because it's still early, my father wants to go out, explore the city of Grants Pass. Maybe get some more groceries for the week we'll spend at the homestead together. Maybe find the post office. A Laundromat. I'm not having any part of it.

"Go out if you want," I tell him.

“You don’t want to look around?”

“No.”

What I want to do is lay on the flimsy bed with the curtains drawn tight and sulk. Finally, my father shrugs and says he thinks he saw a donut shop down the street; he’s going to check it out. He’ll be back.

Then the room is mine, and as has happened to me so often in cheap hotels, in towns far from home, a great loneliness descends. I listen to the traffic on Sixth Street, its steady grind, and every once in a while someone walks past my door. I hear the gentle sound of footsteps, murmuring voices. It reminds me of nights as a kid when I’d lie awake in bed listening to the sounds of my mother and father settling in for the evening, feeling as though everything were right in the world and mourning its goodness, never wanting anything to change. And also nights in my early twenties, alone in an efficiency apartment after a divorce, hounded by doubt and regret. From the window of that place, I could see the underside of a bridge that spanned the Wabash River. A homeless man lived there, and one day, walking by on my way to teach a class at Purdue, I saw three big square-cut swatches of sod the man had stolen from a yard somewhere. He’d been sleeping on them. There was an indentation where he’d lain his head.

I think about that homeless man, about my divorce, about that era in my life when things had felt so shaky and adrift: that was four years ago. Now I’m starting a new era. When I first decided to enter this contest some part of me knew that I’d win. Not because I’m the world’s greatest writer, but because I needed it. That was the story I’d been telling. That more than anyone else, I needed it.

I try to remind myself of that.

It doesn’t help.

Lying on the bed, thumbing through Bradley’s manual, I go over the rules and regulations, the warnings about wildfires and

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disease-carrying ticks, what to do in the event of serious injury, the explanation of the water system, the hand-drawn maps into the homestead, the two hundred hours of chores I'm to fulfill in order to complete my hour-a-day caretaking duties. Should anything go wrong—should a pipe burst or a bear break into the cabin—it's up to me to deal with it. What happens if I can't? What happens if I come up short on character? What if I fail everyone?

It's maybe an hour before my father returns from his walk to the donut shop. We're both ready for dinner and head across the street to a restaurant. It's dusk. The sun has dropped below the cloud ceiling and is shining wanly on the low, folded mountains surrounding town. There is a freshness in the air, a coolness. Over a dinner of hamburgers and french fries and Cokes, my father informs me that he met a local at the donut shop who said you couldn't find better halfpounder steelhead fishing than on the Rogue River. Who said once upon a time it was a big gold-mining river. "I may have to do a little panning for gold," my father says, between bites of hamburger. And I tell him: he'll get his chance, that tomorrow's the big day. "I'd like to find me a big gold nugget," he says. "Wouldn't that be something? A gold nugget?" I tell him: it would.

IT'S SPITTING RAIN WHEN MY FATHER and I pull into the gas station near Riddle, Oregon. Big wisps of steam rise from the surrounding mountains. The Douglas firs are wet and green. This is what Bradley calls "Last Gas" in the manual—from here on in, some forty-five miles of bumpy logging roads, it's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) numbered roads and bridges over little creeks: Middle Creek, Cow Creek, Riffle Creek.

We're early again. We fill up with gas and back into a parking spot in a corner of the lot. We watch logging trucks roll by on the highway. They are loaded down with long, skinny trunks, oversized Lincoln Logs.

With the engine switched off, the truck is chilly. I'm wearing blue jeans with big holes in the knees, a thick flannel shirt, a barn coat, steel-toed boots. There is no backcountry in Indiana, and this is my best guess as to what one might wear if there were. It's my poor imitation of the farmers I grew up around, out combining corn in the late-October chill. I suppose I could have done some research on the Web or bought a copy of *Outdoor Magazine* or *Backpacker*, but somewhere down deep I already knew that nothing betrayed one's inexperience in the woods quite like getting decked out in the latest expensive and unnecessary wilderness accoutrements. Not to mention that I didn't have the money. I'd been house sitting half the year for a retired poetry professor, teaching a few sections of English 101 at Purdue as an adjunct, saving every last penny—I couldn't see spending a hundred bucks on hiking boots.

Likewise with my truck. Bradley had suggested a four-wheel drive, a little Toyota or maybe a Jeep, but in a homemade video he and Frank sent, I thought I heard Frank say that his rig was two-wheel drive and he'd never had a problem getting in and out of the homestead. So when I had to acquire a truck, I bought a fairly new two-wheel drive GMC from a mattress salesman who used it to make his deliveries. A standard midwestern rig, big and square and durable, it was the kind of truck you could imagine parked six deep at any small-town café in rural Indiana on a Friday night. I even liked the color: slate gray. Nothing flashy or glitzy, just a vehicle to take you where you wanted to go. Why pay more for a truck with more miles and more wear simply because it had four-wheel drive? It wasn't like I'd be off-roading. When I'd made my mandatory visit to the homestead last summer, I rented an SUV, and it felt like overkill. The roads were bumpy and I had to watch out for fallen rocks that could puncture a tire, but they were roads like any I'd ever driven before.

From "Last Gas" Bradley's manual says it's another two hours of

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logging roads into the homestead. My father and I sit in the truck, wait. When the windows steam, I roll them down and breathe in the pulpy, sulfuric smell of a pulp mill. It's not so terribly different from the corn-processing plant back home, the stink of sweet gold kernels being melted for syrup. It's strangely comforting.

"Is that them?" my father says after a time, pointing to a rusty Toyota pulling in, three middle-aged men up front.

The truck pulls up to a pump, and the three of them hop out. I recognize Bradley and Joe Green, last year's resident caretaker, from my mandatory trip to the homestead. In his wire-frame glasses and John Berryman beard Joe Green had peppered me with questions I didn't understand about soldering copper pipe. Bradley—tan, bald, clean shaven—laughingly opened a sliding glass door on the deck of the upper house to show me where a bear had tried to paw its way in. "See that scratch?" he said, pointing to a long arcing scar in the glass. "Now what's the only thing sharp enough to scratch glass? That's right. Diamonds! We got us a diamond-clawed bear!"

The other man with Bradley and Joe Green is Bradley's brother, Frank. As I understand it, Frank is a well-known ceramist who runs an artist program up the coast, the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology. He is tall and lanky, wearing blue jeans and boots, a sock cap bunched on the back of his head.

My father asks again if that's them, then looks at me, waiting. Up until now, I could have called it off. Chickened out. But against what feels like my better judgment, I tell him that's them and get out and wave hello to everyone. Frank introduces himself with a handshake. Bradley pounds me on the back. Joe nods. I introduce them to my father and hear myself saying I'm glad to see them all.

"That your rig?" Bradley says, eyeballing my truck. A look of deep concentration—perhaps irritation—has spread across his face. "You'll ruin my road with that monster."

He pulls off his wool beret and runs a hand over his bald head, pinches his lips with his forefinger and thumb, keeps staring at my truck. Frank, the taller of the two, pulls off his sock cap, folds it in his hands, says the roads get awfully, awfully muddy in the spring and worries that I might get stuck. Joe Green, in a rain slicker, a crumpled fedora, points at the tires. “Street treads,” he says.

Bradley’s chewing his bottom lip, thinking it over. In his gray work pants and boots, his scuffed jacket, his wool beret, he looks like any other Oregonian I’ve encountered in the last day and a half. There’s something in his countenance, though—his arch seriousness, the scrutiny with which he’s considering the details of our trip into the homestead—that makes me think of a general on the eve of battle. As a greenhorn from Indiana who knows next to nothing about the world he’s entering, I’m intimidated as hell but at the same time deeply grateful. He tells me I’m going to need mud and snow tires. Then he asks me if I have chains. He says that I’m going to need chains.

“You should’ve called me,” he says. “I could’ve told you—you need four-wheel drive. It’s muddy as hell in the spring.”

“I’ll get new tires.”

“Then again,” he says, lifting his eyebrows and shrugging, “as dry as it’s been, you may not have a problem. They might even close your road for fire precaution. Then you’ll have to get a permit from the BLM. They might even close off the river to rafters. That’s how bad it is. Middle of a ten-year drought.”

I nod as though I understand.

Bradley sighs.

For now at least, we’re just going to have to make due. Last report from John Daniel, who spent the winter in solitude at the homestead, was that the road was dry and clear. We’ll have to take him at his word. We’ll go slow. If I get stuck or start to slip and slide, Frank’s got a big steel chain, and we can connect

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our rigs. It's something they have apparently had to do before. Bradley and Frank share a glance and a laugh. There's a story I don't quite catch about a writer whose rig wouldn't stop sliding on the downhill slope. They tethered their rigs with the chain—the writer's vehicle out in front and Bradley back behind, with his rig in 4WD low range, and riding the brakes. Or else it was the other way around, and the writer kept braking every time Bradley stepped on the gas. I don't totally catch it because the two of them are laughing so hard, remembering, and because I'm glad they're laughing, and because I'm relieved to hear I'm not the first greenhorn writer they've had to deal with. For a while there, the way Bradley scowled at my truck, I thought we might have to delay the trip. I thought: here we are, day one, and you've already screwed up.