

Lucky Encounter

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A story of a chance encounter of a non-romantic type involving Yellowstone national Park.



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Bill loved the outdoors and was an avid hiker. He logged about 250 miles a year on trails. At 27 years of age Bill had already hiked in many of the National Parks across America. He received his back country permit for his June hike at Yellowstone Park in the mail. This would be his sixth hike in Yellowstone and he couldn't wait to get started. He drove the 1,400 mile from Chicago to the park in two days.

Bill had planned his route carefully. He would follow the 18 mile Bighorn pass trail toward Indian creek but would cut cross country to Tom Miner camp and pick up the trail to Ramshorn Peak. The high country would still have snow in spots but the trail along the south ridge of the mountain would be passable without snow gear. The numerous peaks in the region were all over 9,000 feet elevation. All in all Bill would be hiking 32 miles in 10 days. Bill chose the northern part of the park this time because the trails would not be crowded. Bill always hiked alone and really enjoyed the solitude with nature. He knew the wilderness was unforgiving, even in national parks so he always took precautions to be safe. His route was filed with the park service and he always carried a cell phone and emergency gear. He also left a copy of the schedule, route and contact information with his parents back in Chicago.

Bill arrived at the trailhead late on the second day of driving. He didn't bother pitching his small back packing tent, he just dropped his pad and bag next to his car and went right to sleep. In the morning the smell of pines was replaced by the smell of bacon as the campground came to life. Bill finished the last of the coffee in his thermos and the sweet rolls he picked up at a bakery on the way. He filled his water bottle and washed up. Then he put his frame pack on his shoulders and headed down the trail, happy as a lark to be out in God's country again.

On his third day of hiking, Bill was going cross-country from beaver pond to the trailhead at Tom Miner Camp. He followed a ridgeline at about 8,500 foot elevation. It was easy hiking and mostly low scrub vegetation. There were a few pockets of snow where the sun didn't reach and the vistas to the south were amazing. Bill could see Cinnamon Peak dominate the southern skyline of peaks. Bill took off his pack and sat on a boulder so he could change his damp socks. He found that a changing his socks frequently prevented hot spots and blisters. He had just finished tying his hiking boots when he heard a god-awful bawl behind him. Turning he saw a bear cub and without warning a large grizzly bear paw swiped and hit his back sending him rolling down a steep ravine. There was nothing to grab onto but scree and he went over a second ledge and fell. Falling was the last thing he remembered until he came to.

Bill was wedged against a scrub pine on a wide, moderately slopping ledge. He climbed to his feet and looked around. He was not seriously hurt but he was bleeding from cuts and scrapes. He took off his jacket and the rip-stop nylon on the back had been damaged by the claws but they didn't go through they were more like snags. Bill felt lucky to be alive. There was no way to climb back up the way he came down. Bill checked his pockets. He had a bag of trail mix that he put there to snack on while he walked. He had a folding knife on his belt. His cell phone, matches and everything else he had with him, was on top, with his pack. Bill yelled "Shit" as loud as he could to relieve some frustration.

Bill could see Cinnamon peak in the distance to the west. He knew before he got to the peak he would cross U.S Highway 191, which ran north and south. As long as Bill headed toward that mountain he would cross the highway, there was no way to miss it. He would not even be missed for 7 more days and he would be hard to find as there was no official trail where he got knocked down. Bill decided to head to the highway. He figured it would take him about three days to get there. At least the hike would be mostly downhill and through a

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large forest of pines and hardwoods where he would be more sheltered. Bill realized as he started walking that he was going to be very sore later from the fall. The nighttime temperatures were in the mid to upper 30s. Bill made a pine bough bed to lie on just before dark and although he got cold in the night he was off again hiking at first light. Even without a compass he could keep his direction quite well with intermittent views of Cinnamon peak.

On the second day after the fall Bill saw a person thrashing through the forest.

“Hello there! Hey!” Bill yelled as loud as he could to get their attention and the person stopped and looked in his direction. They headed toward each other and Bill could see it was an older woman with long black hair. When they got even closer he realized she was Asian, probably Japanese. He recognized the words “help me” but most of the rest of the words were in Japanese or something like it. She had no purse and was not dressed for the outdoors. At least she had a long coat on.

Bill motioned with his hands for her to relax by lowering his open hands palm down toward the ground and repeating the motion. The lady was frantically yelling in this foreign language. Then he put his finger in front of his lips and said “shh, relax, hush,” in a very low and calm tone. The lady seemed to understand and became quiet. She stood in front of Bill wild eyed and shaking.

“Do you speak any English?” Bill asked calmly.

“Small,” The lady said holding her thumb and index finger close together indicating a small distance. The lady was still panting quite hard.

Bill tried asking her where she came from and what happened but he could not understand her and he knew she didn’t understand him either. Bill managed to establish her name was Kayo and she understood his name was Bill. He motioned for her to follow him and they walked together toward the road. Bill shared his trail mix with Kayo. She was hungry and happy to have something to eat.

After the sun set, Bill found a good place to spend the night. Bill made Kayo and himself a thick soft bed of pine branches next to each other and they both lied down for the night. They were warm from hiking but about two hours later Bill woke and was aware that Kayo was shivering uncontrollably. Bill stood up and walked the few steps to Kayo’s bed in almost total darkness. He reached for her hand and it was trembling as she continued to shiver. Bill opened her coat and opened his jacket. He climbed on top of her and hugged her tightly against his warm body. He breathed his warm breath onto her neck. Kayo wrapped her arms around him under his jacket. Her shivering started to subside as Bill shared his warmth with her. Finally Kayo started to dose off to sleep. Bill spent the night embracing her and dosing also. It seemed like a very long night.

At the first light of pre-dawn they finished the bag of trail mix and started walking again. By midday they started hearing an occasional car on the highway and knew they were close. Bill flagged down the first car that came by, it was headed south back into the park. It was a couple from Denver on vacation. They shared some cookies and soda with Bill and Kayo while they drove to the next business which was a diner and gas station outside the north entrance to the park. Bill explained to the manager briefly what happened and asked to use the phone to call the police. The Wyoming Highway Patrol said they would send a car to the diner to pick them both up. The manager at the diner brought them some hot soup and bread free of charge while they waited. Kayo smiled at Bill as they sat in a large booth and ate. When the patrol car pulled into the lot they stood to go out and Kayo gave Bill a hug and a kiss on the cheek before they got outside. Bill was curious to find out why she was alone in the woods but that could wait. For now he was happy that fate brought them together for he feared if they had not met she may have died.

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