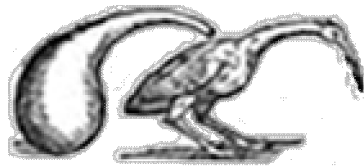


Segue

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CONTENTS

Claim Jumpers	4
About the Author	9

Claim Jumpers

My nine-year-old son Will and I, emerging from our one-story motel into the heat, scuttle from shadow to shadow like sand crabs moving lightly across the surface to their dark, sheltering holes. Idaho City, such as it is near 5:00 PM on a summer weekday in 1998, is otherwise quiet, though in my mind it's crowded with ghosts: I've read about how its boardwalks were once full of miners, its streets with horses and mules, dogs dodging pedestrians or waiting for their masters outside the shops. Hoping to interest Will in its history and entertain us both, I've driven him the 30 miles from Boise, where he was spending time with his father, but there is another agenda, too: I want him to have some serious fun.

In 1998, the town is a four-block square, including two motels, a couple of gift shops, an ice cream store, and several historic sites like the museum and the old jail. The population is 350. Most of the shops are closed. The museum is closed. The visitors' center is closed. We settle for flavored ice from one of the few vendors, cooling our mouths from under a tree on a sidewalk bench, but Will's at an age where this might not interest him for long.

Indeed there is primarily one thing on his mind: "When are we going to look for gold?" he wants to know.

Will lives with me most of the year, but I've negotiated with his father for this overnight during the annual summer weeks when he stays with his father, stepmother and two half-brothers in Boise. Notice my language—*stays with* rather than *lives with*. I suspect that every custodial parent is afraid that one day, her child will want to *live with* the less available parent, thereby making her house the house he visits. If I don't say to Will he's *living with* his father for five weeks, maybe he'll never say the words *I want to live with Dad* back to me. If one day Will decides to live with his dad in Idaho, I'll be the one stuck with 2,500 miles between us. That would be a hard spin out of the familiar orbit I keep, circling around him. I don't want to be jolted away from him into the deep freeze of space.

But maybe Will doesn't feel the same. When I went to the house in Boise to pick him up after a three-week separation, he didn't even get up from "Monster Bash," the computer game he was playing, to say hello. He didn't want to quit, because he was having fun. I want him to have fun, but I also want him to miss me. If he has too much fun, I'm afraid he won't want to come home. Lots of kids wish they could keep having fun wherever they are—amusement park, summer camp, or sleepover—but generally they can't choose to stay at the place, like children of divorce can choose to stay with the non-custodial parent when they come of age.

So the pressure is on: I have to make sure Will has fun—at least as much fun as he was having with his two half-brothers, his father and stepmother. This will be quite a trick, since I'm his only playmate here. But Idaho City has one thing Will hasn't yet got, one thing that put it on the map, one thing for which it's still remembered. He's already said it: gold. I don't want to buy my son's affections, exactly, but I will use what I can to engage him.



At the only restaurant in town, we sit under a porch roof at an outdoor table, Will munching on piles of French fries with his chicken strips. “Do you think we can still find gold around here?” I ask the waitress. She’s a slim brunette, fine lines etched around her eyes and mouth, her long high-cheekboned face dominated by brown eyes that give the impression of worry.

“As a matter of fact, a little girl found a gold nugget in her yard just up the hill.” She brings us the news clipping: the mother recognized the rock as gold from working in the mines when she herself was a kid, and experts estimated its worth at \$300-400.

Beneath his baseball cap, Will’s freckled face is partly shaded, but now he looks up at me and into the sun, squinting, to ask, “Do you think we could find something like that?”

“Well, I don’t know. That would be pretty unusual.”

“Yeah.” He lowers his head, looking into his plate. “But wouldn’t it be great?”

I’m thinking it would sure beat Monster Bash.



Just a block from Trudi’s Kitchen, a little shack displays gold mining equipment. The sign in front offers to take tourists like Will and me out for panning. On the roof of the shack, a dummy has been hanged. A big-lettered sign beneath it reads, CLAIM JUMPERS BEWARE.

Harry, a big-bellied red-faced man with gray sideburns that travel down his cheeks in the old-fashioned style of mutton chops, owns all the gold-mining equipment.

“Great sign,” I say when we arrive, smiling and pointing at “CLAIM JUMPERS BEWARE” and the hanging dummy.

Harry doesn’t smile. “Anybody jumps my claim, I’ll greet ‘im with a .44.” Then he pulls out a set of big buck knives, displaying them for wide-eyed Will.

We negotiate a price for gold digging (not much), and he tells me where we’re going (not far). His wife, who sticks her head out of the door of the shack to greet us, says she’s coming along. She’s a quiet-voiced, wide-bodied woman in a floral housedress. In part because of her, I decide that, despite Harry’s buck knives, it will be all right. I drive the rental car slowly over ruts and rocks, following Harry’s truck. Pretty soon we stop along something that looks like a ditch, where he wades into the knee-deep water in his rubber boots, digs some mud from the bank with a small, flattened shovel, puts some in his pan, and shows us how to rinse it with water until the gold, heavier than the other material, speckles the bottom of the pan. Maybe two or three speckles in that first pan, each the size of an eyelash. He sucks the gold into a dropper and releases it into a vial.

Will grins and wants a turn right away, and I’m thinking *yes, I’ve done it, he’s happy, he doesn’t miss his dad*. Harry hands me a pan, insisting that I dig, too.

And it’s not unpleasant work. The creek cools our feet, mud squishing between our toes. We dig and rinse, carefully picking through the dirt, searching for the telltale shine of gold. Harry says he was a Vietnam regular for three years. When he pulls up his shirt to show us the scar on his belly, I’m sure it’s a war wound until he says, “Nope, I was gutshot. Hit by a disc when I was a welder and pipefitter.”

“I have an affinity with the Germans,” he tells us. “I have a German last name, you know.” I think of the neo-Nazis who unfortunately gave northern Idaho a media presence when they headquartered at the Aryan Nations compound there. He further reinforces the stereotype when he says, “Relatives of mine was Indian killers, and they was good at it.”

“How’d you get into gold mining?” I ask, anxious to change the subject.

“When I was twelve years old, I went prospecting in California, and I been doing it ever since. You’ve heard it gets in your blood? It’s a disease.”

His wife, sitting on the bank in a lawn chair, nods emphatically, her most passionate communication yet.

Meanwhile, Will, diligently panning, rarely finds specks of gold. We’re getting hungry. He’s complaining that he’s tired. My back begins to hurt from bending over the creek, peering into the pan. Miners, according to one 1860s visitor, were “the dirtiest men I ever saw, living in cabins with dirt floors and seldom washing, and all showing high water marks under their chins and jaws, below which water never touched.” Already I feel similarly silted, so for awhile, I sit on the creek bank, watching Will and Harry work the creek.

Tall pines shade Harry’s wife and me. I crane my neck, considering the branches high above. In this hot, dry weather, if I were a smoker and dropped a burning cigarette, the crackly brush and dried-out wood would catch fire fast. In places like this, surrounded by national forest, unattended campfires and lightning storms can result in big losses. I once thought of buying property in the area but decided against it when I overheard some landowners talking about how many times their cabins had been threatened by fire. It was the same when Idaho City was more populated. Since it was settled, the entire city—whose population once surpassed Portland, Oregon’s—has burned twice.

I think of the townspeople who had to pick through the charred remains of their homes, looking for the only existing pictures of relatives, the tiny gown of an infant now buried in the cemetery up the hill, not to mention books, bedding, furniture, dishes, and all the daily comforts. In contrast, my own disappointments seem insignificant, yet at the moment, I have a little boy standing in a muddy creek with only two specks of gold to show for his 90 or so minutes of struggle. A little boy getting hungry for lunch. A little boy sighing deeply and starting to walk up the creek to see what else might entertain him. A little boy who’s ceased having fun and might be thinking about returning to his father’s.

Meanwhile, Harry’s daughter and son-in-law have arrived. Dressed in shorts and T-shirts, they emerge from their Jeep with their happy retriever looking remarkably normal, picnic basket and ice chest in hand. How come Harry, a racist, has an intact tribe while I, so much more enlightened, have to deal with divorce and shared custody? Smiling through my resentment, I bid Harry goodbye, using his family reunion as an excuse to head back toward town. “How about some ice cream?” I ask Will.

“Yeah.”

We park by the wooden storefront on the dusty street and order our ice cream in big waffle cones.

“Let’s find a place by the river,” I say, “and cool our feet.”

But when he gets into the car, Will’s cone topples. Ice cream slips into the cracks of the back seat, coats the seat belt webbing. I run back into the store for napkins and water to clean up

the mess. I don't scold Will. I'm an *accidents happen* kind of parent, but his lips tighten. He averts his eyes, and my internal mantra intensifies: *He's not having fun. He wants to live with his dad.*

Mopping the ice cream, I think, somewhat desperately, of swimming. What kid doesn't like swimming? Maybe that'll improve his mood. So I drive to the hot springs pool south of town, where through the fence, we watch kids splash to the staticky sound of a radio playing country-western music, but Will, still moping, shakes his head. Not interested.

I drive on, guilty and desperate. His bad mood somehow translates into the certainty that someday, because of the divorce, he'll hate me. In my mind, as I drive, I'm defending myself against his future attacks: how could I take him 2,500 miles away from his father? Why wasn't I able to make a life with him closer to his dad, or better yet, work out my differences with his dad when he was a baby? I imagine myself cowering before my future son, a grown man with a receding hairline pointing his finger angrily.

"I did the best I could," I'd say. I never meant to hurt you! I tried—really I tried."

Meanwhile, the innocent nine-year-old looks out the window, tired and bored. We follow More's Creek south, looking for a place to pull over. Eventually, Will—unwitting and unconscious nine-year-old CEO of his mother's emotions—approves a location near a swimming hole, where we take turns changing in the bushes, then shriek as we try to lower our bellies into the icy current. We walk along the bottom of the creek gingerly, the sharp rocks hurting our feet. I bend to gather a handful of pebbles into my palm, still searching for gold. Then, exhausted by my self-inflicted emotional ping-pong, I sit on a rock to bask in the sun, but Will says, "Watch this, Mom."

He picks up a flat rock and skips it across the surface of the water.

"Nice going!"

Light seeps between big cumulus clouds, making the surface of the water glitter. My round-cheeked, freckle-faced son, wearing his baggy black swim trunks, picks up a stick and asks me to throw him a rock so he can bat it like a baseball. I oblige, ducking as the rock zings back. He's delighted. "Throw me another one!" The game goes on. All at once I realize we're back in the groove, we're having fun, just the two of us, and it doesn't even require gold nuggets.

When the rock games have subsided and the two of us are sitting by the creek, listening to the slosh and *chrrr* of its flow over the rocks, our wet skin drying in the afternoon sun, I say, "You know I didn't grow up like you are, with two families, so you might need to tell me how that feels if you think I don't understand. Your stepsister has two families, so she might understand. Your friend Jesse has two families, so he might understand. But sometimes, I might not."

"Yeah," says Will. "But Jesse's lucky because his dad lives closer."

"True," I admit. "although he has to go back and forth between houses more, and that can be kind of confusing."

"Yeah, and he doesn't get to go to Idaho."

"I wonder if sometimes Jesse's parents get jealous of each other. You know, like Jesse's mom might get jealous of his dad when Jesse gets to spend time over there."

"Do you get jealous of my dad?" Will asks, his voice incredulous.

I think of Harry's sign: CLAIM JUMPERS BEWARE. The only thing I'd protect with a .44 is a person, the boy sitting next to me by this creek. Like the most passionate prospector, I'm possessive of my treasure, but I also recognize that he's animate; he has feelings. If we fight over

him, if we try to buy his affections—whether with “Monster Bash” or a little panning for gold—he might begin to feel more like a possession than like a real live person whom we love.

We watch more water go by. Clouds trap the sun. With my feet in the water, I get chilly. Will and I admire each other’s goose bumps. Then the clouds release the sun, and we enjoy the feel of it, sharing its warmth.

“I’m not really jealous of your dad,” I say. “I’m glad you two get to have time together.”



Rituals give me the feeling of control when I know I’m about to lose it, as I do when I hand over my son. Before I return Will to his other family, one of the rituals I’ve devised is to watch him eat. If he’s well fed, at least for that day, I’m reassured he’ll be OK even if they offer only Cheerios and hot dogs. This morning it’s eggs and bacon and hash browns—his favorite breakfast—at a motel restaurant in Boise, where we listen to canned music and enjoy the air conditioning after vegging out on Disney movies in the room.

We both clean our plates—no appetite problems here—and venture out in the 100 degree furnace. In the car, I immediately turn the air conditioning on “high.”

“Maybe Dad will take you swimming today.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s gonna be another hot one.”

With five minutes to his dad’s house and the heavy talk—such as it was—accomplished, there’s not too much else to say.

I turn onto the street where Will’s other family lives. It’s much like the street where he lives with my second husband and stepdaughter and me—a neighborhood of single family dwellings on a dead end road. Like ours, theirs is the last house on the right. Like ours, theirs has a basketball hoop set up so kids can play in the street. Only here, unlike in Virginia, there are fewer trees, fewer one-story homes, more ranchers. I park in front of the house with the tent-trailer in its driveway.

As Will opens his car door, I say, “Don’t forget the pact.”

In our motel room, we’d promised we’d both have fun for two weeks and two days, then slapped hands in a hard high-five.

Will gives me a hug, then runs to the house, heading back—no doubt—to join his half-brothers in their quest to reach the highest level of “Monster Bash,” their own prospecting adventure. I back out of the driveway, turn the car around, and press the accelerator to exit the neighborhood, my throat tight. All around me the City of Boise expands. Its wooden buildings appear hastily erected. Each is inhabited, nevertheless, with its own history—tales of fortunes made and lost: families dwelling together and then, whether by choice or by circumstance, dispersed. I tell myself my stake in the claim at Will’s father’s house can’t be taken. I tell myself to think of the time when Will and I will be together again. I drive the rental car through these moments I’m wishing were already over, knowing—like those in Idaho City—they’ll be gone soon enough.

About the Author

Lisa Norris' book *Toy Guns* won the Willa Cather Fiction Prize in 1999 and was published by Helicon Nine Press. Her stories, poems and creative nonfiction have been published in *Fourth Genre*, *Ascent*, *Notre Dame Review*, an anthology called *Kiss Tomorrow Hello* (Doubleday 2006) and others. "Claim Jumpers" is part of a completed manuscript titled *Viewfinder*. She is an assistant professor at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington.

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