

## **Trail Tales, February 20, 2024**

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It was a beautiful Alaska summer day. The kind of day where you wake up buzzing like you're already at least a coffee deep. A Facebook cover photo kind of day. The kind of day where you think "nothing bad could possibly happen on a day this beautiful." And yes, that's really on-the-nose foreshadowing, but I know you've all had days like that, and it was that kind of day.

It was June of 2016, and three good friends and I were headed out to packraft at Spencer Glacier. We'd heard that you could hop on a train at Portage, take a short train ride to the Spencer Glacier stop, and then paddle around the glacier and float back on the Placer River to a car staged at the Placer River Overflow parking lot. There wasn't a lot of information about this trip back then, but our backpacks, boats, and beers were packed and the stoke was pristine.

We hopped off the train at the Spencer stop and hiked a few miles to the face of the glacier, where we inflated our boats and put in. We started paddling around a big lobe of the glacier. It wasn't very vertical or ragged-looking, but I remember looking over and seeing that the warm lake water had undercut its face by about a dozen feet, so what looked like a gentle slope was actually a pretty big overhang. It spooked me a bit and I paddled farther out into the middle of the lake, while my friends continued along the face. They were paddling right next to the calving face of the glacier, at times paddling into little coves or reaching out to touch the giant seracs with their paddles.

I took my SLR out of my dry bag and snapped a bunch of photos. It was sketchy but it was epic.

What I really remember is how loud the calving was. It was like artillery. Instantaneous and very, very loud. A part of the face we'd paddled around sheered off and roared into the water. Then another artillery shot, and another, and it became clear that a whole section of the face was going. The pieces of glacier broke off and then broke into smaller and smaller pieces as they surged forward. The wave caused by the event ran along the face of the glacier, racing up into the little nooks and crannies in the face and creating secondary calving events. My friends realized what was happening and were quickly paddling away from the face, though from my perspective low in the water it appeared that they were barely moving.

I was frantically backpaddling too, though by the time the wave reached me, it was almost nothing, just a gentle rock up, and down. Barely noticeable. We were all fine.

Several days later, I met up with one of my friends at a coffee shop. We were working on a web design project, when he said. "I can't stop thinking about what happened out there. Did we almost die?"

I didn't really know. Many of us have had that experience of walking down a road, and seeing a car crash and thinking "man, if I had just been 100 feet back, or left my house five minutes earlier, I would've gotten hit." Maybe it was like that? I didn't know if we'd almost died. Maybe we'd almost almost died. Whatever it was, it weighed on us.

Later, I went through the photos I'd taken of my friends, right before the calving event. And yeah, they were epic. They were the kind of photos that ricochet around Instagram or that get branding

slapped on them and end up in print ads. They were hashtag-YOLO hashtag-Alaskalife hashtag-*theAlaskaLife* gold. But looking at them later, they felt off.

There are a lot of different ideas about how to share outdoor experiences. Plenty of people blame media, and particularly social media, for ruining outdoor spaces. My friends and I were once asked by a ranger at Denali National Park not to write or post any trip reports. I've gotten some blowback for sharing trails, routes, and so-called "secret spots" with a broader audience.

I get it, but I generally disagree with this attitude. Outdoor media is a form of art. It inspires, and democratizes outdoor spaces. And going out into the wild and then coming back to tell about what happened is one of humanity's very oldest and most enduring behaviors. I believe that it's deeply innate, and it's a deep source of joy.

It's no accident that stories about the wilderness are a part of so many religious scriptures and practices. In the Bible, when Jesus got back from spending forty days and forty nights in the desert, he didn't say "sorry guys keep the Sinai wild," he spilled the beans about his run-in with the devil.

In a sense, photos are just a modern medium for the same type of communication humans have engaged in for hundreds of thousands of years. But looking at the photos from Spencer Glacier, it was hard not to appreciate how easily photos can contain lies of omission. In isolation, they omit everything outside the frame, and everything forward and backward in time. Despite their millions of glorious pixels, the photos from that day didn't show our run-in with the devil. And that was the only story from that day that really mattered.

So I deleted them. And I decided that from then on I'd make an effort to delete photos that I felt weren't telling the right story about danger and risk. I don't take or share photos of people boating into ice caves, or skating too close to the calving faces of glaciers, or standing more than their height from the edge of a cliff. If people do these things in front of me, I put my camera down. I'm not saying that my standards here are perfect, or that I apply them with perfect consistency, but it works for me.