

Moving Mountains: The Mine, the Women, and the Deep Dark Snow

*Laura Sky*¹

Curious Strangers

I head to a tiny company town deep in the Rocky Mountains. I am dressed for a Bay Street meeting. Rose-coloured silk blouse, tailored, camel wool dress pants. What was I thinking when I dressed for the trip this morning, a world away from home? Luckily, I left the pearls behind.

A calm flight, a long gentle afternoon drive from the Cranbrook airport. I drive through the early summer mountains, following creeks that become rivers, roads that beckon me forward. Not knowing what I will find. I am apprehensive and content at the same moment. This is what I am meant to do - to explore, to discover women waiting at the end of the road, unknown. I am searching out a film but have no camera in hand. Only the murmur of my curiosity and the uncertain promise of what lies ahead.

After a couple of hours, I come to the town of Elkford, on the British Columbia side of the border with Alberta. I pull into the large Quonset hut that doubles as the union office, a meeting room, and the local hunting hall. This is mining territory. Steelworkers' territory.

I park my shiny rental car in the lot beside dusty four-wheel drive cars and pickup trucks splattered with mud. I see the scarred mountains ahead and above. Summer snow and black coal.

As I open the metal screen door, I see three women and a lone fellow waiting. The group gives me the once over, curious, intrigued, but wary. What can they expect from a girl filmmaker so

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far from her downtown Toronto home? Nonetheless, they each introduce themselves and, a bit tentatively, shake my hand, giving me the benefit of the doubt.

Bev has her white hard hat on the table beside her. Cheryl is on her day off and sits comfortably in her clean jeans. Heather wears her warm smile - one that is never far from our conversations. Standing with them is Dave, the union steward. Hard hat, broken smile, lumpy mustache, and a true heart.

We have the first of many conversations sitting around the meeting table, old strong black coffees in hand. I politely turn down the powdered cream but quickly say yes to the homemade Nanaimo bars. Lunch.

It looks to me like I'm a good decade older than these young women. They are in their mid-twenties - even younger. They are the first women in the country to mine coal. High school for some, community college for others led straight to the open pit mine. This has become their normal experience of work. Hard-won normal.

I pull out my notebook, reach for my pen and keep my eyes engaged with theirs. I am a curious stranger. They wonder about what has brought me up this long and distant road. I hope to connect with them, reaching beyond my silk shirt.

"Thanks for meeting with me. I've come a long way and I'm glad to be sitting with you." They are quite still, waiting for more.

"I make documentaries and I have a special interest in making films about women's work. I'm here to research the film I would like to make about your jobs. If this goes well for all of us, next time I will come out with a small film crew."

They all nod. I just got extra points. We are curious about each other's work.

They talk quietly to me, simply. Not offering more than I ask. I hold my breath and try to sound calm and casual. Will they take me seriously? Will they let me into their lives on the hill and at home? Or am I too weird - too city?

I bring with me the many conversations, plans, and hopes of women across the country as we do our best to enter the world of men's work. It's the early 1980's and for many friends and colleagues the question of women's equity and independence dominates our discussions and collective actions. We are determined to increase our opportunities and our pay cheques, to take us out of the limitations of our traditional roles. As a documentarian I have been working in a male-dominated industry. Most film directors, producers, funders, and technicians are men. For me, each day brings new struggles, new negotiations to be heard, seen, and taken seriously. I have a lot in common with these coal-mining women.

I explain that I also plan to talk with the men they work with and those they live with. The men are part of this change process. They nod in agreement.

And so, our adventure begins.

A Small Woman with a Big Job

Four months later, true to my word, I return to Elkford with a film crew.

The mining women are young, energetic; uncertain about being filmed but intrigued by the camera. They are not quite sure what to think about four of us city people, loaded with cases of equipment, travelling all this distance to film them doing what has become ordinary to them. Their conversations are sparse - not many words, but they share a shine in their eyes. They ride strong in their huge coal hauling trucks. They claim the icy mining roads. Together, they speak a language that reflects their confidence in their daily jobs, no matter how challenging the tasks. They are proud of their work.

It is mountain morning - dark, clear blueblack December air. Our crew rose at 5, ate a hearty breakfast at the mine kitchen, most of us too bleary to talk. The miners who live at the camp have gone on shift. Just the four of us now. We all trundle into the dining hall with our parkas, long underwear hidden by layers of mountain clothes.

Tim, the insistent elegant sound recordist, sports his tan knit tie and brown corduroy jacket under his 40 below parka. Nick, the cameraman, is big and Greek, a mountain opposite from natty Tim. Nick's beard keeps him warm, and he is packed into his dark parka with his fisherman's sweater. Helene, our location manager, is a beautiful young woman, with eyes that sparkle even in this cold remote place. She is energetic, infusing our little group with the energy we don't yet have. She is a woman who is precise in her attention to details, and who likes to laugh.

I feel short, trying to convey leadership and confidence. Trying so hard. Weeks earlier, shopping at an outfitters store in the city, I chose a baby blue down parka, and matching gloves and scarf. A bit too pastel and perfect for this rough environment. Mostly I feel like a small woman with a big job.

We leave our breakfast table, bundle up and join the coal-mining women on the hill as they wait for their work assignments. The dawn surrounds us in a dark glow. Our breath meets the frigid morning as a cold mist. The women are pumped. The mining men beside them don't know what to think. Their ambivalence about the attention the women are garnering from our film crew hangs heavy on the frigid air. They share awkward jokes, making light of the attention the crew is focusing on the women. We don't laugh much. The women look away.

And then the moment of truth, standing beside the largest trucks in the world that await like colossal sooty chariots. The wheels are about four times our actual height. Our host in her truck is Lori, a wisp of a woman, curls cascading from her yellow hard hat. She is more nervous about our film group than she is about driving the monster truck up steep mountain roads in the dark.

“Hi,” she says timidly, not sure who to look at in our group. “How do you want to do this?”

Good question. This means that I have to direct - I have to do my job. I actually have no idea how to do this. This is my first time in a remote location with a full crew. I am beating back a sense of dread, fearing certain failure.

I have a central blind spot in my role as director, but at this moment, I don't know where this comes from. I just feel inadequate.

Only years later, about five more documentaries into my film career did I begin to understand. At a time when I was compelled to learn a new technology, as our industry went from using film as our primary medium, to working with videotape equipment. I had worked for years to master film production. Now, faced with unfamiliar technical demands, my confidence was shattered. I was mortified by my clumsiness and uncertainty. On our first video shoot, I had a major melt down in front of the bewildered crew. I was in crisis. Afterwards I sought the counsel of an educational psychologist. In two days of cognitive testing, he discovered a lifelong learning disability that had plagued me throughout my school years and followed me into my self-taught film life.

I was embarrassed to admit this perceptual disability to my co-workers. I understood my strengths as a storyteller. I listened carefully to the people we filmed, and I heard them well. But I found it difficult - sometimes impossible - to organize a cohesive film sequence. My brain didn't work that way. Although I never discussed this limitation with my crew, I relied on them to keep this aspect of our work organized.

Now, on location in this cold and forbidding strip mine, not only do I have to climb up the long metal ladder attached to a truck that is four stories high, but I also have to direct this group – fearlessly. My heart races with apprehension.

Searching for the strength to conceal my dread, climbing aboard this dinosaur truck, I don't dare look down. Its bin holds a million pieces of this mountain. Black coal. I make my way up the tall cold ladder, climbing up into the navy-blue sky.

We all squeeze into the cab of this behemoth, Lori at the wheel, finally comfortable in her role. The filming begins.

Thelma and Joanne; Softness and Strength

Two days into the shoot, I am concerned that the women we are filming are uniformly young. This might cause middle-aged women in our audiences to feel excluded from the story. They might not identify with so much younger women. I need to find a more seasoned woman to include in the filming, preferably a mother.

Then I meet Thelma. She is the mine's painter, working in offices and out-buildings all over the mine site. She is the mother of seven.

Thelma is about 45 and weathered. A woman of few words, her spare frame is wiry; her face etched by tough times. Her nicotine fingers tremble, her voice finds its tone through a thousand cigarettes. I cannot help but notice her fragility. And her determination.

Our crew squeezes into the storage room that Thelma is working on today. She is painting the walls dull beige. Her hard hat shows the layers of paint, colours of the jobs that preceded this one. Her hair is uneven, brown fused with grey, her glasses slightly crooked, her mouth set straight. She doesn't talk to us much about her work. As she paints with careful rhythm, she tells us how she got here.

"I was raised by a contractor. I had three brothers... I was the youngest. We were painting the inside of those houses by the time we were 10 and 11. We worked hard."

That's all she has to say for now. As we prepare to leave her painting site, I ask her if we can film a walk in the mountains soon, giving an opportunity for us to meet her youngest daughter. Thelma brightens immediately, and we make a plan for the next day.

We wake to a snowy Saturday. On a nearby mountain trail Thelma introduces us to her tiny daughter Joanne, who is only eight, a bundle of energy and curiosity. We follow the two of them, filming as they hike on the white crested mountain. Joanne wears a hand-me-down snowsuit, no mittens or hat. Her curly red hair flies in the cold wind, her blue eyes sparkle with adventure. Thelma and Joanne are an unlikely pair, the older woman weary and worn, the youngster, fresh with the wind. Thelma loves her Joanne and Joanne feels safe, so close to her mother.

They hold hands, talking earnestly, as the wind holds them near. Every once and a while, the little one scampers ahead or behind, never far from her mother. Thelma tells us that her daughter is the centre of her heart here on the mountain.

"She always wants to know how my day went, what did I paint. And she sits there, and tells me exactly what her day was like. She'll say, 'I had a bad day, I had a tough day' with that sad look ... It was probably some small thing, like her pencil kept breaking..."

"I wouldn't give up my kids, trade them for nothing. They're beautiful children, all of them."

In the final film, a song composed especially for this sequence accompanies Thelma and Joanne on their walk.

"Softness and strength

Like ice and snow on the mountaintop.

Outside

Tough and tired

Tenderness she still holds inside.”

Mountain Lullaby

There is only one hotel in the mining town of Elkford. Only it isn't actually a hotel. More a collection of four rooms above the bar, which was also the strip club. Upstairs, for our crew, clean beds, clean toilets.

There are no phones in our sparse rooms. The only payphone is in the corner of the bar. I need to use it when I called my eight-year-old son to sing him his nightly lullaby as he prepares for bed at home, twenty-five hundred long miles east, long over the mountains.

“Hi Adam, how are you doing?” I cup the phone close to my ear. Strip club music blaring in the background.

“I'm OK. Where are you? Sounds pretty weird.”

I'm OK. I'm at my hotel. There's a live band in the bar here.” Which was sort of true. I didn't tell him about the near-naked women and the poles.

“How's the new babysitter?” An older woman – she seemed calm and solid when I interviewed her a couple of weeks before I left. A surrogate grandmother. Sort of.

“Mum, she's pretty weird.” My heart sinks to my stomach. I am a mountain range and thousands of miles away from my boy.

“What do you mean weird?”

“She's a Born Again. Talks to me about Jesus. I told her I'm Jewish.”

“How was she about that?”

“I don't know. She got pretty quiet.”

Oh God. Not only are we Jewish, but we don't really do God.

“Can you handle her? I'll be home in 10 days.” Even to me, this feels like a month of Sundays from now.

“I wish you'd come home.” Quiet on his end. Too quiet.

Being a good single mum and a good filmmaker are a pretty hard mix. Too hard. I am the provider, the nurturer, the absent Mom. Both Adam and I make pretty big sacrifices for my documentary life. He struggles at home while I am out changing the world.

“I can call Granma. She’s working evenings this week but maybe you can spend next weekend with her.” I hold my breath. We’re now only on Monday.

Quiet on the home line. “OK. I guess so. But I wish you were here.”

“So do I sweetie. So do I.”

And then the lullaby. Accompanied by strippers’ music in the background.

“Lullaby and good night, my little Adamy Padum

Have a good sleep, have a good night. And in the morning we’ll play.”

Twice over. Not much on rhyming but filled with love and missing. Singing a promise I could not deliver.

The next morning, I call Adam’s babysitter. We’re at the mining office, so this is a call without musical accompaniment. That’s a good thing, given the sitter’s attachment to Jesus.

“Hello Edna. This is Laura, Adam’s mother. I’m just checking in to see how things are going.”

“Oh, everything is fine here. He’s quite a bright little guy. Quiet though.”

I know that my boy is not quiet, unless he is not happy.

“How are you making out for groceries? Did I leave you enough for the week?” What I really want to ask is, “How are you making out with Jesus and the Jews?”

“Adam can be kind of shy with new people. He’ll come around.” I say this hopefully.

“I’m sure he will. We’ll be fine.”

We are both reassuring ourselves and each other. The conversation ends with neither of us, nor Adam, being any further ahead.

At that moment, my mother’s heart is at home, with my son, my dear boy. But I’m here in the high mountain winter with my film crew and these spirited women. My creative heart is beating full tilt. I am elated. Yet the sadness in my son’s voice from far on the other side of these mountains, tells me that my Adam is missing his mother by his side.

The Danger

Months later, the filming in the mountains is complete and the edit in Toronto is in its final stages, I do what I always do. I screen the not-quite-finished documentary for the project participants. I want to make sure that I got it right.

The women miners and the union steward drive from Elkford to Edmonton and I fly in to meet them at a local film studio. We will screen the film for the other participants in Elkford soon after this event. I want to ensure that the women are free and comfortable to express their opinions without concern for the male co-workers' responses.

Now we are all nervous and excited. The women have never seen themselves on a large screen. It's time for me to do a reality check, ensuring that I have not romanticized or misinterpreted their experiences, or missed something crucial. This is another moment in our collaboration when their work and mine are entwined.

My work tools are not growling trucks on a high mountain road. It is not coal that I have carried. I travelled by plane with a bulky, square film box, grey cardboard with brown leather straps, holding two large metal reels of 16mm film and magnetic sound stock. The film and mag tape are cut and spliced throughout - fresh from the three-month editing period. Each piece of sticky tape joins images, sounds, moments of terror and truth about these women who mine coal.

Cathy, the film's editor back in Toronto, has never met the women - she knows them through the film footage I brought back from the mountains. Together we have had to decide what is important to include in the final film.

Cathy's memories of our work together speaks to her experience in our male-dominated film world.

"I was over the moon to finally be working with a woman producer-director. The raw sexism I was subjected to in my early work years as a film editor had really been wearing me down - sexual harassment, employment discrimination, condescension... It was part of my daily life, and I knew the only way to get away from it was to work with other women."

Arlene Mantle and Donna Green created the music score and lyrics directly to the film picture, capturing the spirits of the women, the texture of the mountains, the mist, and the mine. Their music reflected the strong women, the monstrous trucks, the dangerous mountain roads and the grit of coal and black dust on the innocent snow.

Cathy remembered, "We had such a great time, making '*Moving Mountains*'. I remember my assistant editor, Helene, and I dancing around the editing suite when we first heard the music track."

Now in Edmonton, I am on my own as the director. I wish that the whole crew was with me as we show the film to the people in it. It is a breath-holding experience at once terrifying and magical.

It is great to see the women and Dave in “civilian” surroundings. This studio is a more familiar workplace for me than for them. I feel like they have entrusted me to show the world their work lives, and I hope that I have honoured that trust. The proof is before us.

The cavernous studio darkens. And on the huge screen, surrounded by colossal speakers, we are back at the mine, larger than life.

Thirty minutes later, when the lights come up, we are all spellbound. Silent. And then the women laugh, they bubble, and can’t stop talking.

“Oh wow. Oh wow! Is that really us? Man, that was great.”

“Oh, I am so relieved that it works for you,” I admit.

“Oh man, Lori, you look great.”

“I should’ve washed my face, that’s for sure.”

“Wait till my mother sees this...”

Then Heather speaks up.

“You know, one of the parts that you missed was the danger of our jobs. No kidding, I’ve had some close calls, and they scared the crap out of me. Some days, after a close call, I felt like I couldn’t go to work.”

The whole group becomes very quiet.

The women agree. “Heather, you got that right. Laura - you have to put that part in the film.”

I get their point. They’re right. Very right.

I realize that the editor Cathy and I had screened the footage of a mine rescue drill, but had not found a place for that section in the film. I found it so difficult to direct this complex sequence while on location. My confidence had wavered, eluding me. At that moment, high on the dangerous mountain, Nicolas, the cameraman admonished me. “You have to do this. This is your job. This part is so important - it is all about the danger they face every day. You have to be brave yourself.”

I knew he was right.

But again, months later in the editing room, faced with this familiar self-doubt, I had chosen to avoid including that section in the film. I was afraid that my inability to craft such a dramatic film sequence would expose my weakness as a director. Big mistake.

Now, screening the documentary for the woman, it is clearly time for me to reconsider. Given our working relationship, the participants are entitled to expect that their authentic stories will be reflected in the documentary - our documentary. At this moment, I understand that their expectations of how their work lives are represented are clearly more significant than my own struggle with self-confidence.

All these months after the original filming, I ask Heather to join me in the small recording booth at the Edmonton studio. I record her speaking about her fears, the risks and working conditions that informed her everyday experience.

The memories take Heather back to the danger, and she takes us there with her.

“When things go wrong, boy you just sit there and shake, and you shake so bad you can’t say anything. Your voice shakes and you think ‘Oh my God it could have done this, it could have done that. It could have been so bad....”

I know in my mind’s eye that the section of visuals of the mine rescue drill would put images to Heather’s words. And so they did.

Although it was clear that I had missed this vital aspect of the women’s work, I now feel a sense of affirmation. It means so much to me that the women have the confidence and trust in our working relationship to correct my error, to remind me of the importance of their real experience. They trusted themselves to speak out and they trusted me to receive their contribution.

Ambivalence, Contradictions and Uncertainty

I have always been intrigued by filming the complexities of real people involved in social change, as reflected in the lives of participants who engage in these struggles. Long ago I relinquished any necessity to be “objective” in my story telling. I see myself as an ally in our shared commitment for social justice. And I understand that each issue, each relationship, in reality, includes mixed “truths”. Activists can be strong but fragile. We can have strong feelings about our goals and mixed feelings about getting there. We can embrace the need for personal and collective change, but be ambivalent about what we are giving up in the process. I believe that it is important to highlight those tensions in my documentaries, rather than to avoid them. In exploring ambivalence, contradictions and uncertainty, participants and audiences will not be deterred when encountering confusing experiences.

In Elkford, I learned that the challenge to gender roles does not have one beginning, one middle or one endpoint. It is a process that unfolds as a continuum for women and for the men they work with and, in some cases, live with. Small steps lead to bigger ones. Sometimes the steps move backwards. Encouraged to speak honestly, most participants reveal their mixed feelings about the upheavals along that road.

On one hand, it seems as though the largest risk in participating in this film has been borne by the women miners. Once seen, they will not be in positions to duck the issues that challenge

workplace inequity. They will no longer be able to hide their hopes for access to jobs traditionally offered only to men. But the men in the mine are also living with risks inherent in these changes. The goals for women often reflect a loss of status and privilege for the men.

In deepening the research for the film, I begin to understand the importance of including men's voices in this exploration. Men and women are struggling with the imperative to change and the resistance to those changes. Each group struggles, admitting their own ambivalence and uncertainties straight to camera.

Helmut, a longtime miner, now in his fifties, admits on the screen:

"I feel out of place here with women around. I don't like to see women in the mine. If I holler at one of them to get a certain tool, some of them haven't been around a mine but some of them are OK with things - they're just like a man. I'm not comfortable with the situation but I just have to tolerate it. But if I had my own way, I don't think I would."

I wonder how this shift in job roles has affected the men's relationships at home. Pat, a mine mechanic, thinks about his situation.

"This is about the dirtiest job you could imagine. And it's dangerous. Thinking about my wife, I prefer to have her in my home sitting in the kitchen rather than working in a coal mine, coming down in those trucks with a set of wheels on a slippery road with 500,000 pounds of coal behind her. If you think about the women who work here, this may not be the nicest job, but they need the money. They may be single parents and a job is a job, no matter how dirty and dangerous..."

Heather has another way of understanding this shift in gender roles at work and at home. While filming a social visit with the whole group one Saturday night, Heather explains that she is training her husband Ray on the job. She operates the huge drill that pierces the mountain in the search for coal.

"I'm on the drill," she says proudly. "It's my drill and now I'm training Ray... We co-operate. I'm boss at work at he's boss at home." She beams. This sends the whole group into big laughter, me included. I realize that in this film we will be encouraging conversations that will reveal old ideas struggling with new possibilities.

This documentary and the relationships that have brought these stories to light are challenging the gender balances of this corner of the traditionally male work world.

Dave, the union steward acknowledges the struggles faced by the women and the men. At this moment, he is a truth teller. And a mediator.

"The men reacted poorly at first because a woman is not what anyone expects in a mine. But the men finally got to see the women work, and as the women became more adapted and they fitted in more and more, and when people got to know them better, they were more accepted. But it

wasn't all that easy for the first women here because they had a lot of proving to do before they were accepted."

I learn that even the strongest women can experience mixed feelings about their courageous attempts to challenge gender roles.

Ina is in her thirties and is a major force on the blasting crew. And yet, she lives in the centre of a difficult contradiction. She is a fighter, and she is respected for that role. But the consequences of her commitment also include personal isolation. While filming we speak with her at her workstation on the wind-swept snowing mountain. She is unafraid to speak out for her co-workers. But, as she expresses in the documentary, she pays a price for that role.

"When I first was hired, I was offered a cleaning job here at the mine, I said, 'No thanks. Cleaning is not my bag.' I wanted a job in the pit, on the drill... People told me I would never make it or that I would be the only one that makes it. But I knew that women had to support each other... It was hard. The company would not put us on the same shift, so you were surrounded by forty or fifty men. I just kind of fought back. But sometimes it's not always good to be known as a fighter. A lot of the men can be scared of me. They wouldn't be if they got to know me... But that can be a problem if you are divorced. You go all by yourself to a party or a dance. I still go on my own, but you wish you had somebody - not just anybody."

Closely aligned with the women she works with, admired for her perseverance courage, Ina struggles with loneliness.

Following my usual practices, in finalizing the form and content of the documentary, each person in the film has been invited to watch the results of our work together. They have the opportunity to ask for changes or deletions before we 'lock picture'. As producer-director, I have promised not to negotiate with them, not to try to convince them to give up their concerns. The final decision rests with each of them. In these consent screenings there has been much animated and reflective discussion, but not one participant has asked for their material to be changed. The women stand proud. Given the opportunity to take back their words, Helmut, Dave and their male colleagues stand by their thoughts.

The Mountains Move

After two more months in the editing room, the sound mixing studio and the film lab, the film is free to fly into the world.

As the first step, we prepare for the film launch in the community that hosted our work. The completed documentary is loaded into the film can and I make my way back to Elkford.

The evening of the screening has arrived. It is now spring in the mountains. The light lingers, pink and welcoming. Winter still hangs in the mountain air.

I am terrified and excited as are the women we have worked with. They arrive with their children, their spouses and their best friends. The men who had been in the film are assembled as well, with their families and friends at their sides. I imagine that they may be anxious as well.

Years after these events, remembering my own my anxiety that night, I think that I was feeling an acute sense of empathy for the women and men who have been so truthful, so courageous in expressing their wishes, their hopes, and their misgivings. Their private feelings and thoughts will now be so much more public in this small community.

The town has assembled, and this audience will serve as witnesses to this fundamental transformation in their workplaces, their homes and in their company town.

The Quonset hut has been converted into a movie theatre, complete with a projector flown in from Edmonton and a projectionist at the ready. The hall is cavernous, 500 seats, lined up theatre style. The screening has been advertised throughout the region and the audience arrives early. It looks like everyone in the town has come out. Pickup trucks and cars stream into the parking lot and spill over onto the nearby roads. Those who live nearby wander in, animated with expectation.

We soon run out of chairs and nimble audience members take to the high rafters, perched from the ceiling beams. I pace.

Introductions complete, lights dim, and the film rolls. At first complete silence, and then as familiar faces and voices fill the screen, bursts of recognition and easy laughter tumble out through the aisles. There is all manner of quiet conversation between the audience and screen. I can finally breathe. I wish the crew were with me. This is a magical moment, impossible for me to translate back in downtown Toronto.

This is a great triumph for the women in the film. They are finally seen and acknowledged after being treated like second-class citizens for so long. Here is the whole town, witnessing their strength and their courage. It doesn't get much better than this. None of us can stop smiling.

The men in the mine have spoken their truths. Now declared on screen, perhaps they are relieved of the burden of holding back their mixed feelings about this historic imbalance.

As the documentary ends and the Q and A's draw to a close, the women are swarmed by their newfound fans. Their children hold on to their mother's legs. Husbands stand proud. Hugs, some tears and mostly broad smiles. The women in the film linger. We thank each other over and over and over again.

The men assemble in small groups, amused exchanges, loud laughter, back slapping and the odd shared shrug.

The crowd is slow to leave. Night has fallen. Families head back to their vehicles, the kids running ahead and behind the adults who are engaged in animated conversation. Some of us head off to the bar to share our pleasure and relief.

The next morning, we screen the documentary for the local primary school. The auditorium is filled with children who say goodbye to their parents each day and evening as they go off to their shifts on the mountain. The kids have never seen their parents at work.

I find little Joanne with her class and catch her eye. She was at the community screening with her mom, Thelma, last night. It was pretty overwhelming for both of them. Now she is unsure about what she will share with her grade three friends. She fidgets. Thelma sits at her side, each holding the other's hand as tight can be.

As the film unfolds, clusters of kids recognize their parents and, like little butterflies, they flutter from their seats on the floor, and call out, laughing in recognition. Now they know about their parents' work. The moms are the guests of honour. This is an event no one will forget.

Joanne Finds Her Mother

Decades pass. Many documentaries later, from somewhere in the universe, I receive an email from Joanne who I remember as an energetic snow child, firmly attached to Thelma, her world-weary mother.

I was thinking about the film and did a google search on films made in Elkford and it came up. I am thrilled that I found it...

I think this is the film that me and my mom were in. If I remember correctly, we were walking on the ski hill. How would I find out more information or see a copy of this. My mom passed years ago and it would be amazing to find the film.

And I reply immediately:

Dear Joanne

Your message took my breath away. The film is on its way to you. If you are comfortable with this possibility I would like to talk about your mother's experience of the work, and yours.

Thank you for finding me and Moving Mountains. Laura

While the documentary finds its way over the mountains to Joanne, we have a phone conversation.

Joanne explains the lines etched her mother's face when we were filming.

My mom had a tough life. She raised us on her own. All that time she struggled with addiction. Us kids were the centre of her life. We knew it, but we also struggled with her addiction. She had a number of car accidents and those left scars - for all of us. She never drove drunk with us in the car, but we couldn't protect her from herself at night once we were in bed. We knew she loved us but we were scared for her and for ourselves.

The complexity of the woman we filmed and her relationship with her daughter now unfolds all these years later. Thelma was a company painter, a mother, and a provider. And a woman who knew suffering. Here is her now-adult daughter reaching through time to find her mother.

Two weeks later, I received this letter from Joanne:

The film arrived! I was so happy to find out that my mother did talk a bit in the film. Quite surprised that it was not the same voice I have been hearing in my head for the last 25 years!! That was the most surprising part!! It was so amazing to hear her voice and listen to what she had to say about us kids. It is funny how time fades the memories of someone you held so dear. Yes a lot of crying was involved. I had to watch it four times and get through the crying before I could even realize what I was feeling.

I think her words were the most painful, it felt as though I forgot the best part of her and focused on the bad stuff over the years. I feel a bit guilty forgetting how much she loved us. It was heartfelt hearing her talk mainly about me.

It sure brought back memories of how strong the bond between us really was and how much I looked up to her. I guess my mind has blocked quite a bit of this over the years, probably to protect me from the pain. It was such a gift to get this back. It has stirred quite the emotions, but I think it is a wonderful thing for me. It is funny how time fades these things for us. Sure made me realize how much I really miss her.

I am glad to get to share with you this experience of how your film can affect someone 35 years later. I have not heard her voice since the day she died. This film brought her back to me.

I cannot tell you enough how grateful I am to you and what a precious gift you have sent to me, I will cherish it always. I might cry every time I watch it, but I wouldn't regret it a single time. It is funny how this came to me at such a big crossroad in my life, I do believe that everything happens for a reason. I think this has come to give me strength to make it through this next challenging chapter in my life. My mom always worked through her pain somehow in life and worked hard. She was an amazing strong woman.

“Softness and strength

Like ice and snow on the mountaintop.

Outside

Tough and tired

Tenderness she still holds inside.”