



SOURDOUGH CHRONICLES

Border Town Characters

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Del looks me directly in the eye and asks, “What are you doing this summer, girl?”

“Slinging beer and burgers,” I answer.

Del is a regular customer of mine who builds log homes in his spare time. It’s 1989 and I’m the barmaid, waitress, and on-call cook at Whitehorse’s Airline Inn. As a single mother of two young children, it’s tough to make ends meet. I’ve decided trade skills would be helpful in the long run, so I’ve enrolled at Yukon College for the fall.

“I’ve got a joint up on the Alaska-Yukon border called Marvin’s Roost,” Del says. “I need a hard working manager for the summer. Are you interested?”

“How much money, honey?” I ask, as I start doing the math in my head. I’m counting on my current income (not including tips) to sustain me for the fall and winter while I attend college, and so far things are looking bleak.

“If you make it through the summer I’ll throw in a \$2,000 bonus,” he offers.

All I hear is the part about a bonus, and we’re shaking hands to seal the deal. I should have paid attention to the part about making it through the summer.

Beaver Creek is at Mile 1,202 on the Alaska Highway, close to the border of Alaska. It’s Canada’s westernmost non-incorporated community. In 1989, the tiny Yukon border town has a population of roughly 100 people, not including transient summer workers.

Marvin’s Roost is a log lodge situated along the highway. The main building has a dining room and bar and is decorated with an impressive collection of antiques. The motel runs along the exterior, but what I call the “real deal rooms”—with no running water or electricity, where most people sleep on the floor for free—are found around back. I sleep in the room closest to the kitchen with my kids.

A typical day starts with cranking on the old stove at 5:00 a.m. and ends with the bar shutting down at 1:00 a.m. or once we run out of alcohol, whichever happens first. There is not a lot of sleep time



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between start up and shut down, and I quickly realize the place loses staff regularly right after payday.

The RV crowd waits outside the lodge each morning eagerly waiting for me to open. Most times I’m a one-woman show in the dawn’s early light. A creative strategy helps me tackle the morning rush.

“Good morning, everyone. If you’re in a hurry, I can’t feed you,” I say. “If you give me a hand, I can promise you pancakes before coffee break.”

Sure enough, the customers who want breakfast help wash dishes and clean tables. I’m not sure what they enjoy more, the food or the work.

Surprises are a common occurrence in the early mornings, as well. One dusky morning, a large, white Cadillac convertible with red leather interior is parked outside the lodge. Behind the wheel is a large, blonde lady in a teeny-weeny, multicoloured, polka-dot bikini. Judging by her mosquito and blackfly bites, she has clearly spent the night in the Cadillac with the top down.

“Hey darling,” she says with a slow, southern drawl. “Which turn takes me to Vegas?”

All sorts of people come and go through border towns like Beaver Creek. You never know who will come across those geographic boundaries. Beaver Creek is like a funnel, channeling law-abiding folk from one country to the next in nearly perfect order—until it doesn’t work.

On a particularly dark morning, a gut feeling has the hair on my arms standing up when I come across two unknown men sitting on the front steps of Marvin’s Roost.

“What’s up guys?” I say, keeping my voice steady and light.

“Got any day olds?” asks the younger, slighter one.

“I can do better than that,” I reply in my friendliest voice. My children are sleeping just around the corner. Instinctively, I want to keep these men as far away from them as possible.

“Grab a seat and I’ll get you some coffee. Looks like you boys have been hunting in the mountains,” I say.

“Yeah, our truck is stuck in the woods near the border,” the younger one replies. “We were hunting a moose and got lost.” The older, heavier guy doesn’t say a word.

“No problem. A guy down the road has a tow truck. He pulls people out of the bush all the time,” I say. “I can cook you a couple of eggs and we’ll give him a call.”

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The big guy pushes past me towards the bathroom. I don't like this because now my back escape route is spoiled. Suddenly, Robert, the lodge handyman, comes in the back door at that very moment. The young guy is fidgeting. The older one returns to the table and lifts his head to stare at Robert, asking who he is.

"He lights the stove," I reply.

Turning to the kitchen, Robert grabs my arm. "Run out the back door as fast as you can," he says, but I decline.

"No, I don't want to alarm these two. I'm going to say the tow is here for their truck, then I'll walk straight to the RCMP."

Robert informs me that RCMP officers are already outside. With guns. My voice trembles with nerves.

"Your eggs are done!" I yell from the kitchen. "Hey, the tow truck is pulling in next door. I'll stop him."

Both men are sitting with their heads lowered as I hurry past, saying I'll be right back. I open the front door and end up staring down the barrels of several pistols. My two unexpected guests are two of America's most wanted. They tried sneaking past the Alaska-Yukon border through the bush and got stuck in the muskeg.

A week later, another interesting visitor named Vince shows up at Marvin's Roost. He's arrived from the southern U.S., bound for Valdez, Alaska.

Vince had been an accountant in Boise, Idaho—far from the sea and even farther from Alaska. He's not much older than me, but his life choices led him down a different path. I explain I'm on my own

with two small children, trying to get by; however, his responsibility is much larger than mine. He's determined he'll support our home, the earth, and tells me he's on his way to mop up the crude oil floating in Prince William Sound and help the suffocating birds and sea mammals in the wake of the *Exxon Valdez* spill.

The *Exxon Valdez* was a relatively new tanker used to transport crude oil from Valdez to the lower 48 states. Tragically, in March 1989, the ship struck the Bligh Reef, spilling nearly 40 million U.S. gallons of its cargo into the sparkling blue waters, coating approximately 2,000 km of coastline and 28,000-square-km of ocean.

This customer of mine is dedicating his life to saving this environment. Vince will no longer stay home and just verbally protest. And when he feels like he's made a difference, he will move on to the next disaster.

The challenges I'm tackling at Marvin's Roost are small by comparison. I'm focused on immediate needs like food, clothing, shelter, and education for my children. Vince is looking at a much bigger picture.

I didn't make it through the summer at Marvin's Roost and receive the \$2,000 bonus. But it wasn't because I couldn't handle the work. My daughter contracted whooping cough, so we returned to Whitehorse and spent the last two weeks in quarantine before school started.

However, I can say I spent one of the most interesting summers working in a border town where the Yukon and Alaska meet. And I got to know Vince, a hero to me, and for that I am very fortunate. **Y**