

Gold fever Trevor Roy

At first, there were no people and places had no names. Things simply were back then, before language and labels, pronouns and progress. Time has little meaning without life to live in it. Without life to die in it. So time passed, or perhaps it didn't, and I simply was. I have been around for ever so long you see, so you'll forgive me if I can only really remember the last hundred thousand years or so. There was life by then, most definitely. Mega-fauna I think they call it now and that feels appropriate. Mammoths with tusks as thick as tree trunks. Giant beavers building giant dams. I spent a winter in a dam once, but that's a story for another time. The mega-fauna disappeared soon after the people arrived. The people with their cleverness and their thumbs. They brought fire, tools and traps to the land. They gave names to the mountains and the rivers. It took time, but we learnt to live in harmony, the people and those of us who were there before. They took but they also gave back. They respected the balance that sustains us all. Our story and theirs became intertwined and they added colour to it.

Not so with the people who came after.

I remember the first time I sat in the palm of a human hand. The salt and grime trapped in its creases. Its humidity. The hand raised me to a pair of curious eyes and turned me over so that I could be scrutinised from every angle. A sudden, sharp pain and my smooth skin was indented with the mark of two front teeth. Those same teeth then grinned a lopsided smile and a set of five grubby fingers closed over me. The prospector gleefully clutched me to his breast and then dropped me into a dank pocket. The world outside was blurry and grey through the threadbare material of his shirt. I watched as he hammered stakes into the ground and carved his name into the wood. Then he slung a pack on his back and set off along the river, singing throatily as we went.

I heard the hustle and bustle of the city before I saw it. I was grateful that the lights and the noise were muted from the safety of my pocket. We strode down the main street, the prospector and I, and I could feel the excitement beating in his chest. He ducked through the low doorway of a log building, where he held a brief conversation with a uniformed officer. The officer disappeared into a back room and the prospector tapped his foot impatiently while he waited. He was overflowing with an irrepressible energy and spoke volubly to anyone who would listen and everyone who wouldn't. His words had a curious effect on those who heard them. Some people stopped and stared. Many dropped whatever they were doing and rushed out the door. By the time the officer returned we were the only ones left in the room. The prospector initialled a document, folded it into his other breast pocket and then ducked out the same way he had come.

Our next stop was a more colourful edifice. The exterior had been gaily painted a pastel pink and the interior was all polished wood and plush leather seats. Spinning roulette wheels decked the floor and spinning girls danced on stage. The prospector kicked the dirt off his boots and we crossed the threshold. The news of our arrival had preceded us. People gathered around and slapped the prospector on the back, kissed him on his hairy cheeks, shook him rigorously by the hand. A tumbler of whisky was placed in front of him and quickly drained, followed by another and then another. My captor's voice got louder and his vocabulary coarser. Suddenly, his fingers were fumbling around for me and I was yanked out into the open. I was overwhelmed for a moment by shouting and the smell of sweat and tobacco. The prospector slammed me down on the green felt of the table. There was a clatter as five bone dice scattered and landed beside me. I couldn't make out the roll, but from my central vantage point I saw the prospector's face hesitate and crumple. A hush fell. Then a cry of triumph from the opposite side of the table and I was scooped up by unfamiliar fingers and shoved into a trouser pocket. Cushioned by a thick layer of lint, I came to rest quite comfortably. I was fully in darkness now. My new owner stayed seated for a long time and I could hear him drinking and celebrating his good fortune well into the night.

At last we stood and, on shaky legs, exited the pastel pink building. The brightness of the midnight sun penetrated even the thick wool of my pocket so that I knew we were in the street outside. The man carrying me stumbled and then lurched away in the direction of the river. We could not have gone more than a few hundred yards when I heard a scuffling, followed by a dull crack. The legs supporting me went limp. Seconds later, something pawed roughly at my hiding place and yanked me from it. I emerged, squinting, into a scene I will never be able to forget. A body lay in the road, limbs askew, face in the dirt. Blood bubbled from beneath a thick mat of dark hair and pooled around the dead man's head. A pickaxe, red and sticky, lay discarded beside him. Before I could discern who was responsible, I was jammed into darkness again and we were away. I felt the murderer break into a run, fleeing his crime, turning haphazardly down side streets in a blind panic until we had left the city far behind.

Once we slowed to a walk, I stopped bouncing around long enough to take stock of this new pocket I was in. Or was it a new pocket. The threadbare material. The check of the shirt. The nervous excitement of the heart beating on the other side. All at once, I was convinced this murderer was the very same prospector who had taken me from the riverbed. We journeyed through the night and, as we neared our destination, my suspicions were confirmed when I recognised the wooden stakes which marked the spot where I had lain only the previous day. The prospector entered a rickety cabin and placed me tenderly down on a wooden tabletop. I looked up into the face of this villain, this devil, remembering the terrible thing he had done. Yet his expression did not resemble that of a dispassionate killer. I was shaken to see tears dripping from his untidy whiskers. His eyes were pinched shut, as if he couldn't bear to look at me. We remained like that for several minutes, the strength of his emotion shaking his entire body. Eventually his trembling subsided. He wiped the moisture from his cheeks with the back of his hand and turned away before opening his eyes.

Weeks passed, and then months, and we stayed together, just him and I, on our little claim by the creek. He never moved me from the table and whenever I caught his eye, he would quickly look away. He threw himself into his work and toiled each day until his hands blistered and his back bent. He slept only when he collapsed with exhaustion, but he never found another speck of gold. I had warned the others of his wickedness and they stayed far from that place.

The days became shorter and colder; frost glittered on the grass in the mornings, yet the prospector wouldn't stop. It seemed as though he couldn't. One morning he didn't rise from his cot. He shivered and sweated, tossed and turned. He stayed in bed all of that day and all of the next. I watched as the meat seemed to melt from his bones. His skin took on a greyish hue and his hair lost its oily sheen. I heard his breathing become laboured and raspy. On the third day he turned his bloodshot eyes to me. There was a calm hidden there that I hadn't seen before. The prospector picked up the used nub of a pencil from his bedside table and, failing to find any paper nearby, solemnly traced words onto the planks of the floor. A sudden fit of coughing drew a lump of blood and sputum from his ragged lungs. It landed next to his final scrawl like a wet piece of punctuation. Finished, he lay back and folded his hands over his stomach. Another cough sent a spasm through his entire wretched body and I heard his soul depart in a final rattling sigh.

We weren't discovered until the next spring. Two younger men came upon the cabin and found the prospector's body near perfectly preserved by the cold. His index finger hung by the bed, pointing limply to the message he had written in his last moments. One of the men read it aloud.

"Hey get a load of this Frank, the old fella has written something on the floor here. 'Let my death be a lesson to those who would survive the north. I put my greed before my need and it has cost me everything.' What do you think it means?"

But the man named Frank was no longer listening. His eyes, roving the room, had fallen on me. As he gazed, I saw the embers of lust begin to flicker; the kindling for the avarice in his heart. I knew then that my journey with people had only just begun.