

# **HIGH COUNTRY**

**By**

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Alaska was a strange place filled with strange people, mostly men. Many were at the end of their rope: men fleeing a marriage, a scandal, or the law. Some hoping to lose themselves; some of us, hoping to find ourselves.

By late June Andy and I figured we would get no more good work around Fairbanks, and the salmon run was about to start in the southern part of the State. In April 1970, we had hitch hiked from Ann Arbor, Michigan to Fairbanks. We had been working on a survey crew hacking a line through the forest for what we were told would be an oil pipeline from the North Slope to a shipping port in the south. We had been living in an abandoned cabin about 30 miles north of Fairbanks when not out surveying in the bush.

In Alaska bars were at the center of both a social and a work life. Most bars required that guns be checked at the door, like a coat check in the lower 48. This was reasonable since virtually everyone who entered drank to get drunk. There were a lot of fistfights and knife fights, but shootings in bars were rare.

Bars were also the place to find a job. Just start talking to people and eventually someone would offer a job: no paper work, no last names, all cash. Every job I got in Alaska started with a conversation with a stranger in a bar and was sealed with a handshake. Both getting and quitting a job were like everything else in Alaska, very informal. It was like everyone lived by day to day whim, no commitments and no questions. And now it was time for me to migrate south to catch the commercial salmon season. I was sure I

would find work by the sea.

Andy and I needed to get to Anchorage. There was no road completed between Fairbanks and Anchorage, but there was a rail line between the two towns. The distance was about 350 miles as the crow flies, but much longer on the winding rail tracks through the mountains which passed near Mt. McKinley, also called Denali. We decided to hop a freight train. We gathered our few belongings and packed two half gallon, cardboard milk cartons with brown rice held together with split pea soup. Each milk carton was a heavy brick. We calculated we could live a week off the milk cartons.

We hitched a ride to the rail yard in Fairbanks and waited for a chance to sneak into a boxcar. As we waited and watched we saw trainmen patrolling the yard, carrying long guns and holstered side arms. Unfortunately, in June it never gets fully dark, so at midnight it is only marginally dimmer than at noon. Worse, there was no cover in the yard. There was just one freight train in the middle of the yard, in plain sight of anyone who cared to look. We assumed it was headed for Anchorage, since there was just one track out of the yard, but we didn't know when it would leave. We finally concluded we would just have to approach it in plain sight and try to find an unlocked boxcar. This was not an easy decision. The trainmen in Alaska had a vicious reputation and the main focus of their job was keeping freeloaders like us off the trains.

After a long, whispered discussion we made a run for it. We found an unlocked, fully enclosed boxcar and slipped in. We tried to camouflage ourselves in a dark corner and

waited. And waited. As hours dragged by we ate some rice, drank water from our canteens, and tried to sleep. We dared not talk, fearing that a trainman silently patrolling the yard might be nearby and hear us. Andy wasn't a talker anyway. He had a long face with dark hair all around, including hanging over his forehead to his eyebrows and a scraggly beard. Andy was the reason I was in Alaska. During the winter in Ann Arbor he had started talking about getting a summer job fighting forest fires in Alaska. He had looked into it and it paid \$50 per day in cash with transportation to the fire and meals included. It sounded like an adventure: fly into remote wilderness to heroically battle raging forest fires — and get paid to do it. I didn't know Andy well— he was a year or two older than me. A quiet type, Andy was a tinkerer. When he did speak he seemed sure of himself and reliable. So, in April 1970 we stuck out our thumbs. I was 19 years old and had never traveled on my own.

During the weeks of hitch hiking we learned that the State of Alaska had just passed a law providing that no one actually in Alaska could be hired to fight fires in Alaska. This was to discourage people from starting forest fires. It worked. There were fewer forest fires in Alaska that year; but it also took away my purpose in going to Alaska before I'd even gotten there. I had managed to get the surveying job out of Fairbanks and spent several well-paid weeks in the bush. But now, I was hiding in a boxcar looking to ride south to Anchorage. At some point nature called. We resisted as long as possible and finally just peed through a wide space in the floorboards and hoped no one would notice the leaking boxcar.

Looking back now, I believe that the danger, the risk of arrest or bodily harm was the whole point of hopping a freight train. We could have hitchhiked to Anchorage by backtracking southeast to Tok Junction and then circling west to Anchorage. We could have bought a ticket on a passenger train or scheduled airline. But hopping a freight was more adventurous and dangerous. Young Plains Indians proved their bravery and gained prestige by counting coup. Running up to the enemy, touching him without striking a blow and escaping unharmed was a coup. Young warriors' coups were celebrated by the entire tribe. I cannot speak for Andy, but I now believe I was counting coup in the train yard.

After what seemed like a full day of hiding in the boxcar, the train finally started to move. Success. We were undiscovered and on our way. The car bounced and swayed. The floor was very rough, with huge slivers exposed. The train slowed, sped up, stopped, started. The herky-jerky, bouncing and swaying in utter darkness was disorienting. The clatter of the steel wheels on the tracks and the rattling of the rickety boxcar made talking impossible. As the hours dragged by my anxiety mounted. What if we were discovered in a remote spot with no witnesses. The trainmen could easily kill us with no one the wiser. As I imagined my death, I was poised between regret at leaving home without saying goodbye, and a grim satisfaction that my father would regret his behavior when he found out that I was dead.

I was a typical teenage boy: certain that I knew the truth about the world, and impatient with more deliberate adults who claimed to see more than one side of every issue. I

viewed this as merely a stalling tactic. At home I did not have to deal with any stalling. My Dad also was certain that he knew what was correct in every situation. In my eyes my father was both a dictator and a man who aspired to be conventional. I did not like either aspect. Dad expected absolute, unquestioning obedience from all family members, no matter how arbitrary his pronouncements. There could be no other point of view or opinion. Without much education, he scraped and clawed to climb into the middle class. He worked nonstop and would allow nothing that would slow his ascent. He wanted to be a man in a grey flannel suit. I was an embarrassment and a risk. I was against the Viet Nam war, for civil rights and women's liberation, had long hair, demonstrated against something every week, and smoked weed. None of these were acceptable to him. Dad was worried that his boss would find out about me and he would be blocked from promotions or fired. He thought I was a threat to his ability to support his family. Of course, I thought he was a coward, bowing down to "the man".

Because from my earliest years my Dad was rarely home and we had no activities together, we did not have a close relationship to start with. He did not know me and I did not know him. When I revealed my plan to go to Alaska to get good paying work, he absolutely, 100% forbade it. We had regular, explosive arguments. He said I would go to Alaska over his dead body, like that was the end of the discussion. My younger brothers were fascinated by these shouting matches; my mother was in helpless anguish. On a normal April morning I had walked out of the house as usual, stopped by the barn where I had hidden my backpack, and started hitch hiking. Two months and 5,000 miles later the glamorous firefighting job had not worked out and I was hiding in a boxcar, between

jobs, feeling a bit of a failure, and a just little scared. My defensive bravado was feeling hollow.

After many hours riding in the dark we felt the train slowing as it ground up a steep slope. We cracked the door and saw we were in a forested valley. We could see Mt. McKinley. It is a big mountain. It is not just the highest peak among several high peaks, like Everest. McKinley is more of a solitary mountain, massive, the highest in North America. Inspired by the sight, we decided to break our journey, gathered our belongings, and hopped off the slowly moving train. This far south of Fairbanks there was more varied vegetation and real trees, much larger than the jack pines of the north. It seemed lush to us and McKinley was breathtaking. We stowed our gear beneath a tree we thought we could find again and went exploring.

Walking in the fresh air felt good after the dark confinement of the boxcar. We saw moose, bear, and many birds in the distance. My spirits rose, I felt more like a free, independent and self-sufficient mountain man. After a couple of hours of walking we decided to sleep. We found the tree with our gear under it, but the ground around it was occupied by a mother moose and her calf placidly grazing. We knew a mother moose could and would easily kill a man if she felt her calf was threatened. There was nothing we could do to get our sleeping bags, food, and gear. We each climbed a tree, found a branch and tried to rest, wedged between branch and tree. Full sleep was impossible. Even lightly dozing risked a fall.

Towards morning the moose wandered off and we could fetch our gear. We were starving. By then we were sick of the rice and pea soup brick we had been eating since leaving the cabin. We knew there was a national park around McKinley and that we were probably in it. That meant that there was a Lodge serving hot food in the vicinity. We started walking through the trees. We came upon a dirt road and sat beside it. The Lodge had to be somewhere along this road; we would ask the first vehicle we could stop which direction to go. After a long wait, lounging beside the road, a big red car with chrome-trimmed tail fins came along. Cars were a rare sight in Alaska. It was mostly pickup trucks or larger vehicles. We stood waving and the car stopped.

A well-dressed man with thick, glossy black hair was driving with a teenage boy beside him. We asked which direction to the Lodge? Andy and I were dirty and smelly. It was obvious we had been living outdoors and had walked out of the woods. Mr. Sabatino and his son, Bunky, who looked to be about 14 or 15 years old, had just arrived at the Lodge from New York City. They were on a father/son wilderness adventure. Just out of the Lodge they were driving a rental car on the only 35 miles of road in the Park. The rental car and this little stretch of dirt road was their chance to see Alaska. Mr. Sabatino and Bunky got out of the car to stretch, breathe the air and talk with us.

I did not know much about clothes, but even I could see that Mr. S was well put together, from his shoes to his hat. He had a concept of the image he wished to project and it was executed to perfection, down to the smallest detail. Everything was of the finest materials, elegantly cut and fitted. I see now that Mr. S was a Manhattanite, dressed for



his idea of the North; a country weekend in Connecticut. Bunky had a different look. Bunky's was the cleaned and pressed Bob Dylan look: frizzy hair, headband and a bit of tie-dyed cloth visible.

After we told Mr. S and Bunky a little about ourselves it was agreed that Mr. S would buy four box lunches at the Lodge and that Andy and I would accompany the New Yorkers on their drive to the end of the dirt road and back. Andy and I could not believe our luck, riding on soft seats and a free lunch. As tired and hungry as we were, this was heaven. I reckoned at the time that Mr. Sabatino viewed their chance encounter with two mountain men as an unanticipated enhancement of their wilderness adventure. Of course, it is possible that he simply took pity on two hungry teenagers. Mr. S drove us back to the Lodge, purchased the box lunches, and we set off on the only road in McKinley Park.

We went slowly; the scenery was magnificent. The dirt road curved along the side of a mountain so we had upslope views on one side and valley views on the other. Bunky, in the front passenger seat, took photos out the side window. Mr. Sabatino was a talker. He went on about being in the rag trade and life in the garment district: the vibrant street scenes with racks of clothing being pushed on sidewalks and on the streets; half dressed models wandering the cutting rooms; the vendors schmoozing and buying boozy lunches and dinners. With a wink he'd say "Well, it's a living." He told stories about designers, buyers, models and behind-the-scenes dressing room drama. He made it sound interesting and exciting, sexy even. Mr. S was proud of his career. Bunky was having none of it; he was visibly dismissive of these stories. Bunky kept his head turned away from his father,

looking out the side window.

Andy and I were politely interested. We did not want to risk missing out on the box lunches. Mr. S remained cheerful and talkative. Sitting quietly in the back seat, I had the impression he was using this time with Bunky to explain himself, to disclose what made him tick, why he got out of bed in the morning. He sometimes referenced Andy and me in his monologue, but it was clear Bunky was his intended audience. Mr. S was seeking a conversation with his son. He wanted to connect with him. Bunky made a show of being unresponsive. I remember thinking that it seemed kind of pitiful; and, I felt sorry for Mr. S. Bunky was defiantly uninterested. I could see just how rude Bunky was acting; but, at the same time I knew that I probably would have acted the same way if my Dad had ever tried that with me.

But, of course, my Dad never did. I do not recall any one-on-one moment with my father, other than arguments. He did not feel a need to reveal himself to me or to discover who I was. I was simply the first-born. We were two strangers living in the same house, each in a relationship with the same woman. She moved between us, trying to make peace. Perhaps she thought she did not have a choice. Maybe she liked it that way; as the go between, Mom controlled the communication, and that gave her power over each of us.

While Mr. S's efforts were clumsy and embarrassing to witness, on some level I admired his attempt to connect with his son. I felt a rueful sadness. I guess because I thought I would never experience such an act myself. Even a clumsy, embarrassing attempt is

better than no attempt at all.

When Mr. S. finally ran out of energy trying to connect with Bunky, he got Andy and me going about our time in Alaska. We talked about the couple of weeks hitch hiking across Canada, and then up the 1300 miles of the Alaska Highway, which was unpaved and all rocks and dirt at that time. Mr. S. seemed to enjoy our stories about surveying in the bush, cutting sight lines through virgin forest. About working, eating, and sleeping out in the open with a line crew of very rough men. About misty rain most days, constantly walking in water on the permafrost, and pine needles stuck to everything. About sweating heavily while cutting trees all day with a brush hook or an axe, and then being unable to get dry in the cold dampness. And the mosquitoes. Clouds of the biggest, hungriest mosquitoes ever, all day and all night. Mr. S kept trying to engage Bunky in our stories but without much success. Bunky did not seem to be interested in our adventures any more than his father's.

At about mile post 32 Bunky said that he wanted out of the car. He wanted to play his harmonica and commune with nature on his own. So, Mr. S left him sitting on a grass-covered knoll just to the side of the dirt road. I wondered why Mr. S had let Bunky sit by himself. While we had not seen any large wildlife on the drive, I knew it was around. We had mentioned seeing moose and bear the day before. In the end Mr. S seemed to think that leaving Bunky on the knoll with his harmonica was letting his son have the “man alone in nature” moment that was a necessary element of their wilderness adventure. The situation did look ideal: Mt. McKinley rising into a blue sky, other surrounding snow

capped mountains, green grass, and mild air. We figured about 30 minutes to cover the three miles to the end of the road and back to pick up Bunky. What could go wrong?

At the mile 35 turnaround we were chatting with the Ranger — Mr. S. had a lot of questions. At some point the Ranger asked if we had seen a cinnamon grizzly bear on our drive out. We said no. He said there was a very irritated cinnamon grizzly in the area and she was very dangerous. We should be on the lookout and stay clear of her. I thought Mr. S. would mess his pants right there. We sprinted to the car and left a spray of gravel flying as we sped off. At mile 32 we found the rise. Bunky's harmonica was on the grass. No Bunky. We were all shouting Bunky's name. Mr. S. was frantic, shouting and talking nonsense. I circled the base of the knoll and found very clear, very large bear claw marks in the torn turf. But, as I told M. S., at least there was no fresh blood on the harmonica or on the grassy slope.

Mr. S was beyond upset. He wasn't shouting anymore; he might have been going into shock. It all happened so fast, with no warning. Bunky being a normal, defiant teenage boy; then "poof", he was gone without a trace. I kept looking but found no clues to Bunky's condition or location. I had no idea where the bear was either.

The Ranger had followed us and I showed him the claw marks. He radioed it in to the Ranger Station. In less than an hour ten men assembled, all with rifles. We split up to search for Bunky, half down the mountain from the road and half up the mountain. Two shots in quick succession were the agreed upon signal to return to the starting point. Andy

went down the mountain with half the men. I went up the mountain with the other half, calling for Bunky and searching for any sign of his presence. I went higher and higher. Sometime later I realized that I was far from the others, above the tree line, in loose scree with boulders the size of delivery vans scattered around. This was a little spooky, because I could not see around the boulders. Bears can sprint at 30 miles per hour, far faster than a man can run. Bears are faster going up hill than down. I was uncomfortably aware that I had no rifle and was separated so far from the other men.

I remember the sky was clear blue, the air thin. No clouds, which was rare. McKinley attracts clouds and the summit usually is obscured by thick cloudbanks. It seemed very clean up there: no spongy wet moss, no rotten fallen trees, no tangled undergrowth. I noticed that the air was pure, with no forest scent. I was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain focus on looking for clues. Maybe it was the altitude, maybe it was hunger, but I was light headed. I was climbing in the loose gravel calling for Bunky when, late in the day, I heard two shots echo; the signal to return. I started to descend the steep slope, choosing my footing carefully in the loose scree. As I picked my way, I just happened to look up and see a cinnamon grizzly moving between two boulders. I was too close to the bear and I knew I was in trouble. The bear, now hidden among the boulders again, was between me and the assembly point below. I had been extremely lucky to have glanced up at the exact moment she was passing between two boulders. I shuddered, thinking what if I had not seen her and casually proceeded down.

Now I was in a dilemma. I was far too high for my voice to reach the men assembling

below. I had no gun, only a knife. I did not know if the grizzly had a cub or two in the rocks, or where any of the bears were. Fortunately, I was downwind from the bear so I had some time to think. I was tired and had no food or water. In the commotion around Bunky's disappearance, I'd left it all in Mr. S's car. I was now in the shadow of the mountain, out of the warmth of the sun. The bear could come up the slope and detect me at any moment. Going down towards the bear was scary; but, just sitting there as it got colder and the light faded was also scary and my situation would only get worse. I decided to descend and try to get the attention of the men. I crept down as quietly as I could, carefully listening and trying to look around the boulders. Still too high for voice contact, I came upon a boulder I could climb. Standing on top, 10 or 15 feet off the surface, I frantically waved my flannel over-shirt in the failing light. I caught the attention of one of the fellows by the road. He called the others. With hand signs I tried to convey that there was a bear between me and them. Finally, they signaled recognition and several with rifles fanned out and climbed toward me. I stayed on top of the boulder, in plain sight of the men and, I hoped, out of reach of the bear. At one point I saw the bear moving between two boulders and pointed her out. Soon I heard a shot and saw the men converging. I went down to the spot and there lay a large, lean cinnamon grizzly. We stood around the dead bear, absorbing the situation and discussing the known facts. The bear stench was head clearing strong: an overpowering combination of urine and slimy sweat. Judging by its lean frame, the bear had not fed well since spring. It was hard to know why she had not fattened, but hunger was probably the cause of her aggressive attitude. We left the bear for later and went down to the road. Everyone was loudly jolly and relieved, except Mr. S. and Bunky; they were quiet.

I learned from Andy that Bunky had been found hiding in an an abandoned miner's cabin not far down the mountain from the road. Bunky had been surprised on the rise by the bear and fled downhill. Hiding in the cabin, he had heard us shouting his name. But, he was convinced the bear was lurking just outside the cabin and had refused to make a sound until much later when men actually entered the cabin. I didn't say anything, but I was upset with Bunky. He had heard us shouting from his hiding place when we had returned to the rise and did not find him, only the harmonica. If he had just shouted back, we could have avoided the search party, wasting an entire afternoon, and my close encounter with the grizzly. Bunky's acting like a frightened baby had put us all to trouble and risk. I burned with resentment. As I watched Mr. S fussing over Bunky my stomach was growling; I had not eaten since the day before.

Mr. S. quickly but sincerely offered his thanks to the search party. Bunky did not say anything. He did not even ask to see the dead bear, which I thought was strange. Mr. S. practically carried Bunky to the car and got him safely in the passenger seat. Mr. S was so relieved. He had lost what was most important to him for several hours; and, now it was found. His face, his eyes, his body were transformed from anxious fear to exhausted relief. I was powerfully struck by the transformation in Mr. S. With a wave of his hand they left for the Lodge. As I watched the taillights bounce down the gravel road, I realized that the darn box lunches were still in the car.

So, our day was done. I was physically exhausted, partly from climbing at high altitude all afternoon, but mostly from the stress of playing hide and seek with a grizzly bear. I

had been truly terrified, alone, and without any good options. Now the adrenalin high was gone and I felt completely drained. Andy and I ate from our brown rice bricks and got into our sleeping bags under a tree.

I could not sleep. Mr. S's transformed face kept appearing above me. My body was rigid as I stared up at the trees and sky. A blur of thoughts and images from the day swirled through my head. Nothing was clear. I was agitated, disturbed — but did not know exactly why.

I was furious with Bunky, but at the same time I vaguely was aware that my anger was somehow wrong. Bunky was a city kid, 24 hours in Alaska. He did not know anything about a dangerous bear in the vicinity, and was understandably terrified upon being surprised by a bear close up and in pursuit. I, on the other hand, had some experience in the bush and with aggressive bears. Yet, I was the one that went into an area that I knew contained an aggressive grizzly, and then separated myself from the other, armed searchers. I had thought I was valiantly looking for Bunky; but, it could just as easily be described as me looking for the dangerous grizzly, alone and unarmed.

The real question is why did I behave so recklessly. Instead of polishing my hero medal and being angry with Bunky, I should have been questioning myself. Why was I seeking danger, risking injury or death? What was I trying to prove? And to whom?

The next day we waited along the tracks for a freight train to come and climb the same



steep slope where we had jumped off. I think we waited a full day. I thought about Mr. S and Bunky; about, Mr. S's face showing such strong emotions. I knew that Mr. S's fear and then relief were the visible signs of his love for his son. I saw it plainly. He cared. He loved. But what had Bunky done to deserve this? Was Bunky responsive or respectful? No. Was Bunky brave? No. What did Bunky have that merited such unrestrained love? Nothing that I could see. Bunky had run and hidden; I had sought out the bear. Yet, Bunky was loved. I was so angry; but, I also wanted to cry.

Many years later I see the self-defeating futility of my actions. I had disappeared from my family as suddenly and ominously as Bunky had disappeared. I wanted what Bunky had. I wanted to be missed. I wanted a loving embrace after an escape from danger. But I had cut myself off from the possibility of a loving embrace. I wanted to prove myself worthy of being a man among men. But now, I was far from the one man I wanted to impress.

Finally, a freight train was slowly straining up the incline. I was dismayed to see no boxcars, only open flat beds. With the end of the train in sight we hopped onto one of the flat beds, since there was no other choice. We were exposed to any trainman who happened to be looking and to the wind and the rain. We were concerned that we would be spotted, pulled off the train and beaten or worse. However, once over the high pass the train picked up speed and we had a bigger problem.

With nothing to hold on to we were bouncing all over the flat car. The train roared across single track, spindly wooden bridges over deep gorges and sped around mountain curves

with drop offs of unknown height. We dug our fingers into cracks in the rough planking and hung on for dear life. My fingers and arms ached, my butt was bruised and cut by splinters. The scenery as we wound through the southern mountains was magnificent, but sheer terror made it impossible to enjoy. Every so often one of us would lose our grip and start bouncing across the flat bed. I was terrified of going off the edge, into a gorge, off a cliff, or slamming into a tree. I could see in his eyes that Andy was scared too. We had no idea how long this ride would last.

THE END – TO BE CONTINUED