

## An Odyssey with Black Kitten By Kimberley Aslett

In the manner of the adventurers who opened the vast north to settlers and rail, Charlie planned her excursion to the northwest first by looking to the sky and dreaming. She imagined wilderness and auroras and mountains and shards of ice on rivers under cold stars, and felt her heart yearn. Then, around the edges, the dreams began to include the stuff of days, with jobs, an apartment and a little path worn by slippers in the early morning, where she would watch the sun rise, her very own sliver of gold.

So many people had gone before her to the Yukon with big dreams, grit and toughness, that this journey had its own life, and epic stories. It was Klondike and gold and wild rivers and lost madmen and saloons. And it was wanderers and hippies and lost dreamers. And it was hipsters and LGBTQ+ people and more, all looking for the space where their dreams were larger than the lines others drew around them. That was the gold, after all wasn't it? A dream come true? A life that was larger than survival?

The Klondike had called men on mules, horseback, in leaky boats and fragile boots, but Charlie knew she could upgrade these methods. She searched for a vehicle that would be sturdy enough to drive mountain passes and with low mileage to outlast the loan. Her SUV, dubbed Bridget, was the tough and sturdy metallic version of a pack animal, and had more horsepower.

She had a map and a destination. The distance from Kingston to the Yukon was immense: 6060 kilometers. She would require a companion, a side-kick. A husky might be the first choice, if this were a movie, but Charlie knew herself.

The kitten had remained at the Humane Society after the others in her litter had been snapped up. The tiny black furball was not the runt, but she had wobbly cat syndrome, and disabled pets had challenges finding homes. She walked with a drunken lurch that was both adorable and alarming. But it was her focus and willingness to meet every challenge that cracked Charlie's heart. The two forged a bond that was immediate and powerful. Izzy found her place nestled into the crook of Charlie's legs as she slept, and Charlie found her heart the site of a coup. She purchased a travel carrier.

The calendar came out. The trip had to be done after the roads were clear of snow, and the arrival was chosen for the longest day, when the twenty-four-hour halo of sunlight was auspicious. It was the stuff of dreams. A rush indeed.

June 21<sup>st</sup>. Dawson City.

The first days of the trek were consumed by farewells and dire warnings from family and friends. They, like so many who saw loved ones headed into the Gold Rush, couldn't understand the mystical lure. It was so far, so dangerous, so unknown. How would she manage that distance alone? Wouldn't she be lonely? Charlie smiled and pointed to Izzy. What job would she get? She noted her work experience and degree. What about dangers on the road? There might not be leaky boats these days, but the dangers to a young woman on her own, on the road, these were really something that a kitten wouldn't help.

Charlie just kept her dream safe and turned her smile to the future. Not for nothing had her mother quoted Mr. Shakespeare, watching Charlie on her first day of school: "Though she be but little, she is fierce". Mom presented her with travel insurance and a box of sweet treats.

When all the visits were done, Charlie placed Izzy in her carrier with a soft bit of blanket and let Lake Superior slide past on her left. The beaches were still cold, but she put her feet into the Lake to say good-bye to Ontario. Izzy looked at the chill water's edge with feline disdain and hunted ants on the sand. The second day after Sault Ste. Marie, Charlie passed the end of the Lake, and headed to the vast expanse that was inscribed "out west" by the old folks in the family. Terra incognita.

The first few nights were temperate, and the two-person tent was cozy. Izzy was at first concerned about the parameters of the tiny tent, but she found the space on the edge of the sleeping bag where she could draw warmth from Charlie's body and still have fresh air. The routine of setting up camp after a long day and taking it down in the morning was rough at first, with equipment hiding in the packed-to-the-roof burden of the SUV, and morning dampness holding on while folding and packing. But they managed.

Manitoba and Saskatchewan were a test of sheer determination, a previously unimagined distance. Charlie would rise in the morning and turn her face to the west, where the sunlight was whizzing to her destination ahead of her. She would feel the pull of the territory. And she would grit her teeth and pull away from the campsite with only kilometers to count until the next night. So many kilometers.

The rain that had been their only weather for the distance so far was to be eclipsed by a patch of almost-winter chill in Alberta. It was as if the mountains had been holding the surprise of the frost and winds close to stop the weak, uncommitted adventurers, before they could make it to the next province. The tent was unfolded with numbing fingers, and the dinners were now sometime a sandwich eaten in the slowly-building warmth of the sleeping bag. Izzy was not impressed. Where she had taken to sleeping near Charlie's shoulders to control her temperature, she now moved deep into the recesses of the sub-zero bag. Charlie woke with a cold nose, seeing her breath puff into the tent in the dawn's light, and Izzy peaked from a tiny opening in the sleeping bag.

The day that began with rain nearly defeated them, but Charlie was clever, and knew the right time to rent a hotel room and dry everything out. So, that night, they paid up at the desk, and unloaded everything they could drape or hang into the motel room, taking advantage of the thrill of heat and hot water. Later, Izzy was curious where Charlie had got to, and poked her head around the shower curtain to get a spritz that made her shake her head and retreat. Charlie took her time. This was coming out of her Yukon budget, and she was going to wring every comfort she could from the spare furnishings. She splurged on pizza, and told Izzy tales of glacier hikes and fireplace warmups.

At Jasper, well into the west, they encountered a wild animal never before seen by either. Izzy was nestled in a cat-pack on Charlie's back, on a travel-free day hike, when a tiny fluff of brown moved in the distance. Charlie held still, barely breathing. It skittered behind rocks and bushes, not a squirrel, and far too small to be a bear or wildcat. What was it? When it stopped on a rock outcropping, Charlie was delighted to see perhaps the cutest creature to ever draw breath: a pika. Izzy, unimpressed with the competition, only wanted a treat when Charlie pointed to it. Charlie tucked the image away carefully in that place where moments too important for photos live, to pull out on long, cold nights.

The cold was still teasing spring with below-zero nights, as Alberta gave way to British Columbia and grizzly country. If there was a part of the journey that had her mother fidgeting anxiously, waiting for every check-in, this was it. But Charlie was no dummy. On the second day, she counted young bears at the roadside, searching for spring treats. One. Two. Three. She thought that was ridiculous. Four.

When she got to six, she re-evaluated her sleeping arrangements. The sleeping bag and pillow, as well as Izzy, were carefully arranged across the two front seats of the vehicle. It was not comfortable. There might have been a bear in the campground that night. It may have roamed, smelling the heavy scent of humans. But it certainly didn't get to open the can that held Charlie and Izzy.

It had been nine days on the road. Clothes were getting stiff, and the dream of a hot shower was rising again. But so was the vision of Dawson City. And the timing was perfect. It was June 18. She felt the urge to press on when the day's driving should have been done. One day. Two days. She crossed the Yukon Territory border and felt the urge to whoop and send an imaginary hat into the air, elated. Six thousand kilometers. Instead, she pulled to the side of the road, and slept, feeling the nearness of success at the edges of her dreams.

Dawson was in reach on the 19<sup>th</sup>, but Whitehorse made a place for her, the town nestled at the river, curled in the low landscape, and with all its charms. Charlie and Izzy camped again, after one of them visited the hot springs, and the other warmed the bit of blanket. Charlie toasted Izzy with a beer and told her about the next stop. Izzy staggered onto Charlie's lap, and they watched the flicker of a small, well-tended campfire.

The 20<sup>th</sup> brought Charlie to the Klondike highway, renewed and excited. The ribbon of road was a playful thing that made danger seem like so many stories from the past, with the fireweed a celebratory purple banner along the roadsides. But danger was still there, around the edges of mountains and rivers, and in the solitude.

When Charlie arrived at Dawson, her dream was populated with crooked-teeth buildings in candy colours, ubiquitous huskies, and a good-natured nod to tourists. She packed Izzy and took in the ferry, the shops, and the high excitement of a community fair, into the evening.

Later, she carried a blanket to a clear space on the Dome, where good-natured groups and families had gathered for the not-night. Izzy got into her turquoise harness to explore, drawing deserved attention. Charlie lay back on her blanket and let her vision blur, feeling the sunset nearly, but not quite happen. Izzy crept onto her chest and took the pose of an ancient monument, tiny paws tucked neatly, and her face lifted to the horizon, and the future.