After The Goldrush

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Abstract

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I jumped off the logging truck into a rutted dirt street and sat down on the wooden sidewalk. The town was small, mostly bum Indians, loggers, and a few clinging, dreaming miners. The buildings were all gold rush originals. I scanned the street. "Gold Dust Cafe," "Chilikoot Charlie's," and "The Robert Service Memorial Steamboat Anchor," a rusty ton of metal set aside in a weak and long-forgotten attempt at tourism. Everybody I saw obviously lived here. Dawson City, Yukon, is a long way from home. Dawson City, Yukon, is a long way from anywhere.

It was late evening by the watch, but the midnight sun made nine o'clock look like lunchtime. I sat on the sidewalk, boots in the dust, watching the little Indian kids horse around with a mangy collie.

It had been a long time since I'd let myself sink down and feel alone. A couple of old loggers and a squaw lurched into "Chilikoot Charlie's" and I thought what the hell, I'll have a beer and watch the people down home have some fun. A lot of color in there, at least. I don't need to sit here and hear me tell myself how low I feel.

The three hundred pound owner-bouncer brought me a beer. The sparse room was about half-full, but noisy. Weekend drinking up North is done with a vengeance. Already the loggers were starting to put their arms around
greasy, heavy-lidded old squaws over by the Western Shuffle-board machine.

It was time to be a part of something again, but I didn’t find anything to join here. I engaged an old miner in a luckless conversation. Interesting, but he was just a little suspicious as to why I gave a damn. I decided to leave after another beer, which I ordered before heading for the john.

I washed my hands and caught sight of a little Indian kid about eight or nine standing at the urinal. The kid glanced hurriedly my way, then dropped his eyes to his business. I leaned on the sink, smiling. “What the hell you doing in here? Having a beer?” I didn’t really mean to sound serious, I didn’t give a damn what the kid was doing in the toilet of a two-bit bar. Taking a pee, obviously.

But he zipped up frantically, and turned in panic, saying “Hey mister, I’m sorry, don’t get me in trouble, we ain’t got no toilet at home and I just stopped in, every place else is closed up and I’m gonna leave right after.”

I didn’t expect that. It kind of stopped me, so I mumbled something like O.K. and went back to my beer. I watched the two burly loggers sitting at a table next to me. I could smell the one sitting in a chair about a foot away from mine. They were talking about forest fires and the table was covered with beer froth. I leaned back in the wobbly chair. The Indian kid slunk out of the can and looked longingly across the bar to the door. How he got in originally, undetected, was a mystery. To escape he had to pass between my table and the table the two drunk loggers occupied. He was scared.

The kid took a ragged breath and tried to kind of scrunch down into himself and beeline toward the door. It didn’t work. He got to the aisle between the tables, but one of the loggers spotted him and jammed a foot across to my table. The kid stood still, staring at the obstacle to his freedom. He didn’t say anything.

“Well now, he don’t look twenty-one, but he sure as hell acts like it” slurred the one closest to me. His partner chuckled. The place was loud and nobody else really noticed. The kid saw me, but looked away and stared helplessly at a spot on the floor.

“I ain’t cheap, little Geronimo,” he continued, “C’mere and have one on me.” He grabbed the kid around the neck
with one bullish hand and grabbed a mug with the other.

Oh man, I thought, this isn’t what I had in mind at all. The man started to pour beer on the kid’s face and down his dirty shirt. I sat my chair down, and slowly planted one cocked leg against the bastard’s chair seat. He was angled toward me. He stopped drowning the kid for a minute and cocked his head my direction. Just as he started to frown, I braced my free leg against the table and shoved the other full force against his chair. He didn’t even have time to break the backwards topple of his seat, flailed with his free hand, caught the table and brought it and gallons of beer crashing down on top of him on the sawdust bar floor.

Well, that’s how things end up. Ambitious beginnings and blind alleys. I didn’t even bother to think what was going to happen next. The kid made his sprint for the door and disappeared into the street.

The guy’s partner got up, with more than a little blood in his eye, and took a step toward me. But the owner-bouncer muscled his way through the gathering crowd standing around us, grabbed me and hustled me in no uncertain terms toward the door. I didn’t object.

The sun was on the mountain outside. It was almost midnight. I stepped off the sidewalk and angrily caught myself expecting a thank-you or something from the little fugitive.

I looked up the street. Empty. I turned and looked the other way. The same. Well then, I thought, it doesn’t make much difference which way I go. I started walking.

Elusive Thoughts

by Jack Beddall

Zool., Senior

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