

The Alaskan Choice

The windswept forest was stunningly still. The dawn was breaking over the pine forests of Seward, Alaska. It had long since grown to winter near the town and icebergs floated across the still dark water like ghostly ships. People were stirring in the village, dogs were barking and the day was starting in the small town. Anna sat on the roof of her house, coffee in her hand watching this magnificent scene unfold. She had lived here all her life, but the stunning beauty of the Alaskan wild still made her breath catch. She finished her coffee with a few big gulps and climbed down the ladder propped against the side of their two story house. She looked at her house with a dissatisfied frown, the house had become dilapidated since their father had stopped caring, started drinking. She touched the house “I know how you feel” she said.

She went onto the porch, careful to avoid the rotting weak spots in the wood floor. She pushed open the heavy door and looked in disgust at her father lying in the easy chair in the living room surrounded by beer cans, sleeping off the hangover. Her mother was in the kitchen making repulsive cakes of oil and flour. They could only afford the terrible food because their father had lost his job due to his drinking last July and had been “looking” to no avail. Frankly, Annie hated her father. The smart, energetic, loving man of her youth was gone and Annie was 17 now, she saw no trace of her father in this drunken shell of a man. She had gotten so used to hunger by now that she no longer noticed her stomach crying out. She had dropped out of high school the previous year. She had good grades up until 9th grade when her father really started drinking and had never stopped. She knew she had no future ahead of her, Like many Alaskan children she was doomed to stay there and repeat the mistakes of her parents. As the story goes

with so many children of drunken parents, she had dropped out to work as a cashier at the town Kmart. Since then her life had become a bitter monotony in this cold swept death trap.

Her melancholy deliberations were interrupted by the clattering of cans that signaled her father was awake. Anna brightened as she saw her sister run down the stairs from her room. Every day Anna's 10 year old sister Cathy ran down the stairs, always expecting her father to be happy, caring, sober. But it was always the same and today was no different. Cathy's face fell and then assumed the normal, tough position both children had taken in the last few years. Anna pulled Cathy into their routine hug that was both comforting and happy. Anna always felt better after she had seen her younger sister. Their mother walked into the room and looked judgmentally at their father standing near his chair.

“Breakfast” she said in a flat tone.

They sat down and none of them spoke, her father wasn't one for small talk, or mornings, or children anymore. Anna wolfed down the dry fry cake, eager to get out of the oppressive house. As she left she saw her fathers snowmobile and remembered he was going hunting in the woods south of town. Her father only had to do this a couple times a year, Anna just hoped her father could stay sober for long enough. She remembered as a child being taken out on her fathers snowmobile to his hunting hut far south of the town in the forest. It was a long trek, 2-3 hours at least. By the time they got here she had been almost frozen despite her thick winter coat and pants. She crawled into the camouflage hut after her father. He pulled his gun in after them and propped it up on the bottom of the small shooting window. There they waited, her father in steady concentration and her in nervous fidgeting. Finally, a large shape seemed to emerge from the forest and She gasped under her breath. The majestic beast was chewing a sapling sticking out from the snow, he was at least 7 feet tall at the head and his massive rack rose another two. His white chest

rippled in the slight wind and his brown pelt was shiny from the reflection of the snow. Then, there was a massive boom and the resplendent animal was crashing down into the red-splashed snow. She cried out and ran towards the elk where she stood over his body, crying. Her father came over and wrapped her in his arms. She threw him off and climbed onto the snowmobile and refused to look at him. He had never taken her hunting again.

She finished her breakfast and grabbed her phone, coat and keys to the truck as she ran out the door. The clock read 7:30 and her job started at 8. She threw her truck into gear and fishtailed down her driveway on the slick winter ice. She finally got it stabilized and drove down the secluded woodland road towards Seward. As she drove the trees disappeared and were replaced by houses and neon signs. She pulled up to the K-Mart parking lot and looked at the sea of cars in the parking lot. Even though it was the only grocery store in town, Kmart only had 25 cars in its parking lot at a time, today there were 300, easy. She felt a great wave of uneasiness wash over her. She parked the truck in one of the few available spots and hurried inside, careful to keep her footing on the thick ice. Anna waded through the customers at checkout and made her way back to the warehouse. She saw her manager shouting orders to the men driving the forklift as she made her way over to him.

“What the hell is going on” Anna said, yelling slightly over the noise of the warehouse

“Big storm’s coming in!” he yelled, “supposed to white out the whole town, people are buying up all the canned food for miles. Today is our day!”he patted her on the back and walked away to order his employees around in his booming voice. Anna loved storms, the howling wind was like a monster at the door and Anna felt safe and warm inside her home when she knew that out there she would surely be frozen. Through these warm thoughts of home she had an unpleasant

thought, her father was out there with no way of knowing about the storm. And then, an even more unpleasant thought: was that a good thing?

She worked at the register for 7 more hours, watching the panicked people, anger and resentment etched into their faces. She broke up a fight between two women fighting over the last large pack of toilet paper. It was funny, she thought, how whenever there was a big storm in town people abandoned the thought of community to get things for themselves and their families. Again, she thought of her father and an unwanted pang of fear for his life struck her heart. Her shift was over and she stood gazing out of the large storefront window. She stood between an unending sea of white and the bright industrial lights of the supermarket. Taking off her Kmart vest and donning her heavy winter jacket she opened the door and braced against the snow. She walked over to the truck and began to drive home. She saw a crash along the side in the ditch surrounded by police cars and again thought of her father. The neon signs and buildings were again replaced by looming trees, the forest began to look like a mighty wall in the gathering dusk. She pulled into the driveway and went inside the house. Anna's mother had just started the night shift at the national park. She was a park ranger and had to work odd hours to accommodate Anna's hours. Anna hated that her mother had such strenuous hours but there was nothing she could do. Cathy ran down the stairs and wrapped Anna in the largest hug her small arms could handle.

“What's wrong?” Cathy said, instantly seeing the troubled look on Anna's face.

“Where's dad?” Anna said.

“He hasn't come home yet, but I'm sure he will soon.”

“When dad left this morning was he, you know...?” Anna trailed off but Cathy understood.

She nodded and looked down. “I told him he shouldn't go out into the woods drunk but he just ignored me and kept drinking.”

Anna stumbled backwards and sat heavily on the drooping living room couch. She put her head in her hands and stared through her fingers at the worn rug on the floor. Her father had left the house drunk, and gone to the hunting spot he had been going to for years with no trouble, but then, the blizzard hit. Anna had no idea whether her father was alive or dead but she knew that without her he would surely be the latter. Her father had been an unending burden for the past years and had offered no help or love to Cathy or Anna. Even though she knew she shouldn't, whether it was a childish attachment or an unmet need for his love, deep down Anna loved her father as much as she had before he started drinking. However, her father had stopped her from going to college but she didn't want the same fate for Cathy, her sister was the smartest person she had ever met. Anna knew without their father Anna and her mother could work enough to send Cathy to college. Cathy, ten years old but wise beyond her years, knew everything Anna did, and more. She sat next to Anna on the couch.

Anna was desperate for some kind of answer, some defining thing that would help her decide. She paced about. Why did this have to be her burden? Why couldn't it have been left to her mother? Anna knew what her mother would choose, she had never given up hope that her husband would quit drinking and Anna knew this would be no exception. Suddenly she wanted her father more than anything else, wanted him to hold her in his arms and comfort her. She felt she was being torn in two.

Having nowhere else to turn, Anna stopped pacing and looked to her sister for guidance. She looked at Cathy in desperation. "Dad is out there, alone." she said "if we do nothing he'll die, but i'm afraid if we save him-" Anna was shouting now and when she looked down Anna saw that her sister had burst into tears. Why had she thought that Cathy could handle these massive decisions any better than she could?

“You have to go get daddy” Cathy said between sobs “I know you hate him. If you don’t get him I’ll never talk to you again!”

“I-I don’t-”

“If you don’t get him then I will!” Cathy said “you’re stupid and scared”

Anna walked over to Cathy and hugged her. “I’ll get him. I’ll get him” she said and kissed Cathy on the head. This isn’t just about me, Anna thought. Cathy needs him, in all his drunken glory.

The harsh wind whistling in her ears Anna braced herself against the blizzard and slowly made her way to the garage. She could only see a few feet and her tracks in the snow were instantly erased. If I’m not careful we’ll both die tonight, Anna thought. She struggled to pull the snowmobile out of the garage, sliding on the ice and being buffeted by the wind. She climbs on and starts the engine. As she pulls out of the driveway Anna sees her sister in her bedroom window waving goodbye to Anna with tears in her eyes. Anna prayed with all her heart she would see her sister again. Anna hadn’t looked at a map before she left but she knew where to go. She knew the path to her fathers hunting spot by heart. Her headlights were like a ship cutting through the oppressive ice of night. All around her everything was black. The pine trees became a thick wall along the narrow forest path. She saw familiar landmarks she hadn’t seen in years and a wave of nostalgia washed over her with each passing hut and boulder. After 2 hours the shack finally came into view. In the dark it looked even more sad and dilapidated than in the day. And to Anna the small clearing it was in that had always seemed so bright and wild seemed like a place of death. She climbed off the snowmobile and walked toward the shack. The snow swirled around her like a mighty serpent coiling around her and threatening to crush the life from her body. She found the door and pulled it open full of trepidation.

Her father was alive, huddled in the corner looking at Anna covered in every blanket and jacket in the shack. She walked over to him, grabbed his hands and pulled him to his feet.

“I-I’m so sorry” he said through chattering teeth “I-I should have been there for you.”

Anna tried to answer but her words were lost to the wind. She helped her father up onto the snowmobile and she sped away towards home. Many times Anna felt her fathers hands slipping from around her waist and she had to stop and shake him awake, fearful that next time he fell asleep he wouldn't wake up. Finally they made it home. Cathy was still standing at the window looking out into the night and her eyes lit up when Anna drove doggedly into the driveway. Anna pulled her father off of the snowmobile and he started mumbling deliriously. The door banged open and Cathy and her mother ran out and helped Anna carry their father into the house. Anna studied her mothers face and saw relief and anger. They laid Anna’s father down on the sagging couch and Cathy smothered her father, who was beginning to come to in the heat of the home in hugs and kisses

“I'm so glad your ok daddy” Cathy said

“What-what happened?” her father said. And then, as he remembered he started to cry.

“I should have treated you girls better, I'm so sorry.” he said between quiet sobs.

“It's alright,” Anna said “your with family now”

Anna stares out the window and watches the fields of wheat and corn pass rapidly by. She is full of fear and excitement. The car finally stops in front of the small high school in Afton NY, she gets out with a look of disbelief on her face. Her father gets out and wraps his arm around her. There's no smell of liquor on his breath and there hasn't been for at least a year. After the blizzard they moved out of the death trap that was that little town and flew to warmer skies.

Her father had followed her mother into a job as a police officer in Afton. Anna was finally able to quit working and finish high school. She hugs her dad tighter than she ever has before and breaks away, her heart full to bursting. She walks inside and her father stands leaning against the car, watching his daughter leave, and her life begin.