The Sounds of Shamblytown

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ALASKA — Mile 102 of the Glenn Highway and my knuckles are white. Out one window, a drop-off to an ice block 27 miles long and four miles wide. Out the other, small cliff fragments strewn across the road.

Neither the thin metal railing, twisted and torn where previous drivers steered toward the glacier, nor the road sign that says "Falling Rocks" settle my nerves — especially when two hyper dogs are intent on driving our car.

Jade and Big Belly's paws explore everything: the dashboard, the driver's lap, the clutch, the steering wheel. Dog butt in my face and slobber on my sweater, I'm jammed under a mound of backpacks with a case of beer squishing my feet. My left leg has been asleep since we left Anchorage two hours ago.

This would all be okay, exciting even, if I knew where the heck we were going.

"Mendeltna," my co-counselor Andrea whispered in my ear all week long as we led a squirmy bunch of kids around the woods and longed for Friday. "The Mendeltna Creek Music Festival. It's bluegrass. It's awesome." Bluegrass isn't exactly the Friday night pump-up music I'm used to hearing blasted through courtyards at Yale. But staff at Trailside Discovery Camp, where I work in Anchorage, have been playing the fiddle-music constantly in the vans we use to cart kids around.

Now, the car radio emits only static. Raindrops thump on the windshield and huge gray Alaska clouds fill the Matanuska valley, obscuring the tops of the Talkeetna Mountains. I begin to wonder if Mendeltna exists at all. We are nowhere.

After nearly four hours, we arrive at a tiny green marker for Mile 153 on a stretch of highway that looks no different from where we were 10 minutes earlier, or ten minutes before that.

A cluster of cars is parked in front of a lone building that looks as if it's built out of huge Lincoln Logs: the Mendeltna Creek Lodge. A piece of cardboard announces, in Sharpie, "The 3rd Annual Mendeltna Creek Music Festival."

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Although Alaska could tuck 120 Connecticuts inside its borders, it has a population of less than 750,000. So much land and so few people has kept the "Last Frontier" remarkably wild. This vastness, and the accompanying isolation, may explain why bluegrass music has become so popular in a state I never expected to find it.

Bluegrass comes from the "hillbilly music" of Appalachia, where British and Irish immigrants introduced the fiddle and fast-paced dance rhythms to old-time country tunes. The style of music got its name in 1938, when country star Bill Monroe decided to call his new band "Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys" as a tribute to his native Kentucky, the Blue Grass State. The genre, which picked up elements of gospel, blues, and jazz as it evolved in the early 20th century, is known today for its traditional acoustic instruments, complex vocal harmonies, and powerful, often melancholic sound.

Like immigrants in 19th-century Appalachia, recent settlers in Alaska have looked to bluegrass as a way to cope with their new surroundings and to bond with one another.

I figured that an Alaska bluegrass festival, in the age of mainstream festivals like Bonnaroo and Coachella, would be relatively tame. These days, most are — but only because the wilder hoedowns of the past have recently been shut down, including the granddaddy of them all, the Talkeetna Bluegrass Music Festival. Its hosts called it quits last summer after 30 years of operation because they were sick of fighting with the local authorities over permits and capacity issues.

The smaller festivals that have survived in Alaska — there's nearly one every weekend, all summer long — are advertised on a single web page that lists the town, the date, and the host's email or phone number. There are no set lists or online ticket booths, and often no address other than a milepost on a highway.

It's what all Alaskans would call "shambly" — a word I heard for the first time my chaotic night at Mendeltna Creek.

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About 60 bluegrass fans braved the trip up the Glenn High- way to Mile 153. They came with their tents, their toddlers, and enough layers — or lagers — to keep warm in the frost of late May.

I'm sure there was good music playing that night, but instead I remember snapshots tinted by the dull gray of Alaska fog. A huge oriental rug, the backdrop of the stage. A white cockatoo perched on the shoulder of an otherwise-normal-looking guy who used his bird to lure dance partners. A mostly empty bottle of Heinz yellow mustard atop a swinging rope bridge. A weirdly bright sky, like a huge night light, dimming only slightly as the hours passed. Crumpled beer cans around a campfire and flames flickering all night long. Dogs. So many dogs.

My time at Mendelta ended, quite literally and quite unfortunately, in shambles. I woke up in Andrea's tent early the next morning freezing cold, my right foot throbbing with pain. Sperry's — with their utter lack of ankle support — are far from proper footwear at a bluegrass festival, especially one that involves dancing on uneven wooden boards and particularly when you're someone who's prone to sprains.

Lesson learned: go barefoot or go home. (Or wear boots, like most of the Alaskans dancing that night.)

I did go home barefoot, but only because my ankle had swollen to the size of a large egg and could no longer fit into my shoe. I decided in the car on the drive back that going forward, I'd only listen to bluegrass on iTunes.

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But a mere three weeks later, squeezed into the back of a different bulging car, I'm headed up the Glenn Highway on a second Friday afternoon. This time, the drive — to the Granite Creek Music Festival, in Sutton — is only half as long. A brilliant sun has replaced the gloomy clouds, and it is beginning to feel a little less like winter and a little more like spring (never mind that it's technically June). This time, thank God, there are no dogs in the car.

We turn off the highway onto a narrow dirt road lined with cars on both sides, clusters of tents pitched haphazardly under a canopy of spruce and cottonwood trees. The cottonwoods are in full

bloom. With every gust of wind, white tufts float down from the bright sky, dotting the ground like snow.

I exit the car in a kind of daze. I was sleeping, it is sunny, and the air is filled with campfire smoke. I can't remember why on earth I've come. After all, I'm on crutches — the consequence of the first time I ventured out into the middle of nowhere to listen to bluegrass with a bunch of hippie Alaskans.

A loud "Whoop!" comes suddenly from across the road, where my co-worker Rachel is cooking steak on a Jetboil stove in the back of her Subaru. She waves me over to meet her posse: two tall girls in long flowy skirts and brown XtraTuf rain- boots, along with a guy holding what looks like a crystal ball. ("He needed a ride," Rachel explains.)

Liam rolls the ball up his forearm, into the crook of his elbow, onto his shoulder, and then, with a quick snake-like movement, over his head and down the other side. (I later find out that the ball is called an "orb," and it has an additional function. "Have you ever killed an ant with a magnifying glass?" Liam asks me. "Similar idea, you're just killing your bowl of weed.")

The guy with the bird is there, too.

Rachel tells me she's exchanged some of her hula-hoop-making supplies — plastic tubing and colored tape — for the steak she's cooking. She has opted to prop her stove in her car trunk, next to several cases of beer and a carton of fresh eggs, rather than by her tent, an expensive combination of tough fabric and sturdy poles designed to retain heat in even the harshest winter conditions. The tent is sacred, I learn, and thus, steak grease will stay in the car.

My first 30 minutes at Granite Creek are a string of mini panic attacks. I worry that the stove will blow up Rachel's car. I'm overwhelmed by the people and the noise — it takes me awhile to figure out where the stage isc because there are impromptu jam sessions at several campsites, and music is coming from everywhere. A dozen dogs are suddenly barking. And a kid on a unicycle is riding precariously close to me and my crutches.

But the sun feels good after weeks of dreariness and cold, and Rachel's laid-back attitude puts me at ease. As we walk over to the music area, I scope out the crowd: there are plenty of young adults, but also many families with kids, and older couples, some of whom lean back in their camping chairs like they've been coming here for years.

Everyone wears loose, comfy clothing: flannels, puffy vests, Carhartt pants, patterned skirts with flowery blouses, and jewelry that doesn't quite match. "Hiking-boot-chic" is the norm here. In fact, Anchorage prides itself on a poll that rates it as the worst-dressed city in America.

If a strict music schedule exists, I'm not aware of it. Everyone seems friendly, though I overhear a woman complaining that someone has peeled off the Obama sticker on her car (this is still Palin country). At some point, I loosen up enough to let Andrea drag me up onto the dirt in front of the stage — a flatbed semi truck covered with a bearskin rug — to dance, crutches and all, with a gang from work.

When it starts getting dark, at around 2:00 a.m., the music moves away from the stage and disperses in every direction, picking up again at campfires where it seems like everybody can play the guitar. I peel myself away and crawl into my tent, falling asleep to the cozy sounds of banjoes and water rushing through the rocks of the creek-bed.

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My dad pays me a visit towards the end of the summer. My ankle still won't let us do much hiking, so I decide to take him to a music festival in Hope, a sleepy fishing town across the bay from Anchorage.

It's windy and pouring rain, and we encounter practically no one on the Hope Highway, a 15-mile road that leads only to the town.

After parking on Main Street, we seek refuge in the Seaview Inn and Bar — a white and green building with a rusted tin roof, four tables in the dining room, and fishing and hunting paraphernalia along the walls and shelves. The tables are all full, but we hear there's still seating at the bar, where the festival will take place because of the rain.

As we duck into the room, I notice two things at once. The first is the sound of a mandolin — a bluegrass band is tuning at the far end of the bar. The second is the familiar green and yellow of a Green Bay Packers T-shirt, worn by a football fan in front of me. The guy next to him is wearing a Badgers hat.

"Are you guys from Wisconsin?" I blurt out in disbelief. After three months in Alaska, I've met few folks from my home state.

"Yeah," one of them replies, "and so's the band!"

I look towards the makeshift stage. They've finished tuning, and the mandolin player, sporting a Fu Manchu mustache and a paisley shirt, picks up the microphone. "I'm happy and sorry to see so many fishermen here tonight," Matthew Pustina says. Everybody laughs — evidently, the catch wasn't so good today. Pustina steps back from the mic and nods to the other band members. They begin to play.

"Keep your head up and your blade sharp when you're walking the streets of this old town / People here don't like your kind around," go the lyrics of one song. Another song announces an intention to "pump your brains full of blood and steel" with a "Super Redhawk Alaskan 44," a revolver that's often used for protection against bears. In spite of the dark lyrics, the songs are lively and upbeat.

On this night in Hope, Pustina has friends visiting, so nearly half the bar is from Wisconsin — enough people to start a lively rendition of the song "Aaron Rodgers Rock and Roll," accompanied by a five-piece acoustic bluegrass band (Aaron Rodgers, of course, is the Green Bay Packers' star quarterback). My dad, with his Mason jar of beer in hand, thinks it's all pretty great.

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"I came to visit," most Alaskans will tell you with a smile or a shrug. "And then, well, I guess I just stayed."

Two years ago, Hot Dish guitarist Lucas Soden was visiting his former band-mates from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, twins Matthew and Nicholas Pustina, who had moved to Alaska a few years earlier.

"I fell in love with the mountains," he tells me at a barbecue he is hosting at his Anchorage apartment the week after the concert in Hope.

Soden ditched his teaching job in Kenosha, Wis. to move to Alaska, where teachers are generally paid more. The friends started jamming together again, for fun — in college they'd played rock 'n' roll, but Soden now preferred bluegrass. Before long, they'd booked their first gig: a National

Outdoor Leader- ship School benefit in Palmer, 45 minutes north of Anchorage. They were paid with local vegetables and a freshly slaughtered chicken.

These days, Hot Dish Bluegrass is a regular presence at festi- vals around the state (including Salmonstock, Alaska's two-year- old version of Bonnaroo, which features a big-name line-up and tickets that cost over $100). They released their first CD in August.

"Why 'Hot Dish'?" I ask. The band members wanted a name that had something to do with both Wisconsin and food. A "hot dish" is a popular Midwestern term for a casserole — good ol' comfort food, and a far cry from the wild rice and salmon (Soden's catch) that we're eating tonight.

As the August sun starts to dwindle, Soden and Pustina put their cards down and take out their instruments. They begin to pick out a tune.

The mandolin wavers on a high note, descending to meet the steady strum of the guitar. After a few bars, Soden's husky tenor cuts in. This is a song he wrote. "I'm on my way, I'm on my way," Soden sings, "Wisconsin bound."

Unlike Soden, I have just one more week in Alaska. These bittersweet lyrics hit home.