

Venture to Mierow Lake

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Steve and Liz Bailey are missionaries who have just started working in Koyalik, a small Eskimo village on the coast of Alaska. The time is 1950: these Eskimos cannot read or write, they must hunt for meat in order to stay alive, and they do not own snowmobiles. They welcome white people and are curious about their ways.

Steve has found a helper and friend in Victor, a young Eskimo who speaks a little English. Victor interprets whenever Steve wants to talk to the Eskimos, and he allows Steve and Liz to have church services in his home.

As the story opens, Steve has learned that another village, located far inland at Mierow Lake, is open to hearing about the gospel, and he has been praying for an opportunity to visit. But it is midwinter, and he knows that taking such a long and dangerous trip without an experienced companion would surely end in disaster.



So Far, So Good

On Sunday, three families came to the meeting at Victor's house. There were several babies and young children who made the usual noises, but their mothers tended to them, and no one seemed distracted.

The Eskimos listened carefully, first to Steve as he told a Bible

story in English, and then to Victor, who translated the story into Eskimo.

Victor must be doing a good job, Steve thought. People nodded or smiled or looked serious in all the right places.

Victor's wife, Nida, invited Steve and Liz to come back that



evening. Liz baked a cake, and Steve brought along their notebooks, hoping to pick up some useful Eskimo expressions. He still found it hard to unscramble the long Eskimo words.

That evening, Victor told one hunting tale after another in his broken English. As he listened, Steve couldn't help thinking again that Victor would be the perfect person to guide him to Mierow Lake. He'd already asked him to go, but the young Eskimo always had something more important to do.

Suddenly, to Steve's delight, Victor began talking about the trip to Mierow Lake as if it would be a great adventure. "First thing, we ask Gus. That old trader, he know where to go."

Victor's eyes twinkled. "Your dogs good and strong now?" he asked. "Need to be strong this trip."

"Getting stronger every time I take them out. Now they last longer than I do."

"How about your new dog? That *mik-shrok*?"

"Oh, Mikki? He's grown a lot. Of course, he gets special food." Steve smiled at Liz. "But he's worth it." Then Steve told Victor how he'd been trying out different leaders and how Mikki had won the fight with Bandit.

"That dog, he pull with heart," said Victor. "And he . . . what you call him? Smart cake?"

Liz giggled, then she put a hand over her mouth. Steve nodded. "Smart cookie. Yes, he sure is. I think I'll keep him as leader. The Lord sent us a good dog."

"Nida," Liz said, "we don't want to leave you here alone. Could you come too?"

Nida smiled and shook her head. Victor answered for her. "Nida take boys and go visit sister in Nome. She stay for a week or little bit longer. May be I bring her nice fox skin. May be we get a caribou." His eyes gleamed. "Gus say caribou run by Mierow Lake. We go soon; how about Wednesday?"



On Monday, Steve made sure he talked to each person who had ever come to a Sunday service or to Liz's story time. He tried to explain where they would be going and why they'd be away for a week or more.

That night he and Liz talked about the visits they had made. "I don't want them to think I'm just off on a hunting trip with Victor," he said. "But I'm not sure they understood me. I don't think any of them are true Christians, either."

"They're so friendly," said Liz. "They want to be nice, and they smile and agree with everything you say. The children are well behaved and amazingly polite. I wish we could figure out what they're really thinking."

"That's one reason we've got to learn Eskimo," said Steve. "Be sure to pack our notebooks. And by the way, do you know how to make bannock?"

"No," said Liz. "What's that?"

"A kind of crisp biscuit that's good to take on trips. You mix flour, lard, salt, baking powder, and water to make a stiff dough, then you fry it."

Steve consulted with Gus, the owner of the trading post, to make sure they'd be prepared for the worst weather.

"You and Victor will need to shoot some game along the way," said Gus. "But if you have to wait out a blizzard, you'll want something to keep you alive." He scratched the bald spot on top of his head. "Remember that the dogs will need plenty to eat. Most of the time they'll hunt on their own, but take along some dried salmon too."

Steve listened carefully, then he bought a small sturdy tent, a camping stove, some bales of dried salmon, and plenty of dried food such as beans and oatmeal.

When he packed the sled, he first spread out a heavy canvas tarp to line it. On the tarp he piled the bales of dried salmon and all their

supplies. Then he pulled the tarp up and around and tied it snugly in place. On top, tucked under the ropes, went the ax, the guns, their snowshoes, and the big iron skillet.

He handed Liz a canvas bag. "We'll hang this below the handlebars."

"What's it for?"

"My hunting knife, the dog chains, maybe some extra rawhide. Better put in that extra waterproof match safe too."

"How about some chocolate and a few pieces of bannock?"

"Good idea!"

Liz rode on the sled for a long time, then she jumped off, saying she was cold. "I'll run with the dogs for a while," she said. "I'll tell Mikki to do me proud."

Victor must have heard her remark, for he called to Steve, "What's that—*do me proud?*"

"She wants Mikki to do such a good job that she'll be proud of him." He glanced at the dog. Mikki seemed to be pulling for the sheer joy of it, his floppy ear standing straight up in the wind. "So far, so good."

Victor grunted in agreement,

and as they drove on, Steve heard him muttering, "So far, so good."

The first stretch of the river was familiar because of Steve's short trips inland. Late that morning, the sun rose slowly in a glow of pink, and in just a few hours,

it began to set again. But they pushed on in the dusky light and finally reached the landmark known as Tall Rocks.

Huge icy boulders marked the fork of the river Gus had said to



They left long before daybreak and drove for hours under bright moonlight. Steve felt as if they were traveling in another world—a frozen world of white and silver and shadowed black.



watch for. Behind the boulders rose the towering cliffs that had given the place its name.

Victor nodded toward the cliffs. “Rabbits in there.”

They unloaded the sleds quickly and set up the tents. Then Steve and Victor grabbed their rifles. “I’ll start a fire and get things ready,” Liz said. “Good hunting!”

Back behind a clump of alders, Steve shot a snowshoe rabbit, and then Victor got one too. They crept through a snow-covered willow thicket and shot four more. “Dogs can hunt here too,” said Victor.

After they returned to camp, Steve and Victor unharnessed the

dogs and sent them to forage for their supper. One by one, the dogs came back to the fire, and Steve chained them close by. They curled up and watched the preparations for supper, looking contented.

The fragrance of wood smoke and sizzling meat reminded Steve of other winter camp-outs when he’d been a boy. But those trips had been just for fun—what a difference tonight!

He and Victor cut spruce boughs to use as cushions under the sleeping bags, and they all slept soundly.

Will They Listen?

On the second day, the river wound through a long rocky canyon, then opened out into a broad valley edged by mountains. When they stopped for the night, there were no sheltering rocks, but Victor knew what to do.

After the tents were up, he cut snow blocks and piled them around the base of each tent to keep out the wind. They didn't see any game, so they fried the rabbits they'd shot the night before and threw the bones to the dogs.

That night, Steve had hardly enough energy to feed the dogs and climb into his sleeping bag. If he was so tired, what must Liz be feeling? She hadn't said a word of complaint. But she'd been quick to accept the seal oil Victor offered for her windburned face. And she had fallen asleep before he blew out the candle.

For a long while he listened to an owl hooting deep in the forest. What would the people at Mierow Lake be like, he wondered. Lord, help me to tell them about You, somehow. And Victor needs You too . . .

After several hours of travel the next morning, they left the river at the pile of red-streaked rocks Gus had described and turned onto a

dogsled trail. Gus had said the shortcut would save a whole day's travel. The trail climbed up into the mountains through a forest of tall spruce trees. The grade was so steep that it was hard to keep the sleds upright, but the dogs pulled steadily onward.

Canada jays flitted through the trees, and chickadees called from every side. Liz pointed out the birds she knew and asked Victor about the others, but he wasn't sure of their English names.

Once Steve's team lurched forward in a sudden burst of speed, and the sled rocked dangerously on the narrow trail. Steve shouted to Mikki, and the dog slowed obediently to his usual trot.

Victor chuckled and pointed to tracks in the snow. "We cross rabbit trail. Dogs think it supper time."

By late afternoon they had climbed to the top of an especially high ridge, so they stopped for a rest. The sinking sun had turned the sky, clouds, and mountain peaks to gold. Below them spread a long valley, also touched with gold.

"Look!" exclaimed Liz. She waved at a flat, snow-covered expanse edged by rows of cabins.

“Victor, do you think that’s Mierow Lake?”

“Looks like.” He grinned. “So far, so good.”

The dogs must have sensed the end of the trip, for they raced down the mountainside, and Steve had to jump on both runners to keep the sled on the trail. As they drew closer to the village, he counted the cabins. More than Koyalik. Looked deserted, though. Where had everybody gone?

Halfway through the village, they saw an old woman carrying a bucket. Victor spoke to her briefly. “Caribou hunt,” he told Steve. “Men come back tomorrow, maybe.”

“Ask her if there’s any place we could stay,” said Steve.

Victor discussed Steve’s question with the woman for a long time. Steve caught a word here and there that he recognized, but he couldn’t make sense of anything they said. An icy wind rose and seemed to blow

right through him. The dogs drooped in their harnesses, waiting.

Finally, Victor turned back to them. “There is house at end of village. Nobody live there. Very old.”

“I don’t mind,” said Steve, “as long as it has a roof and walls.”

Victor spoke to his dogs, and they plodded slowly through the village. Steve’s team followed to where a cabin stood close to the frozen lake.

More like a hut, Steve thought. It’s plenty small. But it does have a roof.

The door hung off its hinges, and he pulled it open cautiously. Someone had once used the cabin for storage, judging by the dusty shelves and rows of nails in the log



walls. The window had no glass in it. The dirt floor was littered with rubbish. And dogs had been kept in here.

Liz took a step backward. She looked up at Steve, and he put an arm around her. "It's just for a few days. We can clean it up."

Victor helped them shovel out the rubbish, and at bedtime that night, Steve whispered to Liz, "Even without a stove, it's better than sleeping in a tent."

She nodded, yawned, and a minute later fell asleep. He lay awake for a while longer.

Cold air crept past the paper he had tacked over the window, and he pulled the sleeping bag more snugly around his shoulders.

God had brought them safely to Mierow Lake; he was thankful for that. But he didn't know these people, and it probably had been a long time since they had seen a white man. Would they even listen to his message?

I guess I'll just have to wait, he thought. Until tomorrow.

The hunters returned the next day in high spirits. They had shot several caribou, and everyone in the village would get a share. Perhaps no one would starve this winter.

After the feast that evening, Steve tried speaking to a group of the men. Most of them understood English, and they listened carefully.

He started by introducing himself and Liz and Victor, and he told them a little about the work in Koyalik. When they nodded and smiled, Steve breathed a little more easily.

Then he showed them one of Liz's Bible storybooks and told the story of David as a young boy.

The pictures must have looked strange to them, Steve thought—all those people with white faces wearing brightly colored long clothes. And which of the Eskimos had ever seen a lion? But they leaned forward eagerly to see, and they exclaimed at the picture of David killing a bear.

Afterwards, Steve said to Liz, "This is so different from Koyalik. I can answer their questions by myself! I've been trying out a little Eskimo on them too, and they're helping me learn."

Steve preached twice on the second day, and he and Liz spent all their spare time visiting with the people. Steve had hoped that Victor would come with them, even though he wasn't needed to translate, but after a few visits,

Victor grew restless. Finally, he went off in the afternoon and shot a caribou and a wolf, and he came back smiling.

The third day, the day they had to leave, came much too quickly.

One of the young men said, "The book with pictures. Can you let us have it a little while? Then you come back and get it?"

Steve felt like shouting for joy. Several of the young couples could read English, so even though he and Liz couldn't stay, God might use the book to teach them about Himself.

He smiled at the friendly, fur-ruffed faces that surrounded him and spoke his confidence aloud. "Yes! God will bring us back."

