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Theodore Berland
Grand Valley State University

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THEODORE BERLAND

Gold Miners

They were two couples from a city in the Lower 48, spending four weeks in Alaska, experiencing the last wilderness, Leslie and Tom, Elaine and Frank. They had come to see the most incredible mountain on this side of the world. The Indians had named it The High One. Its permanently glaciated peak was shrouded not only in clouds but in native mysticism. Even modern Alaskans spoke of it in hushed voices: "He makes his own weather," they said, and, "He is not like other mountains. Those who attempt to climb him do not live to tell about it."

Just to see "him" would have been enough for them. The peak had been obscured by clouds for three weeks. After they arrived, on Alaska's only train, in the incredible valley that was ringed by the continent's highest mountains, they boarded a renovated school bus that bounced and slid for six hours over gravel road, and occasionally stopped so its passengers could observe and photograph caribou and bear and moose and other wild animals beside the road. Their destination was a small lodge which, their travel agent had assured them, would provide the best view of the mountain; they would stay there for two days.

The "lodge" was a far cry from the lodges they had stayed at on this trip: big and rustic, yet offering all of the amenities of civilization. This was a tiny frontier motel that had been hewn out of rough timber, with a central room for eating and for meeting the few other folks who could afford to stay there, and a dozen tiny rooms, each filled by a double bed that was almost wall-to-wall.

The bus with the two couples and the other guests arrived late in the afternoon. The four had dinner and fell into their beds with headiness provoked by clear air, high altitude, and wine. The next morning they panned for gold (unsuccessfully) in a nearby stream, explored the landscape, photographed bear, caribou, moose, and caught a glimpse of The High One as the clouds parted for a few minutes in the bright sunshine, when they returned for lunch. They were the only tourists at the meal. This was the in-between time. Those who came for one outrageously expensive night had already left on the bouncy trip back to the train. Two men who were staying a week had hiked off earlier to photograph mountain sheep at nearby peaks.

The two young women who ran the lodge, obviously lonely on the edge of the frontier, were entertaining three unshaven, hard-drinking men in overalls. Their familiar-

ity with the women indicated that they were not lodge guests. It was a scene out of a movie. It reminded Leslie of the frontier play they had seen earlier in their trip, at Skagway, the doorway to the Klondike. There in 1896-98 hordes of men had walked off creaking sailboats to embark on the long trip by foot and homemade dingies. Each man carried about 100 pounds of provisions and equipment, seeking his fortune in the yellow metal that was supposed to be under the tundra. Few of the mob actually made it all the way to the new El Dorado. Of these, only a handful actually found gold. Fewer were able to keep it.

Leslie abruptly realized that these three were not actors; their shoulder holsters bulged with the reality of the longest revolvers she had ever seen, in movies or real life. The two women laughed at their jokes, smiled at their advances and served them all the food and wine and flirting they wanted.

As the four tourists ate their lunches, they couldn't help but hear in that small room that the men were gold miners. They were more than neighbors who happened to drop by; the three were openly courting these two women. It seemed a permanent pentagonal affair. If so, it outdid any triangular love affair, at least during the summer, for in winter no one could live up there.

When Leslie and Elaine left for their rooms after lunch, their husbands began talking to the miners who told them of the discovery of gold and silver in nearby hills some twenty years after the Klondike gold rush. Modern miners use powerful machines to extract gold from the trailings left behind by the original miners who shoveled by hand. The two younger miners, who were partners, bragged that they were working a claim that wasn't theirs. But it was all right, they said, since the owners had not returned in many years and couldn't be located. They intended to stake their claim officially when they left in late August, after the freeze set in, when placer mining would become impossible.

When asked why he toted a .44 Magnum, one answered sullenly, "It's a way of life." The other partner snickered, "In case we meet any bears!" Then the three pulled out their enormous guns, pointed them at one another, and had a mock gunfight around the table. The wine kept flowing.

From their jacket pockets they pulled dull-yellow nuggets that were larger than any sold in the jewelry stores of Fairbanks or Anchorage. They showed them off in Las Vegas, where they wintered, they boasted. In Nevada the nuggets had power: they convinced some women to be the miners' constant companions (they wore T-shirts proclaiming "Nuggets for Nookie"). The nuggets also convinced other gamblers that the stakes could get high.

The very thought of grubby gold miners in the Space Age fascinated Tom and Frank,

who sat for an hour asking questions. The miners answered and joked among themselves and drank more wine. Then one asked if the tourists from the Big City would care to go back with them and see how they placer-mined—ran water over gravel until gold dust or an occasional nugget settled.

Without a moment's thought, the two men answered that they sure would and told him they'd go tell their wives that they'd be gone for about an hour or so. One miner, the oldest one, said in a commanding voice, "No, bring them along."

Leslie and Elaine were a little bewildered when their husbands explained what they were doing and were amazed when they were told to climb up into the cab of a dirty old Army surplus truck parked behind the lodge. Tom and Frank would ride in the open back of the truck. The two younger miners, the wildeyed blackbeard and the bearish heavy one, got into a new flatbed truck. Both trucks were soon racing down an unmarked, bumpy gravel road into the wilderness.

Leslie had this feeling in her stomach that she must be crazy to be doing this. Elaine just looked ahead. Only if they shouted could they be heard above the truck's engine noise.

The bumpy ride took them through the most remote land they had been in during their three weeks' wilderness trip. Leslie kept wondering what would happen if the truck got a flat tire or ran out of gas or broke down; or, if the miners threw their husbands off the truck and abducted them. She decided she had seen too much TV back home.

After riding thus for about half an hour, they plummeted into a gravel valley bisected by a madly dashing river and encircled by gentle hills. Here and there an isolated mobile home marked a miner's camp. Each camp, too, had its machine for dredging the gravel and washing gold dust from it.

The trucks stopped at the first mining camp and all got out to chat with a grizzled, round man who told them he had left the civilization of New England two decades ago. He offered his visitors whiskey from a bottle, which the miners accepted, and they offered him marijuana from a plastic bag, which he declined.

After the miners compared nuggets from their pockets, the four were told to get back in the truck. Leslie shouted a suggestion that they go back, but the driver said he wanted to cross the river and visit some other friends.

As the two trucks crossed the wide, fast-running river of mountain melt-off, Leslie realized that there was no other way to get from one bank to the other. There was no bridge; the water was too cold and the current was too fast for anyone to walk or swim across.

This larger camp had three mobile homes and a huge dredging machine, run by

several miners who had given up the conventional life of business and profession (and families) in the Lower 48 for the frontier life of liquor, guns, and isolation. The center of their lives was gold. Leslie realized that this was not so different from the Klondike of '98.

The miners swapped drinks for marijuana: wine swigged from a jug over the shoulder; pot smoked from a cigarette taken from a plastic bag in a breast pocket. Nuggets were compared.

The miner with the black beard told the others about recently entertaining a big city couple staying at the lodge. He took a swig of wine, then dragged smoke from his joint. He laughed wickedly as he told how he had taken the couple to his mining camp. He had then driven the man back to the lodge as his partner, who reminded Leslie of a Teddy Bear, took the wife for a spin on a motorcycle. When they slid into a puddle of mud, she had cried, saying that her heels were ruined and that it was an experience she would never forget. They took her to the mobile home where she showered and spent a wild, tethered night of sex.

"Hell, I gave her a nugget when I dropped her off at the lodge in the morning," he winked. Leslie felt a chill bolt down her back.

They were commanded to get back in the truck. This time they were bouncing over the gravel toward the duo's camp. Leslie shouted over the motor noise that she really thought they should be getting back, but the older miner said they must see his younger friends' set-up.

It was the dirtiest camp in the small valley. Paint was peeling from the small, old mobile home. A pile of litter, mainly empty beer cans, was not far away. Another pile had the remains of old chairs and a file cabinet. And a third pile was broken glass, topped by a wooden target.

The older miner had a beer with his friends and drove off, wishing the tourists luck. Leslie felt very stranded and very alone. Blackbeard and the Bear offered the four beer. The only one to accept was her husband, Tom. She shot him an angry glance, and he quickly shook his head as if telling her to shut up.

As they stood around the open door to the dark mobile home and were introduced to a pale, downcast young woman, he called his cook, whom they recognized as a maid at the lodge. Blackbeard leered at Leslie as he guzzled beer and inhaled drugged smoke. When she asked why he used marijuana, he said he learned to use it in Viet Nam. Ten years before, while working on the big pipeline on the tundra, he found, he said, that "It helps make this life easier. I don't take shit from anyone."

The Bear came by, beer can in one hand, Magnum in the other.

"How about some target practice," he suggested.

“Sure, why not,” his partner answered.

They asked their new buddy, Tom, to throw up one empty wine bottle after another in the direction of the pile of broken glass. He was happy to oblige. That made Leslie angry. Her anger turned to fear as the two miners fired their huge hand weapons at bottles in the air, then at the target. Their bullets did not even come close. Frustrated, they began shooting at beer cans on the ground and at gulls soaring overhead. She realized then how high they were on alcohol and marijuana. “What will be their next sport?” she thought. “Will it be me, like the other woman whom they invited to visit?”

Elaine’s hand tightly gripped hers. She nervously whispered, “How are we going to get out of here? We can’t walk back.”

“I’ll talk to Tom,” Leslie whispered. He and Frank were talking about guns with the miners, who were not very careful about where they pointed theirs. She sidled over and gently pulled his arm.

As they walked away, she told him she was frightened and that she wanted to get back to the lodge. He told her, “You can’t rush these things. These frontiersmen are very individualistic. They do things because they want to, not because anyone tells them to. This isn’t the city, you know. I don’t want to provoke them, so I’m keeping them talking. Be patient.”

She walked over to Elaine as he rejoined the glassy-eyed miners now sitting on milk boxes. She could overhear them talking about “doing coke” in South America and opium in India. The sun had long ago slipped behind the mountain tops, and she thought of walking away now so she could be back at the lodge before the stars came out. Then she remembered the swift river and felt a chill as beads of perspiration wet her hairline.

She and Elaine sat down on some discarded furniture in despair. They realized that they were hostages; not political hostages in a foreign country but hostages nonetheless. Elaine asked her hoarsely what ransom these potheads would ask. Certainly not gold! And from whom?

More questions raced through her brain: “How hysterical will I get when Blackbeard forces me into the mobile home? Isn’t my life worth a few hours of surrender, even to these sex-starved druggies? How do I know I will get out alive, even after that?”

She looked around at the hills and the mountains beyond and reminded herself that no one would ever find them, or their remains. They were in true wilderness! How ironic to come to such a violent end in this remote, peaceful valley.

The Bear told Frank that they could spend the night at camp and get a genuine wilderness experience. The husbands mumbled something. Blackbeard postured menacingly.

ingly at Tom, looked at the women and said they may all as well resign themselves, because there was no way they'd get back in the dark on their own. Weren't they grateful guests?

Leslie and Elaine clung to each other, whispering about men's stupidity. They had no business coming to the camp. Maybe this was a nightmare and they'd wake in their own beds at home. Tom came over to the women to tell them they were "invited" to stay the night. Leslie told him he was crazy, that they'd be attacked and he and Frank would be shot. Their orphaned children would never know what had happened to their parents. No one would. He should tell the miners to take them back to the lodge—now!

Tom shook his head and said he'd try, but he wasn't hopeful. Leslie looked at the fast-darkening Alaskan sky: the first star was out. Her heart jumped into a sprint.

Tom went back to the tiny trailer. Through its window came the bright light of a kerosene lamp and loud voices of the men.

The summer air was suddenly cold. Leslie and Elaine huddled as they waited for a miracle. They were resolved to what would be; they wanted only to be able to leave alive and in not too much pain.

They looked up to see Tom hovering over them. There was an urgent, serious edge to his voice as he said, "Come on! Now!" He took Leslie's hand and pulled her to her feet. Now she knew what the ransom was and to whom it would be paid!

Her knees shook as Tom pulled her toward the kerosene light. She tried to delay as much as possible. "How could you?" she hissed.

"Take it easy," he said, pulling her past the trailer toward the truck. "We're going back. Just don't say anything." She looked back to see Frank and Elaine following.

The ride back on the primitive, darkened mountain road was harrowing. But that fright was more welcome than the fright Leslie had felt at the camp.

The truck pulled up to the lodge, next to the surplus Army truck. They got out and ran to their rooms. Leslie glanced back to see the two miners sheepishly walk up to the young women who ran the lodge. The two women gave them icy stares, then shouted after the two couples that dinner was waiting.

In their tiny room, Tom related to Leslie that his ace-in-the-hole was the third miner, who had left the camp before them. Tom had suggested that the miner was probably having dinner at the lodge. Blackbeard and Bear became upset at the thought of his being alone with the two women. It was then that they declared, "We're going back."

Someone won, Leslie thought, as Tom lay sleeping next to her in their pitch black motel room. They were in room number two. Room number one was occupied by the staff. Its headboard was being rhythmically pounded into the thin wall by its wildly

fornicating occupants.

The next morning, looking out the bus window at sheep in the far off mountains, Leslie decided that not much had changed on the Alaskan frontier in almost a century. That white-capped mountain still dominated the broad, wild valley. Bright gold still dominated scummy wild men, who placed its value above human dignity.

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