

The Geographic North Pole

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The summer of 1974 was brutally hot in New York and I kept thinking about how nice and icy it must be at the North Pole. And then I thought, "Wait a second, why not go?" You know, like in cartoons where they hang going to the North Pole on their door knobs and they just take off.

So I spent a couple of weeks preparing for the trip, getting a hatchet, a huge backpack, maps, knives, sleeping bags, lures and a three month supply of Banic, a versatile high-protein paste that can be made into flat bread, biscuits or cereal.

Now I had decided to hitch hike and one day I just walked out onto Austin Street, weighing down seventy pounds of gear, and stuck out my thumb.

"Going North?" I asked the driver as I struggled into a station wagon.

After I got out of New York, most of the rides were trucks until I reached the Hudson Bay and began to hitch in small mail planes. The pilots were usually guys who'd gone to Canada to avoid the draft or else embittered Vietnam vets who never wanted to go home again. Either way they always wanted to show off a few of their stunts. We'd go swooping along the rivers doing loop de loops and baby boom. And they'd drop me off at an airstrip. "There'll be another plane by here couple of weeks; see ya; good luck."

I never did make it all the way to the geographic pole; it turned out to be a restricted area and no one was allowed to fly in or even over it. I did get within a few miles of the magnetic pole though. So it wasn't really that disappointing. I entertained myself in the evenings, cooking or smoking, and watching the blazing light of the huge Canadian sunsets as they turned the lake into fire.

Later I lay on my back, looking up at the Northern lights and imagining there'd been a nuclear holocaust and that I was the only human being left in all of North America and what would I do then.

And then, when these lights went out, I stretched out on the ground, watching the stars as they turned around and their enormous silent boom.

I finally decided to turn back because of my hatchet. I'd been chopping some wood and the hatchet flew out of my hand on the upswing. And I did what you should never do when this happens: I looked up to see where it had gone and it came down "fffooo" just missing my head and I thought, "My God! I could be working around here with a hatchet embedded in my skull and I'm ten miles from the airstrip. And nobody in the whole world knows where I am."

Daddy Daddy, it was just like you said
Now that the living outnumber the dead
Where I come from it's a long thin thread

Across an ocean. Down a river of red
Now that the living outnumber the dead
Speak my language