

Memories from Muskwa Creek

by

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Gus will know what's in the box. He'll read the postmark and just like that he'll see the river, the mine, the shack, and the bear. The tawny fur is dull and moth-chewed, but the four-inch claws retain their majesty. The brass plaque, fronting the mahogany base on which the souvenir is mounted, simply states: *Muskwa Creek, Alaska, August 12, 1962.*

I left a foster home in Seattle at sixteen and worked my way on a freighter up the Inside Passage to Alaska. On docking at Wrangell, I left the ship. The village was beautiful, with signs everywhere referring to its gold-rush history.

I entered a cafe, and ordered a meal. One old-timer glanced at me and tipped his hat, so I nodded. He came over and pulled out a chair. "What brings you here, young fella?"

I said I'd just disembarked from a freighter and asked if there was any work around here for a young guy. He laughed. "You're a bit late for the gold, son, if that's what you're after. The Stikine Rush was sixty, seventy years ago. I was a kid then, but I remember all the stories. Wrangell was the shoving-off point for the Klondike gold fields up the Stikine River.

"There's still gold in the creeks, though, if you want to work for it," he added. "Those three gents over there are getting ready to go. You should talk to them."

He wished me luck and left, while I sat wondering if I dared approach them. There were rather rough looking chaps, and seemed to be in a bit of an argument amongst themselves. But I was a risk-taker, so I went over and introduced myself.

"I just came from Seattle, on the freighter," I said. "I thought I might stick around, see what's going on. The old fellow told me you were outfitting for a trip to the goldfields."

"Ain't no goldfields," one fellow said. "Just mining the creeks. Tough work ... for men." He looked at me, noting my size, nearly six feet tall, and strong from working on the farms that had supported the foster home.

"Got any money?" one asked.

"Some."

They looked at each other, and one introduced himself as Gus. "This here's Sly and that's Gerard." They nodded and indicated a chair for me to join them.

I became excited as they described their plans to prospect near the headwaters of the Lachish River. When I asked if they might take on a fourth partner, they exchanged glances, nods, and then Gus said, "You'd have to put in twenty-five percent for expenses, maybe more if needed."

I agreed.

"A gentleman's bond," Sly said. "Nothing in writing. Everyone puts in dough, shares the work, and the profits. If no profits, tough luck for all."

I checked out my new partners. Gus looked to be in his mid-twenties, fat and pink-skinned from sunburn, with a fringe of wiry red hair that horseshoed his balding head. Sly

was around the same age, with a mass of black hair, a beard to match, and dark brooding eyes. Gerard, likely in his late teens and youngest next to me, was small-built, and quiet, with a nervous twitch. And then there was me, Theo Carr, an orphan, a kid from nowhere, ready for adventure.

We bought an old wooden riverboat and a Merc kicker from a prospector who was “gettin’ the hell out.” With the old man dolefully watching us from the dock, we loaded our groceries and other supplies, and then we four greenhorns sailed into uncharted wilderness.

I’d never seen anything like the Lachish . . . ice-white water laden with glacial silt, calm and fast flowing until plunging over rock-strewn rapids and down steep falls. On our third night out, we camped on a narrow plateau at the river’s edge, and watched our firelight shoot eerie shadows up the granite face of the canyon wall behind us.

Gus was talkative, a good storyteller, but his main goal seemed to be to scare “the kid.” As the flames from our campfire danced skyward, he related tales heard from local natives about flesh-eating Wendigo creatures. “They stalk travelers.” He leaned toward me, pointing his fire stick. “Scraps of corpses and clothing are found on trails, in cabins . . . nowhere is safe, if you’re stalked by a Wendigo.” The men nodded solemnly, or made grunting assents, but I laughed at his stories. When one of his tales seemed especially unbelievable, I spoke up. “That’s a lie -- you dreamt it up!” The words erupted before I could stop them.

Gus glowered at me and abruptly ended his storytelling. He hadn’t shown much liking for me before, and now I knew I’d made an enemy.

“Go fetch some driftwood, Theo,” Gus snapped. “There’s a pile down on the gravel bar.”

I cut through bushes to the river’s edge, dropped down a three-foot cut bank, and backtracked to where Gus had spotted the wood. I was making my way along the rocky shoreline when I heard a noise. I stood still, wondering if I’d imagined it. When I threw my wood and ax up onto the ledge and started scrambling up the bank, a boot suddenly clamped down onto my right hand. I grabbed for my ax with my left hand, but it was wrenched from me and flung into the bush.

“You and me got some things to settle,” Gus said in a low voice. “Like who calls the shots on this show.”

I was in good shape but Gus had the advantage of higher ground, anger, and a hunting knife. He jumped down the graveled bank, and landed on me on top of me, kneeling on my chest and whipping my head around with furious boxing-ring punches. His red face, hovering inches from mine, showed rage and madness as he held the knife to my left ear, and sliced. “A souvenir,” he said.

I cried out but no one came to my rescue.

Later, I lay partly submerged in the ice-cold river until the bleeding stopped and my senses returned. Then I wrapped my shirt around my head for a bandage and curled up under a bush on the graveled bank. When dawn came, I returned to the campsite. Neither Sly nor Gus looked at me, but Gerard silently pointed to some bacon in the pan and a portion of bannock left for me. I ate. There was no going back alone.

We boated and portaged our way further into the wilderness, with Sly and Gerard showing me a bit of slack and Gus ignoring me completely. My ear healed, but I couldn’t see how badly it had been cut, only feel for what was left of it.

On our fifth night, while camping at the river's edge about thirty miles from our proposed destination, we heard a groan. Everyone went still.

"Quiet," Sly said. "It might come again."

We scraped our coals into a heap, and sat watching the salmon fry and the bannock brown in the pan. The sound came again -- a long pain-filled moan that matched my own mood. I grabbed my ax and gun, and crouched with my back against a big balsam fir. The others jumped up, rifles ready, but we heard only the wind in the trees, the low hoot of an owl, and the rolling hum of the river.

Over the next few nights, we heard the sound again, and again. The farther the "thing" tracked us the more cruelly Gus treated me, as if I had become the cause. When we had to line the boat from the shoreline I was made to pull from the toughest angle, often wading waist-deep in the cold river and stumbling over the boulder-strewn riverbed.

Nearly every night we heard the "thing" cry: from the forest; from behind a rock-face; from across the river. We couldn't track it, we couldn't see it, and so we tried to ignore it.

Gus had some knowledge of wood-lore, but was clumsy and temperamental. He stumbled on slippery river stones, cracking his knee. As I watched him flail about on his bum leg and become increasingly cranky and helpless, my hatred for the man grew with every mile.

Sly was capable but he wasn't much for teamwork. Gerard had the most wilderness knowledge, but uncommunicative and his nervous twitch was becoming worse.

At Sable Canyon, rock cliffs closed the riverbed to a narrow gorge, and white water pounded like the maelstroms of Hell. We were forced to portage, and pull the boat and supplies overland on a narrow rock-strewn goat trail. We had just made it past the canyon and were dropping down to the river when the cries came again, resounding off the rocks.

"A trapper disappeared right here, last winter," Gus said as he painfully lowered his weight onto a fallen log and stretched out his stiff leg. "Never found hide nor hair of him. Just a boot and his ax."

"Probably a grizzly," Sly said.

Gus nodded. "He could have got caught in the canyon. Or went through the ice."

I said nothing, having learned that silence was best around these volatile men.

The groans reverberated against the rock wall. The thing was either on the trail behind us or on the trail before us, for there was no other place to be. We made a small campfire and kept our loaded rifles handy.

"It's gotta be a bear," Sly said, breaking his usual silence.

"Must be," Gerard agreed. "No human could sound like that."

I ventured a suggestion: "Why don't we set a trap, shoot it, and get it over with?"

Gus sneered. "Maybe someone *did* shoot it. Likely got away on them. Bears don't wait around for the next bullet."

"A bear cries when it's hit with a bullet," Gerard said quietly. "It bawls like a baby."

"It's just a *bear!*" Gus said, spitting into the fire. "No loss."

But these sounds didn't resemble those of a bear, or a wolf, or a man. They resonated with despair, dementia, and terrible pain.

When dawn came, we broke camp and hit the trail. The cries followed, even as we branched off the Lachish River and navigated up Muskwa Creek. When we came upon a deserted trapper's cabin, it was decided that would be our summer home. The place stunk of pack rats but we cleaned it out as well as we could and stored our supplies. Gus threw his bedroll on the elevated boards in one corner that the former owner had set up for a bed. Sly, Gerard and I chose to sleep outside in hammocks or sheltered "wickiup" lean-tos.

The next morning, we worked together on building a sluice-box, and assigned rotating shifts: shoveling gravel; sluicing it down with water, and panning the black sand. Sly controlled the gravity feed system for the water, while Gerard and Gus shoveled. I helped at whatever job was assigned, and did most of the cooking and cleanup. I was glad to be away from them, for almost immediately the men began to argue.

"For God's sake get a move on, Gus! We don't want to be stuck here till winter!" Sly said.

Gus nodded, sweat pouring off his head and trickling down his face and neck. His knee had become infected, and looked bad.

Gerard and Sly worked all day, then washed up in the creek and came back to eat at a makeshift table fronting the cabin.

The work was backbreaking and endless. One day I dumped out some concentrates and the men exploded. "You've thrown away half our profits, right there!" Gus yelled.

"There was no colour left!" I said. "You'd panned it already!"

"What would you know?" Sly muttered.

Gerard's face became dark as he banged his shovel around.

"They're going to kill me," I thought. "Either me or each other."

It stayed daylight until late in the evenings, when we sat around the campfire listening to the moans that floated through the still night air, challenging the Northern Lights for lunacy. It wore everyone down, working all day and then tossing about, sleepless, on rough spruce-bough beds or hammocks. The noise either blended with the sound of falling rain, or was swept closer by the wind. It was impossible to pinpoint its direction. We feared the sound and we feared its absence. I constantly kept my .300 Savage with me, even while panning. I was prepared to use it on anything that threatened to attack, animal or human, and said so. Over the summer I'd become a crack shot.

"I saw some grizzly tracks," Gerard said unexpectedly one night. "Yesterday, when I shot the deer. Some measured ten inches across."

We stared at him. We'd seen a track or two but they'd appeared to be old. If Gerard had spotted fresh tracks, why hadn't he said so earlier?

The next day the men trekked down to the diggings, leaving me home to dress out Gerard's deer. I cut and hung the quarters in trees to keep the meat away from animals, and had just returned to clean up the camp when I heard a moan. I stood still. There were no other

sounds -- no birds, no wind, no rustle of leaves or grass. I started toward the cabin to fetch my rifle that I'd left propped against the doorframe.

Then, I saw her.

She came from behind the cabin, an enormous grizzly, lurching like a drunkard through the salmonberry bushes. Something was dreadfully wrong. On gaining my scent, she reared up, and from the side of her twisted mouth came a bellowing roar. She fell back down on all fours and stumbled toward me. Her nearness was terrifying. I circled the trees to get to my rifle before she charged.

Suddenly I noticed a movement in back of her. Gus was coming up from the creek, limping, looking down at his mutilated leg, self-centered as usual, and forgetting caution.

I'd never felt such a thrill in my life. It was her, or him, or me. The bear was horribly deformed, I could see that, and in pain. She was liable to attack at any moment. Which way she'd swing was the question.

I edged around a big pine. The bear swung her giant head in my direction, and then swooped back the other way, as if searching for the foe. I realized she was blind in one eye. I slowly circled to her blind side, knowing smell was her sharpest sense and there was no wind to indicate my position. Slowly, slowly I circled, careful to not snap a twig or make any sound or movement that might spring her into action. Twenty feet, now ten. Gus broke through the trees. The bear stood still, moaning softly, swinging her great head. She stunk like death.

Gus suddenly lifted his head and saw us, the bear swaying drunkenly, turning her lopsided head from him to me and back again, me with my .300 Savage loaded and aimed toward him and the bear, both within range.

She reared up, snarling crookedly from her twisted jaw. I had a split second to get my rifle up and one shot fired. She fell back and I pumped in another, then a third.

I sat down on a tree stump, afraid to advance in case she wasn't dead, or Gus was. The men, hearing the shots, came running from the creek.

Sly walked over to look at the brown hulk. "Congratulations, kid," he said. "A clean kill."

Gus lay on the ground, moaning, eerily picking up the tone and cadence of the old bear's cries. No one seemed to notice him as he crawled across the grass toward us. But I saw the fear in his eyes, the tears smeared on his cheeks with no attempt made to hide his fright.

"You did her a favor, Theo," Gerard said, indicating the bear's twisted jaw, the missing eye. "Hunters made a real mess of her."

One eye and part of the bear's head had long ago been shot away and had healed in an infected mass of proud flesh. When we dressed her out, we found every kind of bullet in her made by man. A thick piece of snare-wire was wrapped around one foot, nearly severing her paw.

"She was out of her mind," Gerard said. "You ended her misery, is all."

"You'll make a good bush man one day," Sly said.

"I'm sorry, kid," Gus said.

I looked at him, sweat-stained, gaunt and ill, his knee a mass of infection, a cruel man, a haunted man, a violator. I looked back at my bear.

Later, I had the paw of that old grizzly mounted, even though the sight of it still makes my breath catch.

Over the years I've often wondered what, in the end, I gained from that summer so long ago. The ultimate reward of survival? The memory of the split-second choice I made when I aimed my shot? The moment of maturity when I made my own peace in the wilderness?

The paw rests in the packing box, ready to post, and for an instant the fur glows bronze in the light reflected from the fireplace. The rusted wire retains its stranglehold on the paw, causing the claws to splay, fighting entrapment. The thing is now old, and rock-hard, like me. I close the lid and seal the box.

I know Gus is still alive although he must be nearly 90 now. He'll stare in shock at the postmark, *Wrangell, Alaska*, and he'll remember. He won't want to, but he'll open the package and there will be the paw. Images and sounds will crash through his mind: the wild water of the Lachish, the mine on Muskwa Creek, the pain endured for long-spent gold, the haunting tales of Wendigos, the stricken mutilated bear. And then, of course, he'll remember me.