



Fort Greely

- An Unfinished Story -

by

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Standing on the top of Donnelly Dome, fourteen-year-old Jimmy Hamilton took in the panoramic scene of the Tanana River Valley 2400 feet below. To his right the Richardson Highway linked the town of Delta Junction, twenty miles northeast, with Valdez 250 miles to the southwest. In the distance, the majestic snow-capped mountains of the Alaska Range stood out dramatically against a threatening line of dark clouds moving up the valley floor. Looking down at Isaac Buckley, resting from the steep climb that had finally brought them to the summit, he said, “Wow. What a view.”

“It’s cold up here,” Isaac commented briefly, shivering from the gusty August wind that enveloped them both.

“A little while ago you were sweating,” Jimmy responded with a laugh.

“Well. I’m cold now, and hungry too. Wish I’d brought some food along.”

Jimmy reached into his small backpack, pulled out two large chocolate bars, and offered one to Isaac. Accepting the candy, Isaac tore off the wrapper and began chewing. When finished, he allowed as how he would be glad to head back down as soon as Jimmy was ready.

“In a couple of minutes. I want to look around first.”

As Isaac stood up and slapped his arms against his chest, Jimmy walked over to several large flat rocks lying twenty yards away. His Uncle Jacob had explained to him several months earlier that Donnelly Dome was actually a fleiberg, the lone remnant of a mountain that had been overridden by ice 70,000 to 100,000 years ago. Somehow, a glacier traveling down the valley had left the dome intact while dumping rocks from another location on its top. ‘How did the fleiberg escape being scraped flat by the ice?’ Jimmy asked his uncle at the time. Probably due to its being squeezed between two distinct tongues of the glacier, was Jacob’s best guess. Whatever the cause, Donnelly Dome was a popular site to climb for locals and summer tourists alike. Hikers had to be careful, though, for the way up was incredibly steep in several places. The last thing Jimmy’s mother told the two boys before they left in the morning was to be sure and stay

on the trail. He had acknowledged his mother's warning at the time, but it was hardly the kind of advice he was likely to follow.

"Hey, Jimmy. Let's go."

"Hold on. I think I see another way down."

"If there's only one way up, there isn't going to be another way down."

"Take a look," Jimmy said, pointing to a line of small breaks in the brush winding down the steep slope. "Doesn't that look like a trail to you?"

"Sure, if you're a mountain goat. Explore it if you like. I'm heading back the way I came." Given Jimmy's stubbornness, Isaac knew better than to try and change his friend's mind. Instead, he asked, "When is your mom picking us up?"

"In about an hour. Come on. I'll race you."

"I'll be in the parking lot when you arrive," Isaac responded with a grin.

As Isaac turned toward the well-worn path that had brought him to the top of the dome, Jimmy gingerly edged his way down the other side, avoiding as best he could the crumbly stone and slippery sand that made the descent difficult. Five hundred feet below, a large rock temporarily blocked his path. Slowly traversing its face, he continued down the slope toward the parking lot and gravel road leading to the Richardson Highway and home. Ten minutes later, he stopped to rest in a small grove of alders. Directly in front of him lay a small canister, half buried in the earth. He picked it up, shook it, slammed the rusted metal against a nearby rock, and looked inside. At that moment, a wave of dizziness swept through his body followed by an overwhelming nausea. He immediately shouted for Isaac to help, but there was no response. When his head finally cleared, he eased his way down the remainder of the slope. Standing by a picnic table at the base of the dome, Isaac stared at him, his face lined with worry. "Jesus. What happened to you?" he asked, observing the sickly expression on Jimmy's face.

"I don't know. I feel really awful. I hope mom will be here soon."

In Delta Junction, Sara Akattah Hamilton sat at the dining room table across from her husband, Dusty. Together, they ran a small backcountry bed and breakfast located at the western edge of town. Even in that remote state Delta Junction was considered an isolated outpost. In 1903, it was a way station on the overland trail linking coastal Valdez with interior Fairbanks, ninety miles to the northeast. Ten years later, miners flooded the region, seeking their fortunes during the Chisana Gold Rush of 1913. They were followed by the arrival of the Alaska Highway in World War II, Fort Greely military base in 1953, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline two decades later, and finally, the influx of several large farms

generated by state-run lotteries in the early 1980s. Eventually, the Thompson family became inured to the changes taking place in and around their small community. Nevertheless, they knew that life in the Alaska wilds remained full of surprises over which they had little control.

While eating lunch, Sara and Dusty shared their concern over the rumor that the military was planning to reduce the personnel at Fort Greely. Of course, they could count on truckers and salesmen continuing to stop overnight on trips to and from Fairbanks, as well as summer tourists exploring interior Alaska. But that was about it. If the guest list did diminish, it would at least give Dusty an opportunity to undertake much-needed repairs that had caused customers to complain about the plumbing. Sipping his coffee, he watched his wife finish the last bite of food on her plate. A tall, muscular woman with ample body to match, Sara's high cheekbones, straight black hair and soft brown complexion reflected her Athabascan Indian heritage, a birthright she wore with pride.

Wiping her mouth with a napkin, Sara looked at Dusty and said, "Jimmy and Isaac biked over to Donnelly Dome this morning. Given the rain showers predicted for this afternoon, I said I'd pick them up in the van around two."

"I'd be more concerned about their hiking around Fort Greely than getting wet in the rain."

"As long as they follow the trail, it should be all right."

"I'm not so sure."

"If you're thinking of Jacob's remark about earlier chemical weapon testing at the base, you needn't worry. A physician from Fort Wainwright spoke at a town meeting recently and said there was absolutely no cause for alarm."

"That's what he's paid to say," Dusty continued, "But I don't believe a word of it. By the way, how is Jacob these days?"

"About the same. I really need to visit him in Tanacross soon."

A two-hour drive southeast of Delta Junction near the Canadian border, Tanacross was the Athabascan Indian community where Sara and her older brother Jacob grew up. In the 1960s, Jacob worked briefly as a civilian employee at Fort Greely where Dusty was a sergeant in the army. Following passage of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act in 1971, Jacob quit his job at the base to take a position in the newly formed tribal government responsible for local resource management. Not long afterwards, he told his sister of his fear that the history of weapons testing on the Greely reservation was related to Athabascan complaints about their moose meat 'tasting funny.' Diagnosed with cancer eight years later, Jacob again speculated on whether his own poor health was associated with 'funny meat.' Except, in talking with his sister, he put it more bluntly. "You know Sara, the government has no respect for the *Tanah*. Our indigenous

rights are devalued while our lands are destroyed before our very eyes. And when we become sick, no one really cares." Of course, Sara did care as did Jacob's many friends in Tanacross. But all the villagers were at a loss to know what to do about the harm being done to their land.

Finished her meal, Sara got up from the table, gave Dusty a quick kiss, and then went outside and drove off in the family van. At the junction of the Tanana and Delta Rivers, she turned southeast past Jarvis Creek and soon arrived at a narrow dirt road leading to the base of Donnelly Dome. Parking in the small lot, she looked around. No one was there. She then sat down on a log next to the van and waited. A few minutes later, her son limped toward her, his face contorted in a mask of misery.

"Honey. What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I feel sick all over."

"What happened?"

"I can't explain it."

Looking around the parking space, Sara asked, "Where's Isaac?"

"He went to get help."

At that moment, Isaac rode up on his bike. "Gee, Mrs. Hamilton. I tried to call you from the gas station down the road but no one answered. I'm sure glad you're here."

"Put your bikes in the van. We're going straight to town."

Following a frantic ride to Delta Junction, Sara swung her van into the lot next to the office of the town's lone physician. Opening the side door of the van so Isaac could remove his bike, she promised to call later and let him know how Jimmy was doing. After Isaac left, she helped Jimmy up the stairs and into the building. Seated at the reception desk, Marge Johnson, a neighbor and good friend, glanced up, took one look at the pained expression on Jimmy's face, and asked Sara, "What happened to James?"

"I don't know. Is Doctor Maplewood in?"

"He's with a patient right now but will be finished in a minute or two."

At that moment, a tall white-haired man with bow tie and neatly pressed slacks entered the room, took one look at the boy standing in front of him, and said, "You appear a little under the weather, son. Let's go in the other room where I can take a good look at you."

In his office, Dr. Maplewood asked Jimmy to explain exactly what had happened. After Jimmy told him about the metal object, the dizziness, and the vomiting, the doctor gave him a quick physical examination. Then, turning to Sara, he pointed to the red splotches on the boy's hands and neck. "Has your son ever been bothered by this kind of rash in the past?"

"Not that I remember. Why do you ask?"

"No special reason. But just to be on the safe side, I'd like to do a few lab tests."

"You think it might be serious?"

"I don't think so. But I need to see the test results to be sure."

"When will that be?"

"As soon as I get them back from the hospital in Fairbanks. The lab usually responds quickly. I wouldn't be too concerned about the boy. I expect he'll be fine in a day or two. When we are finished here, take him home, gently rub this cream on the inflamed areas, and make sure he gets plenty of rest. If the lab turns up anything unusual, I'll let you know." Dr. Maplewood then looked at Sara sympathetically and asked, "How is Dusty feeling these days?"

"About the same. He's always tired, but never complains."

"Please give him my warm greetings."

Sara then turned to Marge and they chatted while the doctor took Jimmy into a room across the hall. Five minutes later he returned, still shaken, though feeling a little better. Saying goodbye to Marge, Sara helped Jimmy back into the van and drove to her home two miles away. After their departure, Dr. Maplewood spoke briefly with his assistant, then reentered his office and closed the door. At his desk he twirled a pencil in both hands while considering what to do about the boy he had just seen. Finally, he picked up the phone and placed a call to Major William Bennett at Fort Wainwright.

"Hello, Bill? This is Frank Maplewood in Delta Junction. You remember the discussion we had a month ago about medical problems in the region?"

"Yes," the major answered, in a slightly guarded voice.

"Another patient with dizziness, headache, and a rash just showed up at the office."

"Oh, really. Who is that?"

“Dusty and Sara Hamilton’s son, Jimmy. Dusty was stationed at Fort Greely years ago. He and Sara now run a bed and breakfast on the edge of town. The son’s story is rather bizarre. Thinks he was zapped by some object he can’t explain.”

“Where did this happen?”

“On the Texas Range near the base of Donnelly Dome.”

“What does the boy mean by zapped?”

“He was hiking down from the top of the Dome. Near the bottom he sat down to rest. Seeing a metallic object of some sort, he reached for it and suddenly became nauseated. When I saw him, a severe rash had spread over his hands and neck.”

“You know, Frank,” Major Bennett said with a chuckle, “kids these days are watching too much TV. God knows what it does to their imagination. The symptoms you describe are probably just latent signs of an illness manifesting itself at that particular moment. Have you done any tests on the boy?”

“A few. I’m sending the results to the hospital in Fairbanks for analysis. Do you want me to send a set to the lab at Fort Wainwright as well?”

“That would be a good idea.” After a slight pause, the major continued, “Frank, for the time being, I’d just as soon you kept this story to yourself. No need to worry others in town about it.”

“Are you referring to the strange object or patient confidentiality?”

“Patient confidentiality, of course.”

The conversation over, Dr. Maplewood hung up the phone and shook his head in dismay. He knew exactly what Major Bennett had in mind by his request. Military personnel at Fort Wainwright, near Fairbanks, were handling environmental cleanup of the 64,000 acre Fort Greely reservation. He called Major Bennett because Jimmy’s problem occurred in the Texas Range, one of several locations where, years ago, the U.S. Army had undertaken extensive biological and chemical weapons testing. Opening a file in his desk drawer, he pulled out a page containing a list of names. Given the small civilian population in the region, the list contained a surprisingly large number of patients with unusual illnesses, all of whom were associated in one way or another with Fort Greely. Might there be a correlation between these illnesses and earlier military tests? It didn’t seem likely. But he wished he could be sure.