



solitude

Seeking Wisdom in Extremes

Robert Kull

A YEAR ALONE IN THE PATAGONIA WILDERNESS

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*For Patti and Cat
and for
the wind and rain of southern Chile*



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PREFACE

On February 5, 2001, I went to live on a small, remote island on the Pacific coast of southern Chile, just west of the Andes Mountains and more than a hundred miles by water from the nearest small town. It was a wild, stormy, uninhabited region of rain and windswept islands and fjords, with no boats or airplanes and only the occasional faint sign of distant human activity.

I took all the equipment and supplies I would need to build a camp and stay, completely alone, for a year. The experience was exciting, difficult, and fascinating, often painful, and sometimes filled with wonder. Physical adventures and the challenges of survival counterpointed emotional exploration, philosophical reflection, and spiritual awakening.

Most stories have a beginning, middle, and end, and they draw us into some other time and place. This story is different; it's all middle — no clear beginning, no definite end — and it slips out of time and into the eternal *now*. It's a journey into one of the most remote places on the planet and into some of the darkest recesses and brightest openings of the human spirit.

Solitude has the power to catalyze shifts in consciousness, so rather than write *about* my year alone, I have let the voice of solitude speak *directly* through the words and silences of my edited wilderness journal. Paradoxically, the voice of solitude must, in some sense, remain silent. As soon as the solitary begins to speak, even if by writing to an imagined reader, he (or she) is no longer truly alone.

In places, I've set reflective "Interludes" between journal entries to add perspective. These were written afterward, and they step back from the immediate

intensity of my experience in solitude to reflect on important ideas or aspects of the year. But the heart of the story beats within the hours, days, and months of the journal. There, I've tried to scrupulously tell my truth as I lived it — even painful parts I might prefer to keep private. Although I haven't included photographs here, many beautiful images can be found at www.bobkull.org.

In many cultures, solitude is recognized as an opportunity to journey inward; in our culture, spending time alone is often considered unhealthy because we tend to believe that meaning in life is found only through relationship with other people. But to be fully human, we need relationship not only with other people but with the nonhuman world, with our own inner depths — and with Something Greater. For me, that nonmaterial Presence is mysterious and sacred. It can be experienced, but not defined. And I've learned that in coming into a deeper relationship with my self, I develop the capacity to connect more deeply with others.

One of the challenges of solitude is that you have to face yourself. There are no easy escapes. During the year, I struggled with ongoing cycles of resistance and release. Each resolution gave rise to new tension, as storm and calm followed each other in succession. The fundamental tensions were emotional and spiritual, and the moments of resolution did not arise from changing the world, but from coming to accept the world and myself as we are.

My intention in writing this story is not just to describe my own year alone in the wilderness but to evoke the experience for others and guide them into solitude with me. Nestled within this tale of physical and spiritual adventure, there is also an invitation to reflect on our common life as we each struggle to live fully and face our daily challenges with compassion and equanimity. There are no sure answers in these pages, only the space to pause and listen to life calling to life; reminding us that we, too, belong here.

INTRODUCTION

THE CALL OF SOLITUDE

There are times when life seems to snatch us up and carry us toward an unknown destination. We hear something calling from deep within and suspect that if we don't respond, we will wither into a hollow shell. I heard such a call in the mid-1970s, and it changed my life. I was in my late twenties, working as a logger on the west coast of Canada's Vancouver Island, drinking in the local pub, and attempting to be a hard-ass macho. I began to feel a powerful need to be alone. I quit my job and watched myself — almost as a spectator — buy a canoe, purchase supplies for three months, and paddle into the backcountry of northern British Columbia.

I've always spent time alone in nature. My earliest memory is of sitting on a rock one hot dusty morning, cap gun in its holster at my hip, watching the clouds and buzzards drift across the southern California sky. There was tension in my family, and between us and the neighbors, so perhaps I disappeared into the woods and pastures seeking peace and a place where I could be myself. I doubt, though, that I knew then why I went; I still doubt I really know why I go. I can give plausible reasons, but finally, I just feel, from time to time, a mysterious urge to leave society behind.

Deep solitude is strange and powerful and can be frightening. During my teenage years and into my twenties, I often spent days alone in the wilderness, but three months was a radical leap I wasn't psychologically prepared for. I almost lost it out there in northern British Columbia. I almost didn't survive. After six or seven weeks, without other people to help me maintain my identity, the facade of autonomous self-sufficiency started to crumble. Fear crept in as I awoke to how small and vulnerable I

was in the face of an enormous and threatening universe. My life felt frighteningly tenuous, and death always instantly possible.

Bears loomed large in my solitary mind. Each night was worse than the one before, as I crouched by the safety of my campfire, hiding from the dangers in the darkness beyond. Finally, I knew I had to either return to the distractions, and apparent safety, of civilization or face the darkness alone.

I left the fire and walked into the forest, edging my way through the dark. I lay down and waited. Time passed, and even the distant glimmer of the fire had died when I heard a bear coming toward me. As it snuffled closer and closer, terror struck. I could feel myself losing it and slipping over the edge into mindless panic. If I moved even a finger, I would be lost. Beyond reason and without reserve, I called for help.

In that moment of surrender, I felt lifted and found myself floating in a pool of clear light. Looking down, I sensed myself lying peacefully on the forest floor. The world was no longer a hostile alien place, but my home. No true separation remained between me and the world.

After that night of inner transformation, the whole world seemed vibrantly *alive*, and I lived for several weeks deeply integrated into the universe, glorying in the beauty of mountains, lake, and sky. There was also Something Else out there; Something nonphysical and beyond definition. I was part of that, too, and felt accepted and at peace. Those weeks were so filled with joy and wonder that I decided I would someday live alone in the wilderness for a whole year.

THE WORLD OF PEOPLE

But when I left the magic of the forest and returned to the chaos of the human world, I lost my way, and the clear inner light faded. I traveled to Mexico with my lover, and sat for long hours by the sea, but caught only brief glimpses of the joy and wonder I'd thought would always fill my life. I didn't know what I'd done wrong, but I felt I'd somehow failed an important spiritual test. I sank deeper and deeper into darkness, clinging to the dead memory of what had been a living flame. My lover tried to understand, but I couldn't explain what I was going through, and she finally left me.

Alone again, I drifted north to California, and lived for a while in a cave in Death Valley — sleeping long hours and attempting to interpret my dreams. During the day, I read the Bible and Carl Jung, trying to understand and accept what had happened to me in the wilderness, without getting sucked back into the fundamentalist Christian dogma I'd grown up with. The depression and the grief for what I'd lost eased only when I discovered Buddhist meditation practice and learned that peak spiritual experiences are inherently transient.

As my mind cleared, I began to remember something I'd thought about in the wilderness. When I was twenty, I'd left the United States to live in Canada rather than fight in the Vietnam War. It had been an ethical choice, but during the months in solitude I came to recognize that I'd avoided an important social responsibility: not to go to war but to contribute two years of my life to serve the community in a positive way.

A friend told me about an agency that sent volunteers to teach organic vegetable gardening in the Caribbean. I signed up to spend two years in the rural mountains of

the Dominican Republic, beyond the reach of cars, electricity, and running water. A month after I arrived, the agency sent word that they had lost their funding and I should use my return ticket back to the States.

But I believed in the work and decided to stay. I built a small shack to live in, continued to cultivate the demonstration garden, practiced my Spanish, and traded vegetables for the staples I needed. I also did small carpentry jobs to earn the thirty dollars a month I learned to live on. After I'd been there for a year, Hurricane David swept through and wiped out the homes of many of the poorest people in the tiny village where I was living. I abandoned the garden and focused on bringing in relief supplies, doing first aid, and rebuilding houses.

Despite the political strife that sometimes caught me up, those years were magical. The deep connection I felt was as much with the people as with the land, and I was overwhelmed by how much I received from those I had gone to help. Even though we didn't share much intellectually, our heart connection was, and still is, strong.

Then I fell in love — with an American woman who was on the island filming the reconstruction effort. She returned to the States but came back to share my one-room shack. As a gift to her, I poured a layer of concrete over the dirt floor and replaced the dim oil lamp with a brighter propane light. We lived together in the mountains for two years before moving to the sea.

On the coast, I found a job running the water sports department in a resort hotel, where I learned and taught windsurfing and scuba diving. The party atmosphere of the Caribbean was very different from our quiet life in the mountain village. We began to each go our own way until our relationship broke, and I was alone again ...except for a steady stream of tourist women. During the next four years, the inner light almost flickered out as I leapt jubilantly into sex, alcohol, and scuba diving. Then one morning, while I was riding my motorcycle across the island to go diving with humpback whales, a drunken farmer crashed his pickup into me. I was flown to Montreal, where the doctors in the Royal Victoria Hospital tried unsuccessfully to reattach my right foot, which had been ripped off in the crash. When I emerged from the hospital a year later with a prosthetic leg, I'd lost my dive business and could barely walk. My life in the Caribbean was over.

THE WORLD OF INTELLECT

It was hard to accept that my body was no longer what it had been, but rather than cling to what I'd lost, I focused on developing my mind instead. I decided to go back to school. I'd dropped out of the University of California at Berkeley when I was nineteen because I felt too restless to sit in a classroom. Rather than the nine-to-five office job I believed a university degree would lead to, I'd wanted a life of physical activity and adventure. Now at forty, I enrolled in McGill University to study biology and psychology. Studying science as a mature student was challenging and occasionally amusing. Sometimes, when I walked into a lecture hall on the first day of class, the other students would stop talking and sit up to attention . . . until I scrunched down into one of the desks among them. "Huh? He 's not the professor? What's this old fart doing here?" It was often a lonely life.

I immersed myself in the intellectual world like a dry sponge soaking up a flood of

new information. I'd always read on my own, but now I was studying in a directed and systematic way. I loved it at first, but slowly the academic approach began to pall, and by the time I graduated — with a fellowship to pursue a master's degree in biology — something vital was missing from my life. I felt as though I'd become a hollow shell filled with abstract facts and theories that seemed to have little connection to my heart or to my own actual experience. Once again I heard solitude calling and spent two months canoeing alone in northern Quebec. During that summer, the world came *alive* again. The sense of existing in a *living* universe was what had been missing in the university.

I decided against graduate school, worked for a year as a carpenter to earn money, and left for what I thought would be three months in Mexico. A year and a half later, after lingering in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico, and Argentinean Tierra del Fuego, I found myself sailing up the remote wild coast of southern Chile. It was astonishingly beautiful, and during the three-day ferry ride, I began to imagine an exciting project that braided together two apparently disconnected threads of my life: I would use the money from the academic fellowship I'd been awarded to carry out a biological study, while living alone for a year in that pristine coastal wilderness.

I made my way back to Canada and enrolled in the master's degree program at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, but the deeper I settled into graduate studies, the more I realized that biology was not my main interest. What I truly wanted to explore was the effect of deep wilderness solitude on a human being — in this case, on me. I would be both researcher and subject. I also wanted to examine my relationship with the nonhuman world and to learn how the direct experience of profound belonging in the universe might lead to changes in human behavior that would be less damaging to the Earth. I expected there to be resistance among conservative professors to this unorthodox approach, but I would risk it. I transferred to the Interdisciplinary Studies PhD program.

One of the most important, but often trivialized, tasks facing a new graduate student is selecting a research supervisor and supervisory committee. This is the group that will most directly support or hinder the PhD process. Especially when wishing to carry out nonconventional research, choosing individuals who are open-minded, ready for adventure, and with whom you can openly communicate is vital. I was very careful and selected such people. They were excited about my proposal to study myself as I lived for a year alone in the wilderness. But there were two strong caveats: they offered no additional funding, and they did not guarantee that I would actually be awarded a PhD for the adventure. I willingly accepted those conditions.

My relationship with the rest of the university was sometimes less positive. Mostly, I pursued my academic study on my own. I had friends among my peers, but no close associates. The faculty frequently treated me with amused tolerance rather than respect or disapproval. One professor told me I was too old for such a radical project, that such things were for younger people. I suspected his comment might apply to my graduate work in general. A fellow graduate student, who was also doing nontraditional research, said she was very glad I was in the department because my project made everyone else's seem fairly conventional.

I learned an important lesson at the university. Walls of resistance often turn into doorways if you lean steadily against them for a while. Once I was asked to give

advice to a group of new graduate students, and I suggested that they take as long as possible to earn their degree. At first their supervisory committee would find many reasons why their dissertation was not acceptable; eventually the committee would just want to get rid of them and would support damn near anything. Of course the quality of the work must be excellent when you step outside the usual framework.

PREPARING TO STEP OFF THE EDGE

In early 1998, I received an email out of the blue from Patti Kuchinsky, a woman I'd met briefly twelve years earlier while I was living in a Buddhist community in New Hampshire. The community had recently published an email list of everyone linked to it, and Patti decided to write to me. Over time we became intimate spiritual friends and partners. Actually, we have never been able to clearly define our relationship, since it is mysterious and continues to unfold. During the years of academic study and logistic preparations for my journey into solitude, Patti was an invaluable counselor, editor, and emotional support. Today, although she lives in Texas and I in Canada, we remain in close and intimate contact, and nearly every year, we go canoe camping and fishing together for two or three weeks.

In the summer of 2000, I met and fell passionately "in love" with Susan. This was definitely *not* on the list of things I needed to do to get ready for a year alone in the wilderness. Our relationship made no rational sense to either of us, but we neither could nor really wanted to break it off. This has been a somewhat frequent pattern in my life: I become infatuated with someone, and for a time desire overwhelms my thoughts and feelings.

As I began my trip preparations, I pored over maps of the Chilean and Canadian coasts and imagined myself hidden away in some remote inlet. To find complete solitude, I knew I would need to go to an inhospitable locale, probably far from the equator. From experience, I also knew I would need to be at least a hundred miles from the nearest town in order to feel fully disengaged from civilization.

I wanted to be on the coast for three reasons: I love the sea; winter temperatures wouldn't be as extreme as they would be inland; because of my prosthetic leg, I would need to transport supplies and haul firewood by water. Since I'd be using a small inflatable boat for transportation, I had to be in an area of protected waterways where storms would be less dangerous.

As I soon learned, human activity is frequent along the coast of British Columbia all the way from Vancouver to Alaska: bush planes, logging and mining, commercial and sport fishing, sailboats, cruise ships, and kayakers. If I wanted to experience absolute solitude, British Columbia's coast was not remote enough. While it would be much cheaper and easier to stay in Canada than to ship my gear and travel to southern Chile, I would likely be disappointed with myself for not making the extra effort. I focused my gaze southward on the area I had seen from the ferry, and in doing so, cast my fate literally and metaphorically to the wind (see map, Tip of South America, inside front cover). Punta Arenas, the only large town in southern Chile, and the administration center for the region, would be my staging point.

THE LOGISTICS OF SOLITUDE

The logistics of preparing to live for a year in the wilderness without coming out for supplies are daunting. In the fall of 1999, I started making lists of everything I would need to build a camp and survive, adding items I might need if things went bad, and then tossing in some treats for physical and emotional comfort. I don't usually plan far ahead when I travel, but this time I knew that if I waited until it was nearly time to go before making supply lists, I would almost certainly forget something important. There were lists on scraps of papers all over my office. (For the final list of everything I brought with me, see the Appendix, beginning on page 333.)

In September 2000, I began the actual trip preparations. I'd intended to be gone long before then, and although I didn't realize it, others were speculating I might never actually go. But that possibility didn't seriously cross my mind. I consolidated the scattered lists I'd made and grouped items into categories: tools, building materials, camping and fishing, boat and motor, household, clothes and toiletries, electric and electronic, repair kits, first-aid, food.

Gathered together, the lists seemed endless. On previous trips alone into the wilderness, I'd taken only a small amount of gear: canoe, plastic and tent, sleeping pad and bag, fishing gear and a few tools, food, grill, a couple of pots, clothes and rain gear, basic first-aid kit, and several books. This time, though, I was going high-tech — partly as the result of planning to stay for a complete year and survive winter in an extreme climate. A tent would not be enough. I would need to build a more substantial shelter, and I would need more than an ax and a canoe to cut and haul firewood. A second reason for the complexity of the lists was that I'd agreed I would send out a short email message each month to let the university, my family, and Patti know I was still alive. This required that I take not only a laptop computer and satellite telephone, but also the means to keep their batteries charged. These main items required many other associated tools and materials.

I also created an email code system. The default was code green. That indicated all was okay. I planned to email this code on the first of each month, and if they didn't receive a message by the third of the month, they would come looking for me. If I felt myself to be at risk — either because of injury or sickness, or because I was going on an extended overnight boat trip away from camp — I would send a code yellow and explain the circumstances. I would also specify a date by which I would email again. If they didn't hear from me on the specified day, they would come looking for me. If I felt my life was immediately at risk due to serious injury or illness, I would send a code red describing my condition and specifying the time I would send the next message. If they didn't receive word from me at the stated time, they would come to rescue me — or retrieve my corpse.

The regular first-of-the-month email was more for peace of mind than anything else. If I were to have a serious accident and not be able to send out a message, chances are I'd be dead before they realized I wasn't sending the check-in message.

I already owned most of the tools, fishing gear, and camping equipment I would need, and I managed to purchase nearly all the other equipment second-hand. One stern necessity was to obtain everything as cheaply as possible because I was financing the project primarily with money I'd saved by working as a teaching assistant. At the last minute, the university unexpectedly kicked in \$10,000.

During September, October, and November, I shopped, searched (rather

unsuccessfully) for detailed information on my destination, applied for a Chilean visa, obtained shots, and took care of all the other details a year-and-a-half absence requires. In October, my mother, whose body and mind had been deteriorating for several years, died, and I went to California to be with her during her last days. But I was moving too fast for her death to really hit me.

Packing and shipping my gear to southern Chile was a major task. I had stuff squirreled away everywhere inside and outside the house, but somehow I squeezed it all into two crates, each measuring about three by three by five feet. I took the crates to a transport company, labeled them with my name and the Chilean National Parks Service (CONAF) address in Punta Arenas at the other end of the world, and drove away wondering if I would ever see them again. I had no money to replace the gear should the crates go missing.

Obtaining permission from the Chilean government to spend a year alone on the remote southern coast was an interesting and, at times, nerve-wracking process. In early 2000, I sent in my application forms and waited — unconcerned since I still had almost a year until my proposed departure. As months passed, I sent emails; CONAF did not reply. Slowly I became concerned.

Finally, in November, I told my friend Juan-Pablo Cerda, who used to work for the Chilean government, that I was up against the wall. We did what we should have done much sooner: he called a friend. His friend knew someone who worked in the CONAF office in Punta Arenas, and he asked her to help me obtain the permissions I needed.

Alejandra Silva should be in charge of CONAF for all of Chile! She is friendly, helpful, reliable, and very efficient. She emailed information about the southern coast and pointed out that the climate is extremely inhospitable, but said that if I was willing to sign a notarized form releasing CONAF from responsibility for damage to my equipment and injury or death to me, they had no problem with my proposed project. Within three weeks I had their written permission in hand and rushed to the Chilean Consulate in Vancouver.

It's easy to obtain a three-month tourist visa and also easy to renew such a visa, but to do so you must leave Chile, cross into Argentina, Bolivia, or Peru, and reenter Chile. Since I would be alone in the wilderness for a year, that wouldn't work, so I applied for a one-year residency permit. By that point, I was starting to feel tense. I'd shipped the crates of gear and purchased a nonrefundable airline ticket with a departure date only five days hence — and I had no visa.

The consul told me it would take only three or four days to obtain the visa, but his bureaucratic assistant was less sanguine. He pronounced the consul an unrealistic optimist and said the process would require at least two weeks. This was not good news, and my stress level ratcheted up. I hustled back and told the consul what his assistant had said. He replied that the man had a gloomy outlook on life, and he assured me there would be no problem. Happily, he was right. Three days later, I picked up my visa, and two days after that, on December 15, I was on a plane to Santiago de Chile. By the time I reached the Vancouver airport after that frantic final month, I was whipped.

THE ROAD SOUTH

A week later, I awoke to rain and to the fact that I was on a bus headed south away from the sun and warmth of Santiago — into clouds, wind, and cold. What had I done? Why had I chosen to go to southern Chile, despite warnings about the extreme weather? As is usual for my life's larger decisions, I had no rational answer — just an inner call. The steward (a civilized feature of express buses in Chile) came by with a breakfast of sorts: cheese sandwich, stale pastry, and nasty instant coffee that I slurped through a straw as we lurched along.

The bus trip lasted two days and nights — a mixture of the ordinary, the strange, and the semiconscious. Since the Chilean coast is far too fractured to permit a road down the Pacific side of the Andes, we crossed into Argentina and followed the same route I'd hitchhiked four years before on my way to Tierra del Fuego (see map, Tip of South America, inside front cover). When I'd hitched, the trip had taken nine days. I'd carried a backpack, camped out, eaten wild blackberries while waiting for long hours beside the road, and gotten stuck for two days at the border crossing, until a long-haul trucker picked me up and carried me all the way.

This time, once my luggage was stowed, I didn't have a thing to worry about. I looked out the window or slept, and when it rained I was snug and dry. On and on, the bus rolled and dipped over the Patagonian grasslands — mile after endless mile of brown, green, gold, and silver, with occasional slashes of brilliant red or orange. And always the wind, which made me wonder about my own future on the sea, as I drifted deeper into South America and farther from my life in Canada.

FINAL PREPARATIONS

I arrived in Punta Arenas tired from the long ride but not too sore. A new stage in the journey was beginning, with new worries: Would the crates of gear arrive? How would I transport them 150 miles overland to Puerto Natales, a small town that is the departure point for boats traveling up the coast? (See map, Puerto Natales to Retreat Site, inside front cover.) How would I find a boat to take me from there into the wilds? Where would I build a camp? I'd solved so many problems already with the aid of helping hands, it seems like I'd have learned some faith. At a deep level I did have faith or else I wouldn't have begun the journey, but on the surface I fretted.

The next day, I registered with the police and applied for an ID card. While reviewing my paperwork, the officer frowned and said there was a serious problem. I began to review my past sins, with a mental nod to Interpol and the FBI, but wisely didn't confess them. He pointed out that the name on my passport was Frank R. Kull, but that my visa was made out for Frank Robert Kull. Serious stuff, indeed! Muttering to myself about the gloomy (and possibly malevolent) bureaucrat in Vancouver, I explained that in Canada we use middle name or initial more or less interchangeably. He didn't seem convinced, so I repeated the assertion several more times — always a good tactic, I find. He finally decided I wasn't trying to con him and said he would contact Santiago to correct the discrepancy. As far as I can tell, he never heard back.

Then I presented myself to CONAF. They were very friendly but regarded me with some skepticism; they just couldn't imagine why anyone would be lunatic enough to spend a year alone. I was soon given the nickname Gringo Loco. They also gave me some bad news. I chose December because I assumed summer in southern Chile

would be about the same as summer in northern British Columbia: warmish days and reasonably calm weather. Wrong. Summer down there is the windiest time of year, and I wouldn't be able to transport my gear in my small boat up the coast from Puerto Natales. CONAF said their ship could take me if I would pay \$1,000 USD for fuel. That was far beyond my budget, and it was the first major glitch in my plan. They suggested I talk with German Coronado, captain of their boat and the official in charge of several huge national parks along the coast. Maybe we could work out a deal.

The next morning, I bused to Natales to talk with German about transport and to ask his advice about where would be a good place to set up my camp. German spends most of his time in Puerto Eden, a tiny fishing village thirty hours by boat further north, and he knows the coast well. We spread the marine chart, and he pointed to a small bay at the very end of a remote inlet, hidden in the foothills of the Andes and about a hundred miles by boat northwest of Puerto Natales. He said no one ever goes there, so I decided I would.

German told me I could catch a ride with them for much less than \$1,000 if I was willing to wait until the end of January when they would make their regular patrol and pass within twenty-five miles of the inlet. I agreed; I was in no hurry now that I knew the weather would not get worse in the next couple of months. In any case, I still had to wait for my crates to arrive, and I needed to buy food, lumber, and other supplies that were too heavy to ship from Vancouver.

Punta Arenas is a nice place. The people are warm, open, and honest. From Vancouver, southern Chile seemed like the other side of nowhere, but after a while it felt like the center of the world. For the six weeks I was there, I rented a large room in a private home. I needed the space because by the time I was finally ready to go into solitude, I had a huge pile of supplies. Doña Mercedes, my landlady, was an excellent cook. She knew her own mind and wasn't afraid to speak it. Now and then, when her teetotaling son was out of the house, she'd sneak a quick glass of wine with me. I liked her a lot.

I'd already purchased a bunch of gear and supplies in Vancouver, but I continued to shop in Punta Arenas, finding, of course, plenty of nifty little items I hadn't thought about until I stumbled across them. I learned to always scan store windows as I walked by, since some held odd and fascinating collections of merchandise: an upscale women's clothing boutique displayed one small shelf of power tools; an auto parts center also sold homemade jam and watercolor paintings. Most of the things I needed were relatively easy to find, but some items eluded me. I never did find stovepipe to fit the wood-burning stove I'd shipped from Vancouver, and I had to have it custom-built.

My crates were supposed to arrive in Punta Arenas about the same time I did at the end of December, but they didn't. After anxiously checking at the port every few days to see whether anyone knew anything about them, I finally found the crates sitting on a dock in Valparaiso, far to the north. They took two more weeks to make their way south.

Eventually, CONAF told me German Coronado and their boat would not be traveling upcoast anytime soon. Another ride I tried to set up also fell through, and the uncertainty of the endlessly shifting situation was nerve-wracking. I tried to relax and just go with it, but over and over I got caught in my expectations of how I wanted things to be and how I thought they should be. I was almost ready to go, and I still had

no idea how I might eventually make my way upcoast with all my gear. But I believed something would work out.

LAST EMAIL FROM TOWN

FEBRUARY 4, 2001, PUERTO NATALES

It's been an intense two days. Yesterday in Punta Arenas I went to the government warehouse to complete the paperwork so I could claim my crates of gear, which finally arrived from Valparaiso last week. The Regional Director of Customs thought my project interesting and signed a waiver that allowed me to import the gear without paying duty — as long as I take everything with me when I leave Chile. The whole process, including storage fees, cost only \$25 USD. That was good news, since I'd heard rumors that some visiting scientists had been charged high import duty on their equipment.

Earlier in the week, the Chilean Navy had finally agreed to take me to the bay where I intend to build my camp, but yesterday when I met with the officers, I discovered they aren't willing to take me all the way. The area is so remote, marine charts don't show depth soundings, and they're concerned their ship might run aground on submerged rock. They'll leave me and my gear on a beach fourteen miles north of the bay, and I'll need to haul everything the rest of the way myself. The officers were polite, proper, and friendly. They feel responsible for my safety and want to be on my monthly check-in email list. They have a twenty-four-hour hotline I can call on my satellite phone if I get into serious trouble. It feels good to have a safety net.

The transport truck I'd hired to haul my stuff to Puerto Natales showed up on time and we went to the customs shed to pick up the crates of gear. I expected a hang-up of some sort, but amazingly everything proceeded without a hitch. Then we went back to my place and began to load. By the time the lumber, hardware, and food, etc., were in the truck it was crammed full. We agreed that he'd pick me up at 8 this morning for the trip to Natales.

Shortly after the driver left, a woman from CONAF called to say she had captured two kittens from the back patio for me. I hadn't planned to take a pet into solitude, since one of the joys of living alone is being free to follow the flow of the moment without considering the needs and desires of anyone else. I don't claim this freedom is good or bad, only that in taking a cat the situation is altered.

CONAF strongly suggested I take a cat if I intend to eat shellfish. Southern Chile is troubled by frequent red tide that makes bivalves, such as clams and mussels, poisonous. The government has an extensive testing program for the commercial fishing fleet, but local people use cats as guinea pigs. If the cat pukes or dies after sampling suspect shellfish, they don't eat it themselves. I would need to do the same.

Exhausted, I headed back downtown on foot. The two kittens — wild, even savage — were loose in the woman's office. No one had spent time holding them, and they weren't eager to alter the arrangement. With difficulty, I captured one, a female who definitely did not want to go into the box. She snarled, clawed, and bit me. Then I snagged the other, a male. Hmm. In a year, this could lead to a bunch more cats. As I sat there considering, the female was still snarling inside the box and fighting to get

out. I decided that if she really didn't want to go, I wouldn't force her. So now I have just the male.

The truck picked us up at 8:30 this rainy windy morning. The kitten didn't seem to like the drive and cried most of the way. We were heavily overloaded, and at one point the truck started to swerve back and forth across the road. It got worse and worse, and then the driver touched the brakes. I thought we would flip, and yelled, "No brakes, no brakes," and he finally got the truck under control.

Here in Natales two navy enlisted guys helped us unload. Then the driver and I went to the hardware store. Over the phone yesterday the store owner said I could pick up the two 55-gallon drums they were holding for me today, Sunday, even though they would be closed: the owner lives next to the store and would open up for me. But when I knocked, there was no answer. "Uhoh," I thought, "this is where things start to fall apart." But the door finally opened and I purchased the drums (plus more nails, even though I think I already had plenty).

The manager of the propane company in P.A. had assured me I could pick up the three tanks he'd reserved for me in Natales at any time, but the propane station was locked when we arrived. The woman next door told me the manager was out of town. "Uh-huh, *here's* where things fall apart." But just then, amazingly, the assistant manager drove up.

"Yes, we have your tanks. Lucky you caught me. I'm about to go fishing." We loaded the propane and went to the gas station to fill the 55-gallon drums and six 5-gallon cans. Then back to the docks.

Over and over when I've tried to arrange things ahead of time I've had to either give up or have watched my plans fall apart. But over and over, too, things have worked out at the last minute in unexpected ways. Why do I still resist living by faith? I'm seriously stressing myself and it doesn't seem to do much good. But perhaps the last-minute miracles won't happen if I stop the preparatory work.

By then, four navy guys were working and had most of my gear on board their ship. We unpacked and inflated my boat, then loaded it, the gas drums, and propane tanks. It was very windy all day, but the rain held off until we finished. It still seems incredible that everything worked out and I'm ready to go. The crew offered me a cup of coffee, which turned out to be a huge steak dinner. They asked if I wanted to sleep on board, but with the kitten and my exhaustion I opted for a pension in town.

It's now after 10 PM and I've come to this internet café to send this last email before leaving for solitude at dawn tomorrow morning. Finally, it looks like preparations have completed themselves and I'm away. It's been a long haul and I'm worn out — ready to sit in my cabin and rest. All I need do first is ferry my gear from where the navy drops me to the bay and build the cabin. With luck it will take about three weeks. As it stands, this may be the last news you receive from me until next year — other than the brief monthly check-in emails — but it's also possible that I'll send reports of my life from time to time. I'll let things unfold as they do. I hope you all have a wonderful year in your different lives. Take good care. Thanks so much for your support and caring. It means a lot to me. — Bob