



QUEENIE; A
NOVELLA

RAYMOND GREINER

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QUEENIE; A NOVELLA

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About the Author

Chapter 1. War



Cold wind and rain is ceaseless and our foxholes have three inches of water soaking our boots causing wonder how our feet will survive if temperatures continue to drop. Bleak, desolate landscape commands visual dominance in every direction. Our company is entrenched in a line of defense connecting with adjacent companies. On the distant hill, we can see our enemy. They mingle about moving artillery in position. Thousands of marshalling Chinese communist troops well equipped and dressed in quilted cold weather garb, preparing for assault. One must question reasons for war. Our goals here I am unable to see or calculate. I only feel despair and anguish. No matter, I must support my comrades and obligated to perform at my best. I am corporal Samuel Williams, responsible for assigned fellow soldiers, and we are facing combat of the highest magnitude. Fear is present, but calmness prevails infused from our training.

The Chinese will come in three waves. Artillery fire directed in front of the advancing troops and also behind the second wave to prevent stalling the advance or spontaneous retreat. The third wave will have no weapons, gathering weapons from scattered dead of the first two waves. These are standard Chinese assault tactics, different from modern American military strategy most often performed by flanking, stealth and ambush.

The battle was intense. US commanders called air strikes and maximized artillery fire. Our M1 rifles became so hot from continuous rapid fire we poured water on the barrels. These Chinese troops were sacrificial, with dead and wounded scattered throughout the plain of attack. There can be no retreat; our only chance of winning this battle is devastation and death of the enemy. Reinforcements arrived and share positions adding firepower, slowing the Chinese offensive. US losses were high and my best buddy was shot through the head and died instantly. The entire scene is indescribable, beyond imagination for those who never experienced the horrors of war. A platoon was assigned to capture enemy survivors to be imprisoned. Our orders then came to pull back to battalion command center for reassignment. Trucks were waiting and we were moved to a central camp with tents in place. After chow, I ventured with my team to our assigned tent and began the process of absorbing all that happened. A resetting of mind and body, as we attempt to cope emotionally. The stench of death haunts us and our minds are scarred deeply by this ineradicable memory. No glory found in war, only agony, death and destructiveness.

How did I get to Korea? Thoughts drifted back. I joined the army in 1951. My childhood and teen years were awful times. There was no love present in any form or dimension. My father was an alcoholic. He physically abused my mother and abandoned her before my memory. We lived with my grandparents and my mother's mental state declined. She eventually was institutionalized. My grandmother was my single source of support since my grandfather was also an alcoholic, not abusive, but unemployed and in a drunken stupor most of the time, babbling incoherent, senseless things. My mother had a brother, Jake, in Alaska who operated a gold claim he staked in 1924. He visited us once

when I was twelve years old. I really liked Uncle Jake; he was fun to talk with, told stories about his adventures in Alaska building a cabin on his gold claim on a Yukon River tributary north of Fairbanks. I hated to see Uncle Jake leave. Uncle Jake represented my one and only emotional attachment regarding family love bonding during formative years. Thoughts of him remained vivid.

Even with my dysfunctional childhood, I did fairly well in school and received a partial scholarship to a local small college. I finished two semesters working part time as a busboy, but struggled to hold my head above water financially. I then joined the Army believing it could offer stability, which it did. Now, I am in a raging war, far beyond anything I could have ever imagined. Governments cause wars, and this scenario has been in place in excess of ten thousand years. Soldiers follow like lemmings and die by the thousands to appease government ambitions, supporting politically fabricated goals and agendas posturing to gain power, feathering their own nests and the cost is high. Those Chinese soldiers we slaughtered had families and homes and were trying to live within a system that completely dominated and controlled them. Payment for their service was death.

The reason given for this war was to protect the democracy of South Korea from the onslaught of communism dominant in the north separated by the 38th parallel. The Chinese entered the war to support North Korea creating massive resistance. Finally, the US accomplished a settling point and the 38th parallel was re-established as the boundary of the two conflicting countries and war ceased.

I was at a personal crossroad. I have three months remaining on my enlistment obligation and was transferred to a base in California. Near the end of my enlistment I received a letter from Uncle Jake in Alaska.

Chapter 2. Alaska



“Dear Samuel: I know you are in the Army and have endured the Korean War but since you are my only living relative, of the younger generation, I am reaching out to you for assistance. I am now sixty years old and have been mining my gold claim since 1924 and my body is beginning to feel the effects of aging. Arthritis has set in and getting worse. I can’t work the claim anymore and will be going into a care center for the aging and would like you to take over my claim. I can still walk, but must use a cane and am slow. I have 150,000 dollars in a retirement account in Fairbanks and this money should cover my costs during final years. If you come to Alaska, I will accompany you to the claim and teach you all I have learned and also where pockets of gold are most abundant. I also have 25,000 dollars in gold buried on the claim and will give this to you as startup capital. You are in my will and when I die you will inherit the claim. I may live a bit longer, hope to, but we all get old and die and must face that reality. This claim has plenty of gold remaining and it’s a lot of physical work during summer to dig and sluice it out, but you are young and I do feel you will enjoy living in Alaska. The cabin is a good one. I built it with great care and planning. It’s 30X20 with two rooms and a sleeping loft with a quality cast iron wood burning stove for heat. I also built a cache to store food. I have never enjoyed life as much as I have living at this cabin. It would please me if you accept this offer.

“I can only image what you have experienced in the war and respect you for surviving it. Nothing humankind has done more incorrectly than its habitual attachment to wars. Let me know if you can make it up here. If you need money for travel I will send it. Your friend, Uncle Jake.”

I couldn’t believe it. I had difficulty sleeping as I thought about Uncle Jake’s offer. I will truly be a lost soul when I leave the army, and have no plans or future. I had to take Uncle Jake’s offer. I decided to write him.

“Uncle Jake: How nice to get your letter. I have never forgotten your visit when I was twelve years old. I am scheduled for discharge next month and considered re-enlisting but your proposal is a better option. Send me the location where you are staying. I will get a flight to Fairbanks as soon as I am discharged. I have plenty of money to travel, and am looking forward to talking with you again. I can’t imagine anything more exciting than this opportunity.

“You probably have a boat and we can travel to the claim offering new direction and I can assist you in any manner I am able. Write soon. Your nephew, Samuel”

A week later, Uncle Jake’s response letter arrived.

“Dear Samuel: I was delighted to read you accept my offer. I’m still plenty good to spend time with you at the claim, it will be great fun to show you what I have accomplished during my years mining gold. I love wilderness areas and enjoy studying

wildlife. I do have a good boat, with an outboard motor. We can access the claim from Fairbanks in about four hours via river. I had great dog teams over the years, but gave my last team to a friend when my arthritis progressed. I still have the sled, it's a mid-size sled, Ideal for a four to six dog team. You will want to get a dog team, for sure, and can get to Fairbanks for supplies during winter easily in less than a day. It's summer now and I plan to stay with you at the cabin until winter sets in and then will return to the care center. I will teach you the tricks to finding gold. When you get your flight number and arrival time send a letter. I will have my long-time friend Bill Foster drive me to the airport to greet you. Bill worked the adjacent claim for years when he married and his wife Margaret wanted to stay in Fairbanks. He still owns the claim but doesn't work it now. You coming here is the best thing that could happen to us both. I need family connection and support and you need a new direction. You will fall in love with Alaska. Uncle Jake."

I received an honorable discharge from the Army a month later and already had my ticket to Fairbanks and informed Uncle Jake of my flight number and arrival time. I felt so good about this opportunity it seemed like a miracle.

Landing at the airport in Fairbanks didn't seem like Alaska, more like every other city, buildings, traffic and people wandering about. Uncle Jake and his friend Bill were at the gate to greet me.

I hugged Uncle Jake and he introduced me to his long-time friend Bill Foster. He was a tall, muscular man, easily recognized as a one of the North Country, with a very pleasant and comfortable demeanor—much like Uncle Jake.

Uncle Jake said, "How great this is. I am so happy to see you and much lies ahead. We will stay with Bill and Margaret for one night then depart for the claim."

"Sounds good to me. It was a rough road in Korea. I feel fortunate to be alive. Your offer fits perfectly, I need change, and the idea of less people surrounding me is needed while I adjust away from wartime stress."

Bill drove a few miles to his home; a small frame house, neatly maintained and I met Margaret, a very pretty and pleasant woman. Margaret made a wonderful meal and I enjoyed Uncle Jake and Bill telling stories of the many years working their gold claims.

Bill said, "It was difficult to give up the claim, but aging was descending and Margaret is the best wife a man could ever find and these issues made me realize it was time for change. I saved over the years and we will be comfortable for our remaining years.

"What I miss most is the beauty of the wilderness and connection with animals and nature. This spectrum of life brings out something unexplainable in a person, may be an ancient genetic reaction."

Uncle Jake agreed, "Oh, yes, unexplainable. The best writers in history have struggled for centuries to describe it. Often use poetry and poetic phrases with flowery words in an attempt to allow readers to feel nature's spirituality. I personally think it's about being there, a personal sensation. Trying to explain it is not only impossible, it's unnecessary. The bliss I feel in wilderness areas dissipates when I return to Fairbanks or other metropolitan zones. Urban areas are foul, raspy places."

I said, “It’s interesting to hear this. You two have spent many years in remote, wild places, becoming attached to wilderness areas. When I was in Korea I also was in a wild, remote place and it was, by far, the most miserable time of my life, also unexplainable. I doubt any writer from any era could find poetic, flowery words to describe the horror of it and not only nature’s wrath caused misery and sleepless nights; it was mixed with overwhelming fear of dying. Although nature was present, the enemy was also present and introspection in any form was inconceivable. I would have given anything to be in an urban area, no matter how foul or raspy.

“However, I feel a sense of anticipation. War taints everything it touches, there is no beauty when senseless killing trumps all else, and no matter how dysfunctional cities are the battleground makes them look like paradise.”

Uncle Jake said, “War is the plague of humanity, pitting human against human, projecting evil, hate and spontaneous killing attached without purpose. In nature, there is no hate, and killing is a necessity only for survival, balance and harmony. You will gain insight and knowledge living in the wilderness, learn about survival and no hordes of Chinese troops will descend upon you. It will be a joyful time for us both.”

The next morning Bill drove Uncle Jake and me to a boat dock on the Tanana River. The boat had a 25hp outboard motor and two gas tanks. It was a large, flat bottom boat with a raised, straight bow, designed to carry heavy loads. Uncle Jake explained we would go south on the Tanana about ten miles then take a tributary short cut toward the Yukon River, but won’t go quite to the Yukon River since the claim is south of the river. I helped Bill load supplies, Uncle Jake had purchased a few days earlier and, in a short time, we cast off, heading downriver. It was a warm summer day, enhancing the emotion. It was comforting knowing I had an experienced companion. Uncle Jake has lived at his claim for over thirty years and knew every inch of the area, making the trip to Fairbanks hundreds of times.

We turned north toward the Yukon River and in about two hours arrived at Uncle Jake’s claim. First sighting was a large wheel device protruding into a wide section of the creek in front of the cabin. Uncle Jake explained this was his fish wheel and used to catch salmon during spawning runs. He dried the fish for his food and to feed his sled dogs, when he had them.

Uncle Jake stiffened during the long sit handling the motor, having difficulty getting out of the boat. I helped him onto the dock. I felt an odd emotional surge, and the cabin was magnificent, not big, but easily recognized as very special, displaying great effort was applied to build this cabin and the entire claim was orderly, emitting a sense of efficiency. There was a utility shed, elevated cache, woodshed and outhouse. Also, a dog kennel and shelter used when Uncle Jake had sled dogs, with various tools hanging just inside the woodshed. The logs used for the cabin’s walls were about ten inches in diameter. Green sod covered the roof of the cabin and other building. Moss was used for chinking between logs. This place entranced me.

After Uncle Jake walked a few paces, he loosened up and could move quite effectively using his cane. He smiled, looking directly into my eyes and asked, “What do you think of the place, Samuel?”

“I had not imagined it to be so nice, look so comfortable and is a place I will enjoy to the fullest. The surrounding forest and creek compare to calendar photos of Alaska. No wonder you stayed here for 30 years. I love it.”

Uncle Jake replied, “I have so much to tell you about this cabin and the surrounding forest. I built this cabin; cache, woodshed, kennel and outhouse with Bill’s help moving logs in place. When one builds a simplistic shelter a penetration forms and the attachment is magnified, greater than when a home is purchased.

“Let’s go inside, make coffee and discuss a plan.”

The cabin had two rooms, one larger near the front of the cabin, where the woodstove stood, a table with three chairs, sink and work counter for preparing food, pots and pans and metal dishes. Handcrafted pottery coffee cups painted with outdoors scenes completed this room. The back room was storage for clothing to suit various temperature changes, boots, and extra bedding. On a hanger was a fur parka, pants, with large mittens with a cord connecting them to be worn around the neck and mukluks for feet, Uncle Jake’s mid-winter clothing. The sleeping loft with ladder access was a low crawl-in arrangement. The cabin had three windows; two in the front room and one in the back room double paned for warmth during winter months. The floor was wood-planked. Also a small two-burner propane stove for use mostly during summer months. Uncle Jake lit the propane stove and began brewing coffee.

Uncle Jake gestured, “Sit at the table. I’ll bring coffee. It sure feels good to be here. I can’t get this place out of my mind. I have lived here so long and feel despair not being able to function properly to keep the place maintained. I thought of you often and it seemed right you should take it over. You will never enjoy living as much as you will living here.”

“Uncle Jake you don’t need to go into the care center as long as I am here. You still function quite well, and I can help you when need arises. You are very welcome to stay at this cabin as long as you are able. It makes no sense to me for you not to stay here. I can cut firewood and do the physical work required and you can help in many ways, cook food and we can talk and share life for years to come.”

Uncle Jake replied, “It does cause me to think about it. I can’t get up the ladder to the sleeping loft. We’d need to build a fold down bunk in the back room. I do feel I can carry some of the load. You were such a good kid when I visited years ago. I could tell you were bright, and now that your army days are over, this is a good path for you. You can earn a good living off this claim; I know this claim inside and out. I don’t need money at this stage of life. We can give it a try.”

I felt good about this. Uncle Jake knew the wilderness well and all the tricks to manage the rigors of winter. He knew how to find gold and separate the fine gold from black sand. He knew when to sell gold and when to hold it as prices fluctuate. His overall knowledge of living this life was boundless. He showed me his *National Geographic* magazine collection and said I could read these during winter’s hibernation. Also displayed a folding bathtub he uses in winter months. His life had meaning and purpose, he read constantly. His back room’s bookshelves were filled with subjects of every description. His interest in nature and local animal activity was as important to him as any

professional naturalist. He corresponded with the Walter Johnson the long time naturalist at McKinley National Park, a dedicated and knowledgeable scientist of natural land and its inhabitants. They exchanged sightings and results of habitat activity especially wolf and caribou interaction. In such a short time, I learned so much about Uncle Jake, much more than I could have ever anticipated.

Uncle Jake had a stack of rough sawn lumber behind the cabin and the next day we worked together to build his fold down bunk. An extra mattress was in the loft and sleeping bags of various comfort ranges for different seasons.

Uncle Jake offered, "I'll make lunch and show you how to make drop sourdough biscuits. I have a gallon of starter; you can't make it in this country without sourdough starter. It's unheard of."

Uncle Jake seemed happier than earlier, knowing he would be able to remain at his beloved cabin, at least for a while longer. It made me happier too, seeing him in such a state of joy.

We had beans with chunks of moose meat and drop biscuits with moose gravy. It was delicious and we both were hungry. Uncle Jake shoots one moose a year cutting some in strips to be dried.

"Samuel, I hunted game since I was a kid, but in recent years I have come to dislike hunting. There's no joy in killing animals but at this latitude practically nothing grows well because of the very short season, and the permafrost forbids a decent garden. I had to kill animals to feed my dogs; the salmon catch was never enough. Living here one must hunt or starve.

"I need to return to Fairbanks in a few days to retrieve my rifle and other things, and we can buy more supplies. We can stay at Bill and Margaret's they told me I am always welcome. Bill is my best friend, ever."

We stayed a few more days at the cabin organizing things, and Uncle Jake showed me the gold stash he gifted to me. It was buried on the hillside overlooking the cabin, marked with a typical looking stone. He also gave me a general description of where most of the gold can be found on the creek. He uses a pan to discover deposits then applies a wooden rocker sluice box to separate sand and gravel in the general area of the creek where the gold showed in the pan. He also told me about his neighbor who lives down creek about two miles he has known for years and helps him from time to time.

"His name's Philo Ketchum and he's about as opposite as one can be from me and Bill, rather crotchety and not social. Philo is not really as bad as most people think. Mostly he is just inept, and clumsy, doesn't apply himself enough and often makes mistakes from not thinking things through. Combined with his crass personality it portrays him as undesirable to those he contacts. Probably the worst hunter I have ever seen, and struggles to get enough meat for winter. I help him hunt in fall and showed him how to use snare traps for rabbits. He makes it, but barely. His claim is rich with color and he finds many nuggets and he does a good job sluicing. He spends too much on liquor and is often drunk and incoherent. I probably do too much for him, but I can't stand back and watch him die from his own errors. I sort of like him, in an odd sense. He's living out here like the rest of us placer hounds sifting sand to make a living and I feel responsible for him. His cabin is a

mess. I have never seen such disarray. He screwed a metal plate to his table and after he eats wipes it with a wet cloth. Makes me sick. You must meet Philo. He's part of the landscape. We'll visit him when we return from Fairbanks."

"Philo sounds like quite a character. When should we leave for town?"

"I think tomorrow is good, and when we return I'll show you how to extract gold from the creek."

"I'm excited about that. Let me operate the motor on the return trip to become accustomed to it and also learn the route better."

"Good idea. We'll leave in the morning."

It was early but the sun was high, one would think it was noon. Daylight this time of year is nearly perpetual. When we arrived at Fairbanks Uncle Jake called Bill from the phone at the fuel dock and he came over right away. We then went to the care center so Uncle Jake could gather his things informing them he would be moving back to his claim and cabin. Bill and I helped carry his personal items to the car, including a large unopened box and two rifles in cases.

As we arrived at Bill and Margaret's, Uncle Jake handed me the box and one rifle in its case. He said, "Samuel, carry these inside I bought a few things you'll need while living at the claim."

Margaret had coffee ready and poured us each cups.

Uncle Jake said, with undisguised pleasure, "Open the box Samuel." Inside the box was a magnificent caribou hide parka, along with pants, mukluks and mittens. "I knew you'd need these for the winter months. It gets to -50 on occasion and you can't function without a fur parka. The new fancy down stuff is not as warm and gets punctured easily then the down leaks out, a real nuisance."

"Thank you, Uncle Jake, so nice. These are very well made. Who made this clothing?"

"Kathryn Manatoo, here in Fairbanks, half Eskimo. She's a master furrier and has made custom parkas for years. She's the best there is at this craft. You won't freeze to death, that's for certain."

I then opened the rifle case and inside was a M1 Garand, the rifle I carried in Korea, a .30-06 caliber.

"Uncle Jake, this is amazing, a perfect choice. I know this rifle inside and out. Thanks, so much."

"Samuel, you need this rifle to kill our annual moose and also we have many grizzly bears in the vicinity of the claim. Generally, they are not an issue but rouge grizzlies are in the area, territorial and have no fear of humans. This rifle may save your life. Philo has my .22 we can use for small game. Don't use it much, but Philo needs all the help he can get and that .22 kept him alive last winter."

Bill remarked, "I always wanted an M1 but difficult to find and also expensive. They are the most reliable of all automatic rifles, as you know from your experience in Korea."

Uncle Jake said, “I have a Winchester model 70, 30-06 bolt action, had it for years, a good Alaskan rifle.”

The next day Bill drove us to the supermarket and we stocked up on supplies. Uncle Jake also bought a few supplies for Philo. We planned to return the claim tomorrow. During the return trip, I asked Uncle Jake more about Philo, “Does Philo have a boat?”

Uncle Jake replied, “Yes, and a good motor; he goes to town but waits too long and often runs out of things. My not living at the claim makes Philo more vulnerable to his own shortcomings but he also has helped me often, too. Especially when this arthritis set in, he cut and stacked my firewood. After I gave away my dogs, I tried to convince Philo to get a team, to enable him to travel to Fairbanks in winter but he told me he doesn’t like dogs. As I thought about it, I was unsure he would be up to the task of managing a team. It’s a bit far to walk to Fairbanks in winter but can be done, staying in one of the abandoned relief cabins about half way; I did this a few times—a pretty tough hike. A dog team is a must in my opinion and my team could get me to Fairbanks in about seven hours, really good dogs. The folks in Fairbanks complain about Philo, view him as a degenerate, which he is not. He has a good heart and would help anyone in need. The main complaint is he talks too much when he comes to town, talks to everyone, running on about his life in the wilds. He gets lonely at his cabin, like we all do, and this talking is a form of release. People are generally impatient and have little insight to cabin folks and their lives. Alaska is very beautiful but it’s a challenge to live in the bush.”

“Uncle Jake, I’ll be fine with Philo. I had similar experiences in the army, helping some of the guys who would wander off track. My captain promoted me to corporal because he liked my flexibility among various personalities and the stresses of combat.”

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