On a $500 million man-made island in the frozen Arctic Ocean, just off the coast of a vast, uninhabitable tundra known as Alaska’s North Slope, a pipeline begins. In temperatures that hover around forty-five degrees below zero, in perpetual darkness, a tight-knit band of roughnecks spends twelve hours a day, seven days a week, drilling down, down into the earth and pulling up precious crude. If you want to know how badly we need oil, here is your answer.
TooDogs is on the run. “Catch me later,” he’ll say each time I approach, and then he disappears for a day. There are not a lot of places to hide. This is a six-acre island, 250 miles above the Arctic Circle, a few miles off the shore of Alaska in the Beaufort Sea—nothing but white ice, ghostly steam, cold steel. The temperature outside is thirty-eight degrees below zero, and now the wind is kicking up.

“Hey!” I say, finding TooDogs upstairs in the camp smoke room, where he’s leaning, peering out a window. Outside, snow blows horizontally, a curtain of weather obscuring his rig, “Nabors 19AC,” standing tall on the other side of the island. It’s a royal blue and yellow tower, platforms and blocks of machinery stacked high over the hole where the drill enters the ocean floor. TooDogs, the “toolpusher,” built the rig. A toolpusher is a guy who builds a rig, runs the drilling operation. I’m not yet sure how he earned the rig name TooDogs. Some say it’s because he can get as angry as two dogs fighting; some say it’s because he’s part Blackfeet Indian and there’s an old joke about a boy of similar origin named “Two Dogs Fucking.” (He spells it TooDogs, not TwoDogs, because, he says, “that looks like shit.”)

Not everyone here has a rig name. Having a rig name is neither a sign of notoriety nor longevity nor respect. Some guys, like Turtle and Kung Fu and Brain and TooDogs, are simply destined.

“You hear that?” TooDogs says, leaning his head toward the window. “Brrr. Brrr. That’s torque.”

He’s a burly guy, a weeble that wobbles but won’t fall down, at first glance kind of a clone of so many others here: mustache, wire-rimmed glasses, cap, Carhartt coveralls, sweet little slippers. No boots are allowed inside camp. About ninety people live out here on the ice, in a snug set of frozen trailers holding glorious heat, and fresh food that’s trucked in over the ice roads once a week, and two beds to a room, and stalls of clean showers.

“You know what time is for?” TooDogs asks me.

“What it’s for?” I ask.

“It’s to keep everything from happening all at once,” he says.

I look at him, nod politely. He drags hard on his cigarette.

“Can you imagine the alternative?” he says, and for the first time I notice that his eyes are a deep steel blue, there is a white scar snaking between them, and the saying on his cap reads: hunt hard…in alaska. He makes his eyes big, and his face gets red, and the scar appears whiter. “The alternative?” he says. “BOOM!”

Now I’m staring at him, and he’s staring back. “What?” he says.

“I guess I never thought of it that way,” I say. “It’s something to remember when your stuff gets cluttered,” he says. “You know, when the stuff in your head gets cluttered?”

He says his stuff has been pretty cluttered this hitch. A tangle of thoughts—family, money, work—clogging up his mind.
He says it’s no big deal. It’s all workable. “Sometimes I think my give-a-shit spring is about to bust.”

He looks out the window, listens again to the torque, the growl of motors trying to spin the drill bit through rock. “The hole’s talking to us. It’s tight. Tight. Brrr. Brrr.”

I suggest he take me over there, tour me around, and show me what’s going on. No one goes to the rig without TooDogs’ permission. “I’ve been asking for days,” I point out.

“Maybe tomorrow,” he says, and he tells me he has to get going, says good-bye, and heads out of the smoke room. I follow him, three steps behind, as has become our odd dance.

He has lived here, on and off, for two years, ever since the island was built. How do you build an island to put an oil rig on? You wait until the ocean freezes. You can’t dig water, but you can dig ice. You dig to the bottom and excavate a foundation, about eleven acres in all. You find a source of gravel—in this case, a pit ten miles away—because you need a lot of it. Crews built ice roads and started hauling. They kept hauling, 20,000 truckloads, traveling a total of 400,000 miles, the equivalent of about sixteen trips around the world. They had to hurry. They had to get it all done before the ice roads melted. They dumped gravel, dumped and dumped, sculpted a six-acre rectangle out of it, then got to work on a retaining wall: more gravel—8,000 sacks of it weighing 13,000 pounds each—one on top of the other, bam, bam, bam, a barrier to fight back the summer sea. They had to hurry. They had to connect the island to shore, six miles away. They dug a trench, a crazy-long trench, in which a subsea flow line would carry oil. It cost $500 million to build this island, not to mention the brawn of constantly revolving crews of as many as 600 people working in temperatures cold enough to kill.

I have listened to engineers explain all this, and overall it has been hard not to look at them and think: My Lord, we need oil.

For his part, TooDogs is not overly impressed. “A rig is a rig,” he says.

I am still three steps behind. I have learned it is the only way to keep his attention, or what little of it he offers.

He has toured me around certain areas of the camp this way, pretending I’m not here. I have to clean my room and you have to clean your room,” TooDogs says. “I am going to my room, and I am going to shut my door.”

“I was asking for days,” I point out. “I knew that.”

“Shut up,” he says.

“I am still asking. I am still three steps behind, as has become our odd dance. I have learned it is the only way to keep his attention, or what little of it he offers.”

We zoom down the stairway, squeaky clean and beige like so much of this place. On the whole, the camp has the cozy feel of a college dorm, or perhaps the too cozy feel of a submarine; the extreme temperatures make the outdoors nearly as inaccessible as the deep sea. You have to pile on about twenty pounds of gear just to walk over to the rig, about half a football field away.

We head toward the dining hall. We pass the sound of a fiddle playing “Come All Ye Young and Tender Maidens,” spilling from behind the bedroom door of the man they call Kung Fu. Some people like the music, some complain it sounds like a dying cat, but nearly all appreciate the calming effect the fiddle playing has had on Kung Fu.

TooDogs quickens his pace. There is a sneaky quality to his walk, a slinking. I ask him how old he is. “Just turned 50,” he says.

I applaud him for answering a question so directly. “That was really good!”

“Shut up,” he says.

“Did you know Jason is not married to a black stripper named Onyx?” Turtle says, “and he does not have a pole in his garage for her to practice dancing with?”

“You know what? He had me believing that for an entire year,” Turtle says. “A year! I hate him. I don’t know why I’m even friends with him.”

“Go clean your room,” TooDogs says.

“It sucks being young,” Turtle says.

“I am going to bed now,” TooDogs says.

“I am going to my room, and I am going to shut my door.”

The island is named Ooguruk, an Inupiaq word meaning “bearded seal,” an animal plentiful on the shores of Alaska’s North Slope. The Slope is where the Trans-Alaska Pipeline starts, where the crude gets pumped up from more than a mile inside the earth, then gets sent on the 800-mile journey south to Valdez, Alaska, where the pipeline ends and tankers come and load the crude up and deliver it down the coast. There, in places like northern Washington and Long Beach, California, it gets processed into the fuel America now so grudgingly remembers makes the world go round.

People have known for thousands of years that oil was abundant on Alaska’s North Slope, a vast tundra, flat and treeless, on and on and on, from the foothills of the Brooks Mountain Range to the Arctic...
The Operation

All This, for Oil

Long gone are the days when oil gushed from the ground, Old Faithful-style, at the tap of a shovel. Now, in places like Alaska’s North Slope, industrial drills often have to dig deep, dividing thousands of feet through ice and rock to access the product. Here, a look at how it all works.—RAH A NADDAF

Equipment

1. DER RICK
A 180-foot-high structure that holds the drill and hoists ninety-foot sections of pipe, called “stands.”

2. RIG
Three-million-pound platform that contains all the drilling equipment, including the derrick, drill, tanks, and crew. Once the drilling is complete on one well, the entire apparatus can be moved to the next.

3. WELL
A deep and narrow hole (sixteen inches in diameter at its widest) that extends into the oil reservoir. It can take thirty to one hundred days to drill a well, and the Oooguruk wells are expected to produce oil for twenty to twenty-five years. A total of forty wells will be built there and will, at their peak, produce an estimated 20,000 barrels of oil a day.

Drilling

4. DRILL STRING
Contains Measurements While Drilling (MWD) tools that read surrounding rock formations and send data to the company man in the rig who monitors the drilling. When a drill gets stuck, pistons on the drill string called “jars” exert 300,000 pounds of force to free the bit.

5. DRILL BIT
The tip of the drill. Chews through rock by spinning clockwise anywhere from 80 to 180 RPMs.

6. MUD
Provides lubrication for the drill. “Mud” flows through the drill and out the drill bit, flushing rock called “cuttings” out of the well. The cuttings are examined to determine the condition of the surrounding rock.

Extraction

7. CASING
Once the drill reaches the oil reservoir, it is removed, and concrete pipes called “casing” are placed into the well to prevent it from collapsing.

8. TUBING
Once the casing is in place, small three-inch-wide pipes called “tubing” are placed into the well. This is what the oil will flow through.

9. CHRISTMAS TREE
A structure that seals the well and contains valves that gauge oil flow. The Christmas tree connects the well to external pipes that eventually connect to the flow line.

10. FLOW LINE
This 5.7-mile bundle of pipes allows oil to travel underwater from Oooguruk to the main facilities onshore. From there, the oil can be refined (gas and water are removed) and then travels 800 miles through the Trans-Alaska Pipeline to Valdez.

Ocean, an endless, unchanging landscape bigger than Idaho. For centuries native Eskimos cut blocks of oil-soaked tundra from natural seeps to use as fuel. In the 1920s, explorers arrived and began poking holes. In 1968 they discovered Prudhoe Bay State No. 1, the largest oil field in North America and one of the largest in the world, and a year later the adjacent Kuparuk field, the second-largest. Today, five of our ten largest oil fields are on Alaska’s North Slope, where twenty-four separate fields pump out about 16 percent of our total domestic oil supply.

A person can’t just drive around the North Slope, visit the locals, stop in at a burger joint. There are no locals, no burger joints, no houses, no cities, no churches. The gateway to the oil fields is the town of Deadhorse, where the airport is, and where security restricts passage to anyone but workers who fly in and get bused to camps for two-week hitches. It took nearly a year for me to gain access to the Slope. The corporate giants who control the fields—BP, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil—have little to gain from public scrutiny. Rarely do stories of Alaska’s oil emerge unless there is a freak accident to talk about—the odd spill, usually set against a snowy backdrop featuring a winsome caribou looking dismayed about the greedy nature of the human race. But Pioneer Natural Resources—the company that built the island, where TooDogs is in charge of the rig and Kung Fu plays the fiddle and Turtle fake-hates Jason for lying to him about being married to a stripper named Onyx—was willing to allow me in. Pioneer is the first independent operator to produce oil on the Slope, a market cornered by the three majors for its entire history. In many ways, it represents a glimmer of hope. Everyone knows the oil up here is running out; production is declining 6 percent a year, down from an all-time high of 2 million barrels a day in 1988 to 700,000 today. But everyone also knows the oil isn’t really running out—it’s just a lot harder to get to. It is a common story in the saga of natural resources, whether you are talking coal or gas or oil: The big companies suck out the easy, vast reservoires, and then in come the little companies nimble enough to pick away at the leftovers.

The ongoing debate over whether or not we should be drilling for oil in Alaska—onward to ANWR to the east—typically leaves out one factor: We are drilling for oil in Alaska, every hour of every day for the past thirty years, drilling in some of the most extreme conditions on earth, where the wind chill can easily reach minus ninety-eight degrees, so cold that you have to leave your pickup running twenty-four hours a day or you’ll never get it started again, where it is pitch dark for nearly two months each
winter, where people live without families, without homes, without access to so much of what most of us think of when we think of what it means to be human.

Who are these people, and how do they get the oil out of the ground? It seems, on its face, an embarrassingly simple question, and maybe that’s the point. Crude. Petroleum. We process it into gasoline, asphalt, plastic, fertilizer. We fill up our cars with it, drive on roads made of it. We use it to make all those soda bottles and all those Baggies holding our lunches, the foam in our mattresses, the padding in our running shoes. The vegetables we eat are fed with and protected from bugs by it. We travel because of it, drink out of it, sleep on it, wear it, eat it, whine about how much it costs, argue about it, hate needing it, love it, kill for it. It is our most ubiquitous natural resource, the juice that made the past century possible. How we get it in the first place would seem to be a fundamental building block in our understanding of what it means to be a modern human. And yet here is an industry and a culture that is as alien to most of us as the moon.

I visited the North Slope twice, once in summer and then again in February, when I settled in for a two-week hitch. The temperature, on the day I landed in Deadhorse in February, was forty-five degrees below zero. I worried about what that might feel like, wondered if the clothing I’d been provided—thick overalls, massive parka, enormous gloves and boots—would really do the trick. I geared up and felt like an astronaut. I bounced out of the plane, squinted as if preparing for a punch. I felt nothing of the sort. For the first three or four seconds, cold is just...cold. Nothing spectacular at all. Then my glasses seemed to freeze to my face, and I took a breath and felt a sting in my lungs that might have been instant ice but probably wasn’t. Within minutes, my cheeks, chin, and nose began to ache, first the skin, and then...muscle? I had no other way of understanding that weird sort of ache. Soon I learned to aim the hood of my parka, lean my head so the fur trim would catch the wind and steer it away. Every little bit helped. I started admiring animals with very bushy fur.

Deadhorse is a place that greets you with the emblematic architecture of the Slope. Nothing is lovely, nothing is charming, nothing is intended for anything other than hard use. Modular corrugated-steel Conex boxes serve as office buildings, machine shops, a hotel, and a general store decorated outside with a cartoon drawing of a dying horse with its tongue hanging out.

The two-hour bus ride to Oooguruk, over the ice roads, was a visit to a postapocalyptic world, an endless industrial landscape without the humanizing effect of pedestrians. We saw a musk ox. The heater on the bus barely worked, and so the guys huddled into their parkas and shivered but did not complain. Oooguruk is six miles off the coast, and so by the time we drove into camp, there were no signs of other rigs, other camps. No neighbors at all.

Bedrooms were overbooked, I was told, so my bunk would be in an “overflow area.” Aaron, a welcoming guy on the operations team, offered to escort me there, led me through camp and out the back door, which opened to a polar bear cage.

“Um,” I said, standing in the cage. I knew about the polar bear cages. They’re placed around camp. They’re for people, not bears. You see a bear, you blow a horn and jump in the cage. Why was it necessary for Aaron to bring me into a polar bear cage?

“Follow me,” he said, unhitching the thick metal latch, and we went out the other side of the cage into the frozen night.

“So my room isn’t attached to camp?”

“Oh, a lot of guys stay out here,” he said.

We hurried down a narrow pathway of crunching snow, toward a long building resembling a boxcar that had a series of freezer doors with numbers spray painted on them. He gave the door marked 305 a shove, and it opened just fine. There was warmth inside, plenty of warmth, and a fluorescent light over a bed with a sheet and a blanket. No sink, no bathroom—all of that was back at camp. Aaron said he’d try to scare up a two-way radio for me to keep in here, in case I got stuck. He said sometimes the snow blows and piles higher than the door, and if that happened, he would come and dig me out.

“Now, guys are going to mess with you and tell you you’re sleeping in a bait box,” Aaron said. “Because you’re sort of polar bear bait out here? But look, the bears are out hunting seals this time of year, up where the ice is broke, so it won’t be a problem. And really, it’s a lot quieter out here. Very peaceful.”

Then he left. I stood there. I stood there and tapped my foot. The room smelled strongly of Lysol. There was an extra can of it provided on a shelf. There was a window with a blue blanket covering it, nailed in place. There was nothing else, just a new kind of aloneness. I’ve known silence before, and I’ve known solitude, but nothing quite like this. It was the kind of alone maybe a monk feels, or someone in solitary confinement? No, that wasn’t quite it either. I stood there utterly cut off, a person in a tiny bubble of warmth, out on the ice, beyond tundra, beyond good sense, a freezer door away from a solid white wilderness, a place I figured even God forgot.

Aaron was right about the peace, right about the quiet, right about the bears not showing up, but it was all that he didn’t say that kept me guessing. All that no one on Oooguruk ever seemed to say: This is ridiculous. Was life out here not an absurdly desperate way to make a living?

For days I would try to sympathize, try to get at how these people survived the cold, the remoteness, the working conditions, the time away from home. I suppose I was prepared to pity them. I wanted to understand how they’d gotten themselves into this mess.

I was getting nowhere; I couldn’t seem to phrase my question in a way that made sense to anyone.
Impressions:

I’ve known silence before, and I’ve known solitude, but nothing quite like this. I stood there utterly cut off, a person in a tiny bubble of warmth, out on the ice, beyond tundra, beyond good sense, a freezer door away from a solid white wilderness, a place I figured even God forgot.
are completed, the picture would be a spiderweb of looping wells.

Stubbs, who works downstairs in the mud pits, comes into the doghouse to ask a question about the torque. “Something’s really fucked-up with the number one pump,” he says. “You seeing that?”

“We’re seeing it,” Rod says. “We’re feeling your pain.”

Stubbs is a thin man in his fifties who moves as if life has offered nothing but wear and tear. He removes his hard hat to scratch an itch, and I notice that he has, oddly enough, the same brassy orange hair the kid called Turtle had. I notice, too, that Jason, the welder, has the same color hair. There is something going on here with hair.

“I think we lost a blower on the number one pump,” TooDogs says to Rod. “I think it’s the blower.”

“Well, it’s down,” Rod says. “We can’t do shit without circulation.”

The two are staring up at the monitors in the doghouse, sitting on a cushioned bench. Turtle has mysteriously appeared.

“Turtle?” says TooDogs, summoning the young roustabout over to the throne upon which he sits. “Turtle, I have a question.”

“What’s up?” Turtle answers.

“Come closer,” TooDogs says.

“Closer.”

Soon the two are nose to nose and TooDogs speaks. “Why-are-you-here?”

“I wanted to hear what you guys were talking about,” Turtle says.

“You don’t get to do that,” TooDogs says. “You’re supposed to work; Turtle.”

On some rigs, a lowly roustabout would never speak to the toolpusher, let alone the mighty company man, but this rig is different. Some old guys learn to break the cycle of abuse, while others don’t. It happens in all walks of life.

The Slope operates on a twenty-four-hour clock, 365 days a year—Christmas Day, New Year’s Day, every hour of every day, there is never a moment oil isn’t being taken out of the earth. The typical shift is two weeks on, two weeks off, although many people stay considerably longer than that, earning bragging rights and more money than they can figure out how to spend. A kid like Turtle just starting out as a roustabout can easily pull in nearly seventy grand. “That’s stupid money for a kid right out of high school,” Turtle tells me. “That’s insane, (continued on page 288)
stupid money.” For a while, he thought he’d work a few years, save everything, and pay cash for college. But then he started buying motorcycles. And computers. And just anything he felt like. And now he looks at his dad, a Slope toolpusher making 250 grand, and he thinks, Forget college. His dad has a house in Florida, has a giant hot tub connected to his pool, custom built in the shape of Mickey Mouse’s head. “It’s awesome,” Turtle says. “It’s the best overspent project ever.”

I meet a 23-year-old electrician who brags of having no high school diploma and who last year earned $140,000. Charlie, the guy who builds the ice roads, once stayed on the Slope for seven months straight, and, legend has it, saved every check, went home to Fairbanks, and bought a new house. With cash. The trick for a lot of guys who work here is to figure out how to go home and not spend all their money on booze.

There is no alcohol allowed anywhere on the Slope. A person getting caught with it will be run off for life, no questions asked, no second chances. When an oil-field worker boards the plane in Deadhorse to go home, he will more than likely order as many drinks as the flight attendant permits. Many of the younger guys I meet say they don’t stop drinking for two weeks, until it’s time to get back on the plane for the Slope. Many of the older guys I meet have spectacular addictions and recovery stories they try in vain to impart on the younger guys.

After their twelve-hour shifts, most of the people on Oooguruk eat and go to bed. “There-is-no-where-to-go,” they keep pointing out. They’re tired. The company had a pool table in the camp for a while but tossed it after no one used it. I never see anyone in the movie theater. I learn of parties, such as they are. Guys gather in the dining hall for ice cream, or chocolate chip cookies they nuke for twelve seconds. I learn of the roughnecks gathering in Jason’s room to apply hair dye one night—“Sandstone,” by Redken—a stunt to terrorize Melvis, the guy who parades around with suspiciously perfect highlighted hair. (Melvis thought the breakthrough of orange hair on the crew was a compliment. TooDogs had to tell him, “Dude, they’re making fun of you.”)

It’s home, in a way. For a lot of guys, real home is harder than this one. I hear this story over and over again. Somewhere along the line, an endless loop of anguish sets in: “The Slope is an escape that many speak of longing to escape from, only to discover they need to escape back to it.”

It is certainly not the case for everyone. There are plenty I meet who are building satisfying careers here—engineers and geologists, medics and computer technicians, people who speak of learning to branch their lives into manageable two-week chunks. But it’s the people on the front line, the roughnecks working the rig, who command the most notice. (Nearly all the people on Oooguruk are subcontracted by other companies. The roughnecks work for Nabors Alaska Drilling.) Roughneck is a specific term for a job on the rig crew, one rung up from roustabout, but also a generic term used for anyone who survives the job and graduates to pit watcher, derrick hand, driller, toolpusher, company man. In the same way a general will always think of himself as a grunt, a roughneck is a roughneck no matter how high he climbs in the hierarchy of a rig. “It’s the same anywhere you go on the Slope,” a guy on the construction crew tells me. “The roughnecks think they’re the shit. They parade around like this whole place is about them. We put up with it because they’re the ones getting the oil. If they don’t get the oil, we all go broke.” Perhaps, then, there is a kind of indulgence; roughnecks are allowed to be, maybe even expected to be, eccentric and tough: in and out of prison, Harley guys, hard-hunting guys, men who strut their badass selves for all to fear. Of course, there is also the need for a certain amount of guts.

A rig is an unforgiving iron tower, rife with peril: Stuff turns, fingers get lopped off, arms, a couple of years ago a leg. That was over on “Nabors 14E,” where TooDogs was working midnight. Tim, a roustabout, couldn’t see through the steam in the pit room that night, couldn’t see where he stepped: into an auger that sucked him in. TooDogs reached, grabbed, but it was too late. Both legs sucked in, the guy up to his hips in the machinery, screaming, not knowing his left leg was already cut off, the right wrapped around the auger shaft. It took rescuers seven hours to cut him out. TooDogs held him. Gently wiping his forehead, talking to him the whole time like any dad would talk. They stuck a stick in his mouth for the final cut, flew him off out of there to the hospital, 800 miles away in Anchorage.

A stuck drill is no way to start a hitch. Rod just came in yesterday, and he’s getting a bad feeling about this well. “ODS K 33,” also known simply as 33. It costs anywhere from $5 million to $20 million to drill a single well, more if you get stuck for any length of time—it costs at least a quarter million a day to run the operation—and considerably more still if you get so stuck you have to give up and cement off, leaving $3 million worth of equipment on the drill string behind. At this point, the bit has reached 8,491 feet, a measurement indicating distance but not necessarily depth. It’s moving—or it was moving—at about a sixty-eight-degree angle through the earth, headed toward oil, or so everyone hoped. The challenge in drilling is that so very much of it is a matter of blind faith. The tools the toolpusher sticks down the hole send signals up, information about pressure and torque and weight, all of which gets translated into numbers on computer screens, which TooDogs and Rod and the engineers back in Anchorage look at as they rub their chins and fret. The whole invisible journey is guided by nothing but a joystick.

“The hole’s real ratty,” Rod says to TooDogs over in the doghouse. “I’d like to backream and run a nutwet sweep, is what I’d like.”

“Getting in and out, that’s what we gotta worry about now,” TooDogs says.

“You mean on the backreaming?”

“This hole has seen eleven-pound mud.”

“Everything above us has seen a 10.7. It’s already swollen in.”

“We’ll know that when we go back in and get the wiper out of there.”

“Bottom line, right now we don’t know shit,” Rod says.

“Can’t do shit without circulation,” TooDogs says.

“We’re stuck.”

You can’t drill without circulation. Think of, well, sex without lubrication. So much of drilling seems borrowed from sex, although no one ever says it. In all its phallic glory, the drill enters the earth, spinning clockwise. It squirts “mud” as it goes. The mud comes out of the middle of the drilling assembly and out into the hole—or “well bore”—the drill makes, and then back up to surface. The mud, a carefully concocted mixture of water and gels, is the key to just about everything. Not only does it provide lubrication for the drill, but it sends the rock you’re chewing—the “cuttings”—floating up and out of the hole. Also, the mud provides pressure, keeping the well from collapsing. Think of diving into the ocean: The deeper you go, the more the ocean pushes you up. The earth works the same way; the deeper you go, the more forceful the pressure. To keep burrowing deeper, drillers increase mud weight, forcing the hole to stay open. It is a delicate balancing act. If the mud weight is too heavy, they’ll bust open the wall of the well bore and get a blowout. A blowout is when the well explodes, often taking human bodies and usually the rig with it.

“Basically, you’re trying to fool Mother Nature” is the way one guy explains drilling to me. “You’re trying to get in her, and she’s trying to push you out. You keep her open with your mud, and you ream deeper.”

He draws me a picture. He never once makes the joke. Not so much as a wink. After more talking and fretting and coming back to the same point—you can’t do shit without circulation—TooDogs comes over to me. “Okay,” he says. “Put your stuff on, because I’m taking you back over to camp.” I tell him I don’t want to leave.

“We’re fixing to start jarring. You can’t be here when we’re jarring. Now! Let’s go.”

I put on my parka, head down the rig stairs with TooDogs, whose big, blocky body is so nimble on these steps. He leads me quickly across the yard; we go through a polar bear net and run into the mudroom. “Stay!” he says. His face is red, and his scarf is getting white, so I know he’s serious. I put on my slippers and head to the
dining hall and eat some surprisingly fresh shrimp salad, feel surprisingly depressed about getting run off the rig. It's hard to leave that place, hard to miss out on the unfolding mystery of what the earth is hiding.

Soon, a distant BOOM! explodes from over on the rig, followed by a BOOM! You can hear it all the way over here in camp. Jar-ring involves hydraulic pistons deep inside the earth, tools in place on the drill string to help a driller get unstuck. BOOM! And thirty seconds later, BOOM! One hundred thousand pounds of drill pipe pulled up and then let loose. BOOM! Jar-ring is full of violence, the derrick shaking and moaning after each BOOM. I head to the smoke room, where the view is better, and wait an hour for the guys to come back, to tell me about their success jarring, their success beating Mother Nature at her foolish game of “No!” BOOM! I wait two more hours in the TV room, then back to the dining hall, the smoke room. There are only so many places to go. After four hours, I give up and go back to my bait box and try to sleep. BOOM! BOOM! All night long.

It bothers me that no one here states the obvious. No one says, “Isn’t this kind of like sex with a girl who won’t put out?” In the same way, no one here talks about the living conditions, the crazy remoteness of the island, the cold. How can the temperatures not be a constant topic of conversation? How can “Jesus H. Christ, it’s COLD” not be a daily exclamation?

In the morning, I step out to greet a windless dawn. The cold is not a slap so much as a squeeze. The rig is quiet now, a hush of exhaustion. I look out into a white sea rolling on and on to the horizon, all frozen humps. I think about the moment the ocean froze, having simply stopped moving midwave. I think about limitation, surrendering to all that can never be. Soon the sky welcomes the sun, briefly cracks open with fierce stripes of crimson red. The world, as far as the eye can see, turns pink. I think about the loneliness out here, acute and so thick I feel I could slice it and it would bleed all over the place.

TooDogs loves his wife severely. We’re soul mates. We dream together. Sometimes. Not lately. He thinks of her as his anchor, and as the angel who saved his life. Actually, techni-cally, the angel came to her and told her: “He is going to die.” She reported this to him.

In those early days, when he was still in his twenties, he reunited with his own father, Ray, his namesake, who had taken off when he was a kid. They even worked on the same rig together for a little while. They were just starting to gel as adults. It was a chance to get some answers maybe, to understand some of the bad shit that left him with himives. Maybe his dad saw what was going on back then. But by now his dad was deep into alcohol and drugs. One day, TooDogs got a call. “I’m at the end of my rope,” his dad said. TooDogs tried to get over there, but it was too late. I found him. Oh yeah. You open the door and you feel life go through you. I knew he was gone. I mean, like, hair standing on end. I felt my hair blowing back. His spirit was bouncing around in there pretty severely. I found him in the bedroom. Shot himself right through the head. So.

TooDogs started running pretty hard after that. The Slope was safe. To him, it was, and is, one of the best lives a guy could have. Things break, you fix them. It’s all hands on. It’s all workable. Being married is hard. All the touchy-feely. Way hard. I can love, but I have to work at it real hard. Because love is a touching deal. The kind of love on a rig is eas-ier. He thinks he’s probably a better father to the roughnecks than he is to his own kids. I regret leading a double life. I do regret that. You open the door and you feel life go through you. I knew he was gone. I mean, like, hair standing on end. I felt my hair blowing back. His spirit was bouncing around in there pretty severely. I found him in the bedroom. Shot himself right through the head. So.

He is working on being touched, but re-ally, he’s not optimistic. He didn’t use health insurance to pay for detox. He figured it wouldn’t stick if someone else paid for it. He drained his retirement ac-count, like $100,000, all of it in hundreds, put it in Baggies. He went to the dealers he owed, counted out more than $60,000. “Ig-norant, ignorant, ignorant,” he said with each bill. He had to feel the money leave his hands to make everything stick.

He has been sober ever since, not a drop of anything in like eighteen years. He still feels like a piece of crap for having been a junkie. He’s less angry now than when he first came out of detox. When it got real bad, he would go to the rig with a sledgehammer and pound on the iron, just beat until he couldn’t beat no more, then sit down and ponder.

He has never hit a person out of anger, or maybe, or whatever twisted shit causes people to beat on innocent people. It has to, he thinks, be a sickness or something that makes someone constantly beat on a little kid. There has to be forgiveness and forget-ting. Forgetting.

Howard Hughes couldn’t be touched. It’s a for-instance. It’s okay. It isn’t, but it is. The violence led me to become a better person. I’m trying to justify it.

You can’t dwell on the past. You can’t get anything back. No, all you can do is improve yourself. Make yourself into a better person. He wants that severely. Severely. It’s what he works hardest on. Pretty much constantly.

For years he worked out on the ice, wild-catting. Bait boxes on sleds, dragged fifty miles out on the ice. He’d build the camp, build the rig, drill the exploration wells, wouldn’t leave until the ice started melting. He’d be gone sometimes from like November through May. He loved it. That sounds crazy, but he loved it, minus fifty, minus seventy. He would just stand there and think: Mother Nature at her finest. If he went outside with his hair wet, he could snap it off.

He discovered humility out there. He would stand in the cold and look up at the stars and say, Okay, I am a tiny piece of noth-ing down here on a vast frozen sea.

Life on Oooguruk, compared to wild-cat-ting, is practically vacation. Two weeks on, two weeks off, a camp like this? It’s luxury living. It gives him more time at home. It’s hard to adjust to all that time at home. He has a shelf in a closet. He puts his shaving kit on the shelf. He has one drawer. He has a Harley, a snowmobile, a fishing boat, a couple trucks. It’s hard to be a human being. That’s why he likes mechanical stuff. It is all workable.

With oil prices the way they are, the money in drilling is crazy, crazier than ever. A tool-pusher like TooDogs could go anywhere in the world. There’s a rig in Khazakstan that wants him, another in Calgary, another in Sydney. It would mean long hitches again, being away for months at a time.

The thing about his wife is, if she would
A warming trend—we are up to minus twenty—can mean a blow is coming. A phase-three blow, the most severe, means you can’t see a foot in front of you. Nobody goes anywhere during a phase-three, which can last a week or more. No one is allowed to work—if there’s an accident, they won’t be able to get you out of here—so guys sit around and watch movies and curse the ennui.

“There’s a good chance we’ll get stuck here for a few days,” TooDogs says to me.

I make the point that getting stuck has been a theme this hitch.

“It’s not always like this,” he says.

Nothing is going right. Normally, it takes about thirty days to drill a well. Nearly two weeks into 33 and there’s no end in sight. Seven hours of jarring freed the drill that night I sat in my bait box listening, but then the next day, or night, or maybe day, the MWD, the tool that sends the signal that tells them which way to turn, abruptly lost its pulse. They lost thirty-six hours to that calamity, about $300,000 to the company. They pulled it up out of the earth, thousands of feet up, and found three small rocks lodged in the mechanical parts of the tool, freezing it up. How did the rocks get in there?

Rod was upset. He sat the crew down in the conference room, put the three rocks on the table. “Hopefully, we’re not pumping rocks in our sweats!” he bellowed.

Stubbs, who is in charge of the mud pits, wondered if it was his fault, looked down. Zach, who is in charge of Stubbs, sat there furiously. They keep clean pits! TooDogs sat there thumping his fingers while Rod vented. He could see Zach seething. That kid took pride in his work. That kid had come far. Kids! It’s not their fault they come here so inexperienced. Not like in his day, when you grew up playing with nuts and bolts. These kids start out here and they don’t know which way the fucking drill bit turns. TooDogs has to teach, right-tighty, lefty-loosy. “It’s just like a beer bottle,” he’ll say to them. And they’re like, “I don’t use a screw top, I drink premium.” He’ll think, “Jiminy Christmas.” It had been a lot of work growing this crew. A lot.

“Well, whatever you’re doing, it’s not working!” Rod went on, in the conference room. “Obviously it’s not working! Them rocks cost us a lot of money! A lot of time!” He was sort of making the same point over and over, sort of losing the guys with each repeat.

“Look, we’re not smoking anyone here,” TooDogs said, interrupting Rod.

Rod looked at him. Well, yes, he was smoking someone. Or he was trying to. There was a pause, a tilting of heads, two parents trying to get their act together. “A lesson learned,” TooDogs said. “Everybody step it up. Take the time you need to do your job right, all the way, full on, nobody cutting corners on nothing. That’s for everybody in this room.”

“A lesson learned,” Rod said, retreating.

Nothing is going right. It won’t matter for long. They will all leave soon, if the blow doesn’t come, and a new crew will come, and the problems will continue, or not continue, the drill will go on turning, or not turning, until they come back in two weeks and continue drilling, or not. This hole, the next hole, the next hole, pick the rig up and move it to another oil field, another set of holes, there is no finishing, never an ending, on a rig.

One evening in the dining hall, there appears the beauty of prime rib. Prime rib means: Sunday. It’s a Slope-wide tradition, every dining hall, every camp. It is about the only certain time marker. Sunday gets people thinking of Wednesday, change-out day, going home. Prime rib has a way of reminding people of time again, of something on the horizon.

“Drink beer, drink whiskey, chase women, go out in the woods and kill stuño” is how one of the guys describes his time home after leaving the Slope.

“Keep yourself alive, that’s it.”

“Yup.”

“Instead of trying to fit everything into a weekend and feeling like hell till the middle of the week, we get to spread it out.”

“That’s where we’re lucky.”

“Yup.”

When he goes home, Turtle’s plan forward is to buy a new motorcycle, his third. (He will drive it out of the dealership in Wasilla and immediately get a speeding ticket.) Kung Fu is going to visit his dad in Sacramento, a somewhat scary notion, seeing as Sacramento is where he was fixing to locate Lords of Liberty Motorcycle Militia, his strip-club/meth-lab. A lot of memories there. (He will continue an eight-month losing streak.) Andy plans some quality time with his fiancée, who is game for anything, who knows she’s kidding. He knows she is. It’s funny, he thinks.

She has this wave she gives him at the end of losing the guys with each repeat.

“Does that make any sense? It’s not a bad woman.”

“Yup.”

“I did make that clear, right?”

“Keep yourself alive, that’s it.”

“A loving family is way better than any cap.”

“Yup.”

“Keep yourself alive, that’s it.”

“Yup.”

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“I think so. I tell him there’s a love you’re free,” he says, standing in the mudroom.

“Looks like you are, too,” I tell him.

He says it’s no big deal. He says it’s all workable. “I’m a machine,” he says. “It’s what I am.”

I have learned not to argue. He sits with me while I wait for the van driver. The mudroom is utterly quiet this time of day, no one in here banging locker doors or kicking off boots. Just the buzz of fluorescent lights overhead and the faint sound of TooDogs thumping his fingers on the bench. He’s already dressed for his day of travel, wearing clean blue Carhartts, same HUNT HARD cap.

“A loving family is way better than anything you can create up here,” he says finally.

“I did make that clear, right?”

I tell him I think so. I tell him there’s a kind of love up here, too, though.

“I’m talking about a real family,” he says.

“You know what I mean, Gawd, woman.”

“All right.”

“But I can only handle this one,” he says.

“Does that make any sense? It’s not a bad thing. It’s kind of sad. But not.”

I look at him, nod. He’s clean-shaven for the first time I’ve seen, the stubble notice-
ably absent. He trimmed his mustache.

“What time did you get up?” I ask. “You’re all clean.”

He says he did laundry. He watched a fishing show. He listened to Clint Black.

“Do you know what the life expectancy is of a roughneck after they retire? Did I tell you about that?”

I tell him no, we didn’t cover that.

“They give up,” he says. “Two old guys I worked with didn’t get their first retirement checks. Both just up and died before the first check came.”

We sit in that thought for a moment.

“I’m thinking: broken heart,” he says.

He shrugs, continues thumping his fingers. I cut him off before he can say it doesn’t matter, that it’s all workable.

“That’s not workable,” I say.

“No,” he says. “That’s the whole deal. It’s not.”

We say good-bye. He calls to make sure I get home safely, apologizing for worrying: “That’s just the way I roll.” Days go by, weeks, a few more hitches. He gets a big job offer, a chance to be company man, just like Rod, except off on rigs all over the world. He feels like he’d be abandoning his children if he left the island. He feels, on the other hand, like he’d be improving himself.

On the last day of his last hitch on Oooguruk, he pulls Turtle aside. “I didn’t think much of you when you started,” he says to Turtle. “But you’re turning into a real good floor hand.” Turtle recoils, nearly weeps, then leans in for a hug. TooDogs hesitates, takes an exhausted breath, but finally opens his arms and cradles Turtle’s head. “This is a rig,” TooDogs says. “My God, this is just supposed to be a rig.”

*Jeanne Marie Laskas is a *GQ* correspondent.*