

Glacier Vanishing

C. R. Fulton

THE CAMPGROUND KIDS

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Glacier Vanishing by C. R. Fulton

First Edition

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- 1 -

Apparently, Montana eats truck engines for lunch. After driving 1,782 miles on our journey to Glacier National Park, the engine in Dad's nice Chevy extended-cab truck broke down. My 14-year-old cousin Ethan pulls on his lower lip as he stares at the "loaner truck" parked beside the only mechanic's shop for miles.

"Does it really run?" my sister Sadie asks. She's hit a growth spurt, and she almost reaches my nose.

"Shore thang!! This here's a real winner. Let me jist clean out the seats."

The truck before us is ancient. The top and the bottom is a dull red with sort of a rusty cream in

between. Dad nudges one of its huge mud tires with his boot.

“Is this an *official* loaner truck?” Ethan questions doubtfully.

“Let’s put it this way. You can stay here while I fix yur engine, or you can take this truck,” the mechanic says.

Ethan nods, frowning.

“When do you think that will be?” Mom asks.

“Oh, it should be done in a week or two.”

“Isaiah,” Sadie whispers to me. “We might get two weeks of camping instead of only one!”

I turn northeast where the Clark Range juts skyward, tipped in permanent snow. I shift my trusty backpack, unable to tear my eyes away from Glacier National Park in the distance. The park has solid ice at its heart, and I wonder what secrets the place holds.

“Hellooo?” Sadie asks—in the way only ten-year-old sisters can.

“I just...” I point at the distant mountains, still

caught up in the enormity of them. “That’s the Continental Divide—the Great Divide that starts in Alaska and ends on the southern tip of South America.”

“Sure, but maybe the truck will take three weeks to fix, and we’ll get to explore it for a longer time!” she ends with a grin.

“I’ve got my own Continental Divide,” Ethan says, pulling something from his pack. “See?” He breaks a chocolate-covered Swiss roll in half. Then he stuffs them both in his mouth at once!

I sigh, looking back at the dilapidated vehicle. Suddenly, a shiver runs down my spine. *It must be from thinking about glaciers.*

“Let’s move our gear and hit the road.” At Dad’s words, we form a human conveyor belt. All our camping gear is carefully packed and organized; after all, our survival depends on it. The bed of the new-to-us truck has some engine parts scattered about, and I carefully tuck in the last bin among them. Stepping back, I read a peeling bumper

sticker on the tailgate. “If you’re a Tuff’in, you ain’t nothin.”

Weird. I shake my head at the strange words and wonder about the meaning.

Ethan steps up to the deserted road and slaps it.

“What are you doing?” Sadie asks.

“Uncle Greg said we should hit the road.” He dusts off his hands. “Now that’s done.”

“Come on, you jokers,” Dad says fondly.

Ethan, Sadie, and I squeeze onto the worn bench seat in the back of the truck.

“Um, what are these things?” Ethan points at an unfamiliar handle on the door.

Dad laughs. “That’s how we used to open car windows before technology.”

“Seriously?” Ethan turns the handle in a tight circle, and the window slowly lowers. “Wow!”

The crisp air flowing in is a relief; the truck has an odor all its own.

Ethan devours five more Swiss rolls by the time we’re drawing close to the park. We drive through

a place named Kiowa on Route 89. I'm not sure this place that's tucked right up against the mountains could really be called a town. At the only intersection, a big mud truck revs its engine as we pass. I twist, wiping the rear window with my sleeve. I watch as the mudder turns and pulls in behind us. Thick smoke pours from the dual smokestacks over its bed as our loaner truck engine strains to scale the steep mountainside.

"And they are following us," Sadie whispers. I shrug, watching the truck accelerate toward us.

"There aren't many choices for roads around here," I say, wishing I believed it. We lean to the right as Dad guides the truck through a twisting pass. Behind us, the big metal bars of the Mudder's bumper bear down on us, far higher than the rusted tailgate of the truck we're in.

"Uh, Dad? You might want to speed up," I urge.

His eyes flick to the dirty rearview mirror. "The driver in the rear is responsible for keeping a safe distance. Besides, I'm going the speed limit."

Smoke belches from the black truck as it leaps forward, and time seems to slow as it nears our bumper.

BAM!

“Safe distance has just died!” Ethan screeches.

Mom is gripping her seat belt. “What on earth is happening?”

Dad scowls as we cross the pass and start down the other side of the mountain.

“Hey!” he shouts, clenching the wheel tighter as the “mud” truck rams us harder, shoving us to the edge of the road.

Dad wrenches the wheel, but the tires skid wildly on the loose stone at the shoulder.

“Greg!” Mom’s yelp makes me look out Ethan’s window. A sheer cliff drops away below us that makes me feel lightheaded.

Dad guns the motor, and we fishtail back onto the road.

“Here they come again!” Ethan shouts in my ear. I brace for impact, my heart slamming.

BAM!

The black Ford is much heavier than the red truck. We skitter around another bend at the rear-end collision.

“Should I call the police?” Mom is braced against the cracked dash.

“There’s no cell service out here!” Dad revs the engine, narrowly avoiding another ram. *I think I know how a deer feels when wolves are chasing it!*

“Maybe we should pull over!” Ethan’s got sweat beaded on his upper lip.

Dad glares at the rearview mirror again. “I don’t think these fellows will simply go away...nor are they interested in having a pleasant conversation.”

Sadie bites her lip as the plumes of black smoke warn us of another attempt to hit us.

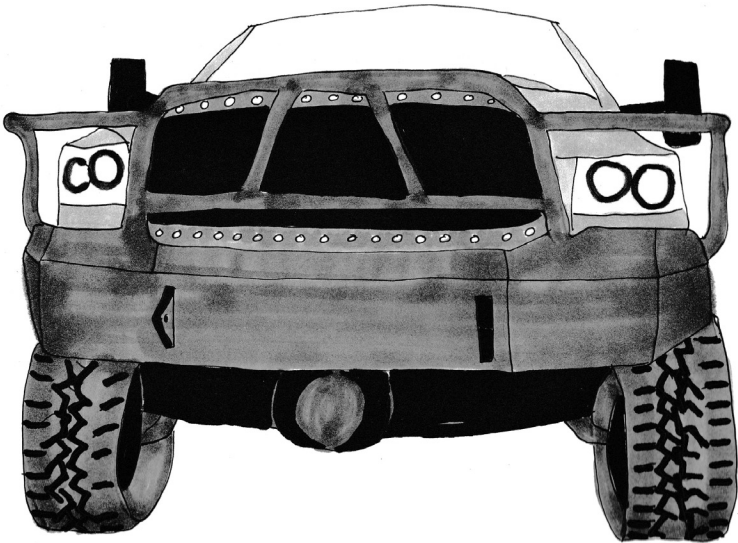
“NO!” I shout as their bumper clips our tailgate, spinning us wildly. I growl, searching for balance and a reason for the unprovoked attack.

Dad cranks the wheel, slamming the transmission into reverse as the truck twists down the road.

Now, we're nose to nose with the big black truck, careening backward down the mountain.

The driver scowls at us behind a bushy beard as black as his truck.

"Oh, no, you don't," Dad whispers, completely focused on the other man's eyes.



As the black truck surges forward, Dad floors it in reverse, cranks the wheel, and I fly into Sadie. The seat belt pinches my waist. The front end

of our old Chevy slides on the shale as the black Mudder launches past us.

I'm heaving in air, my eyes wide, as I blurt, "He's gone."

The black truck disappears around the bend, and Mom sags in the front seat. Slowly, the Chevy inches forward, and I try to relax, blinking rapidly.

Dad's foot is stomping the floorboard as the truck gains speed.

"This...*isn't good!*"

I look at Dad sharply, leaning forward to watch him pump the brakes with no effect.

"Oh, no!" I breathe, staring at the steep road snaking down the mountain. Dad shifts his foot, jamming it down on a different pedal. All that happens is the pine trees pass by even faster.

"I thought that would work!" Dad grunts as he wrestles the truck around the first bend.

"Hit the emergency brake!" Mom shouts.

"I just did!"

"*Eeeehhhhh!*" We all cry as we careen around

the next curve. Dad's still forcing the brake pedal to the floor without effect.

"DO SOMETHING!" Mom shouts.

"Like what?" Dad responds.

"There!" I point to a small dirt drive cutting up to our right.

"Hang on to something!" Dad's muscles strain as he aims for the narrow trail. The front tires slam into a deep rut as the truck hurtles forward. The rear tires hit the rut, and I'm suddenly airborne! My head hits the ceiling of the cab as my seat belt cuts into me again. We rebound, and everything is chaos again as branches slap the windows. We eventually roll to a stop near the peak.

"Finally, we're still," Ethan breathes.

"I don't think so!" My voice is flat as the hill sucks us backward.

"Whoa there, big fella!" Dad shoves the gearshift into park. The transmission makes an angry grinding sound, but we finally lurch to a stop.

Ethan, Dad, and I hop out, and I lift the peg that

holds the hood open. Dad locates the brake fluid reservoir and pops off the lid.

“It’s just low on fluid. Let’s see if there’s any in the truck bed,” Dad says.

“*Ewww.*” Ethan lofts what used to be a silver bottle that’s covered in grease. “Is this it?”

Dad wipes the label. “Good find! We’re in business now.”

I lean over the heat wafting from the engine as he fills the reservoir.

“Dad, why would someone do that to us?”

He searches the forest as though the answer might be hidden there. “I’m not sure, Isaiah. People are sometimes the most mysterious things on the planet. I’m just glad he didn’t turn around.”

-2-

The Saint Mary Visitor Center has a sharply peaked roof that seems to mimic the mountains surrounding it. I step up and study the 3D terrain map of the park. At over one million acres, Glacier is a true wilderness. What strikes me as most unusual is the lack of roads. Only five are noted on the map, and most of them only make brief forays into the park.

“Who can find Slide Lake?” Dad asks, stepping up next to me.

I search the eastern edge of the park muttering, “I know it’s north of Going-to-the-Sun Road... here it is!”

Ethan scowls at the map. “Isn’t that where we’re camping?”

“Yes! I love the backcountry!” Sadie adds excitedly.

“But...I don’t see any roads near Slide Lake.” Ethan leans over the map’s edge.

“We’ll have to hike from Route 17 through the Blackfeet Indian Reservation,” Mom says. “We’ve got permits for a full week at Slide Lake.”

“Ooohhhh! That looks like a *really* long way.”

“It’s 8.4 miles...to be exact,” Mom says, patting Ethan’s back with a grin as he slumps at the news. “Just a short jaunt, Ethan!”

“Look how close we are to Canada,” I say. “Does Glacier extend across the border?”

“No, it joins with Canada’s Waterton Lakes National Park. Their union formed the world’s first international Peace Park, called the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park and World Heritage Site.” Dad points at the boundary.

“Let’s all study this map really well. We know

how important being prepared is when you're deep in the backcountry," Mom adds.

I spend a long time looking at the incredibly steep mountain ranges, trying to lock their location in my mind.

Soon, Mom has located the Junior Ranger booklets, and I find two kinds on the shelves. One is called a *reader*, and the other is labeled a *pre-reader*. I grab two of the readers and hand Ethan a pre-reader.

We step up to the counter, and I hide a grin as Ethan slides his onto it. The man behind the counter has a scar that runs from his eyebrow down to his chin. He looks at the booklet, then at Ethan, and gives him a compassionate smile. I put my book on the counter as well.

"Hey, why is yours different?" Ethan studies the books. "Hang on, I've got to switch this!"

I snicker as he rushes past. He slaps a reader booklet on the counter; then his elbow locks around my neck. "Thanks a lot, Isaiah!"

GLACIER VANISHING

I pull out of his grip but go still at Mom's sharp words: "No wrestling!"

Ethan whispers, "We'll settle this later."

"Agreed," I reply happily.

"Let's set off for the Otatso Creek Trail."

"Oh, by the way," the man at the counter says, "Lately, the Glacier wolf pack has been frequently spotted at Slide Lake."

A familiar tingle sizzles across my chest. *Wolves!*

- 3 -

“Dad, do you think the truck will be safe?” I ask, adjusting my heavy pack.

“Do you mean safe from the black truck?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, at least we won’t be in it if that driver decides to do something crazy again.”

“You mean something *else* crazy,” Ethan adds as we leave the “rental” truck in the small parking area off Route 17. “Here’s what happened last time...” He pulls out two Swiss rolls and smashes them into each other. The white filling oozes out like sweet lava.

Sadie rushes past, snatching one roll on the fly.

“Hey!” Ethan shouts.

Dad and I look at each other, horrified.

“Catch her!” we shout at each other. I leap forward as she jams the smashed dessert into her mouth.

“NO!” I shout, knowing Sadie will turn into a human tornado if she swallows that sugar.

Dad snags her pack, wrapping her in a bear hug. I grab her nose in one hand and her chin in the other and crank open her mouth. “She swallowed the entire thing, Dad!”

“*Ah...mah!*” Sadie shouts, but I’m still holding her mouth open.

“Sadie!” Mom scolds. “You know you aren’t safe when you have sugary desserts!”

I let go of her mouth.

“I’m fine, Mom. See? I can handle it.” Suddenly, she twitches, her pupils dilate, and a shiver runs down her body.

“Hold her tight, Dad! The sugar has her now!”

Dad nearly loses her as she tries to break free from his grasp.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Dad says, grinning. He flips her over one shoulder.

“OObaoahhh!” Sadie’s eyeballs go around in circles as she flips wildly, her front half over Dad’s strong back.

Dad grunts as she tries to kick. I leap for one arm. “Ethan, get her other one!”

The three of us have our hands full grappling with the wild thing that is my sister.

“It’s like...” Ethan nearly loses his grip. “Wrestling an octopus!”

A fit of laughter overtakes her, and suddenly she goes limp.

“Whew, Dad! I think she’s good now.” I slowly release her wrist, watching for any reaction.

“I’ll carry her for a while just to be safe.” Dad strides off across the deserted road with Sadie still safely draped over his shoulder.

“Hold on,” Mom says. “I’ve got to make sure I have our usage permit for crossing the Blackfoot Indian Reservation.”

“We need a permit to walk here?” I ask.

“Yes, and we paid \$10 for it, but look at this place! It’s the only way to reach Slide Lake.”

At the far side, I see a barbed-wire gate in a cattle fence. “The ranger said if the gate is shut, we are to shut it again. If it’s open, then we leave it that way,” Mom says, carefully opening it.

We step through into a wide-open field bordered by quaking aspens.

Sadie moans, “Why are you carrying me, Dad?”

“You stole my Swiss roll!” Ethan fondly accuses.

“Oh, yeah, I remember! It sure was good too.”

Ethan rubs his slim stomach. “I have a limited supply; now you owe me.”

Sadie grunts, “Dad, you can put me down now.”

“Nope. I dare not risk Sugar Sadie running amok in the wilderness.” We stride across the field, every step drawing us closer to adventure.

Sadie sighs, her chin propped on one elbow on Dad’s pack, her other arm swinging in time with his long strides.

“Did you know Glacier National Park is ecologically sound?” she asks.

Ethan cups one hand over his ear. “I don’t hear any ecology.”

Somewhere a bull elk bugles.

“I do!” She laughs. “But what I mean is that the park has almost every single species of plant and animal that it did 150 years ago.”

“But now the park has fewer glaciers. Once there were over 100, but now there are only 26,” Mom adds.

We hike for a while toward a massive chunk of rock called Chief Mountain.

“Dad! Seriously, you can put me down now,” Sadie says as we pass into a thick stand of aspens.

“Promise to be good?” he asks in a teasing tone.

“I’m always good. Well, *mostly*.”

As he sets her down, something crashes in the underbrush next to us. I flinch hard as whatever it is bears down on us.

-4-

Resisting the urge to take off, I stand near Dad as his wide hand shoots out to grab Ethan's pack before he can run past.

The wide head of a cow appears through the leaves, and I breathe again. Ethan holds a hand over his heart, still straining against Dad's tight grip.

"How much longer until we enter the park where there aren't any cows?"

Mom laughs. "Aw, Ethan, she's cute! But we'll have to hike seven more miles through the Black-foot Reservation before we enter Glacier."

"I'd better eat another Swiss roll for energy." Ethan reaches into his seemingly bottomless pack.

We walk a long way, watching the distant mountains slowly grow closer.

“What’s this thing?” Sadie points to a set of slim pipes set horizontally in the ground.

“It’s called a *cattle guard*. See how it’s in line with the fence? It’s sort of like a gate that cattle can’t cross, but vehicles like tractors can,” Mom responds.

I hold out my arms for balance as I teeter across the pipes. A few steps later, I look up and realize we are in paradise.

“Wow!” I scan the horizon, now dominated by three massive mountains. “Dad, why can’t we live here?”

“Well, this area only has about three months without snow. The harsh winters are a large part of the reason you don’t see many people living here year-round.”

“Glacier also averages 13 feet of snow per year,” Mom adds.

“I like snow,” I insist.

“And the park has an average temperature of 36 degrees, which means its coldest temperature is -40 degrees!”

Even in the middle of summer, I’m wearing long sleeves. “I see your point, Dad.”

Sadie gasps and points. “I see something else!”

I lean over a fresh set of wolf tracks, my heart pounding.

“Look at how many there are!” Sadie points ahead where a muddy patch is crisscrossed with many sets of huge prints.

Kneeling to inspect them, I press my finger into the mud, thinking of Kota in Grand Teton National Park. The print my finger makes goes from a bright brown color to the glossy look of wet mud right before my eyes. The wolf tracks only have a smidgen more dampness in them.

“The wolves must be *right here*,” I say, scanning the Otatso Creek Trail.

Our first camping trip seems like yesterday, and I long for even one glimpse of a wolf’s tail. We

travel in a tighter group after passing the tracks until we come to a sign.

“Boundary, Glacier National Park,” Mom reads. “That’s Yellow Mountain straight ahead.”

A brisk wind sweeps over us—almost like it’s trying to keep us out of Glacier.

By the time we glimpse Slide Lake, I’m sure something is strange in the stiffening wind. I stare at the incredibly beautiful lake and listen hard.

“Is that another elk?” Ethan asks.

“No.” I scowl, trying to focus on the elusive sound. “I think it’s human.”

The fickle wind curls around, and we lose the faint echo altogether.

“Let’s get up to the campground,” Dad urges, and soon we select our site: a flat place with log edges that overlooks the beauty of Slide Lake.

The strange sound reverberates again—only it seems closer now. The hair on my arms stands on end.