

## WHERE TRUE FREEDOM STILL EXISTS.

a short story by Ade` Craig

*"Please God, I'll change"*, is the oath I make with *the Man Upstairs* as turbulence pulsates through every compartment of the rickety Cessna 206.

Soaring at 14,000 feet, it pains me to sneak a peek out the window. The moose burger I ate hours prior hangs in the back of my throat. It's dead weight travels further and further up my esophagus as I fear any additional disturbance will propel it from my mouth onto the pilot seated before me.

Slowly, I close my eyes, take a deep breath and swallow repeatedly. Relief comes during the decent when my ears finally pop. In the end, we make it to Valley Point fish camp safely.

The magnitude of wilderness hits immediately. *'The Last Frontier'*, a lexeme no greater, as it is truly a remote land with colossal mountains, copious amounts of water and few people.

The Cessna's propellers pop and to my left I spot several deer dash into the shelter of thickets, as Keta, a German Shepherd, gallops down to the beach to meet us drifting ashore.

Dean, a pilot who has twenty years experience flying throughout the peninsula, powers down the engine. All summer long he will earn a living transporting crew to various sites throughout the bay.

Dean notices Keta, chuckles and says she's getting old. Through the mic attached to the headphones, I ask, "how so?" Dean replies, "She just is, I can tell". He then looks over his shoulder and advises that I forget about cars, trains or buses, because here, they are absent. Looking up into the firmament, one will be lucky to spot a commercial airliner gliding across the skyline. Cell phone towers, electricity poles, too, all removed. Hell, the nearest source of fresh water is a-mile hike uphill to a spring, tapped in by Jacob, the husband of Margarete, who in turn is the lady I met via my mother's superannuated IBM computer.

Margarete informed me regarding the essentials that were essential. One would think in an area as desolate as Alaska, you could never pack enough. Well, Margarete believed otherwise and her wisdom explains why a single bag accounts for my luggage, which Dean offers to remove from the cockpit and carry to dry land. I tread carefully along the planes pontoons, also known as floats. The tide is high and I have not received my fishing gear, or neoprene boots yet for the upcoming season, which is slated to be monstrous.

I step onto wet black sand, and once over my surroundings. The cool sweet air is a panacea. I inhale it, feeling instant relief. Along with fresh oxygen, a barrage of thoughts smash into my brain, like birds colliding into a windowpane, I fear this is going to be one long summer and instantly regret my desire for adventure. Margarete steps toward me and addresses me by my legal name, Michael. She calls me Mike for short. Maybe it's her way of being less formal and making me feel welcomed. Her handshake is firm, and her countenance tough. Immediately updating me on the type of woman she is. Jacob, slightly withdrawn, approaches after Margarete introduces him as her husband. He seems socially incompetent, or maybe that's the restricted continental American perspective contaminating my

thoughts. Ostensibly his demeanor is one derived from his environment of a simple, one-dimensional life spent at sea.

Garrett, the son of Jacob and Margarete is even more introverted. The kid is a genius, but his communication skills are another matter. That's the plight with so many 'bush' kids. Although healthy, strong and free of acne, with little human interaction, they lack the ability to aimlessly converse.

Then there is Dave from Wisconsin. A stout man with short curly hair and a thick Wisconsin accent, he means well. That's how Margarete lays it out. To this day, Margarete frequently asks me if I have spoken with Dave. I usually tell her that we chat occasionally over Facebook. Seldom do we speak over the phone. Dave is the type of individual who sought out freedom from the captivity of modernity. That's what brought him to Alaska. Margarete usually chuckles and says, "Dave means well".

Dean cranks up his Cessna and waves at Margarete and Jacob through the windshield. We won't see him again until fish slime somehow finds an opening into my knee, causing the worst case of staphylococcus infection seen in years. The harsh reality of my leg almost having to be amputated will keep me from returning to this prized land.

The Cessna blows small waves ashore as Keta splashes around in the frigid water where hypothermia lurks. Margarete calls out to Keta, but the canine is in her element and continues unabated. Margarete looks at Keta, clearly dreading the day her beloved furry companion is called home. It's inevitable and she then turns to me, smiles and rolls her eyes.

Jacob makes his way uphill first and then Margarete. Garrett follows in a lethargic third. Dave grabs my bag, telling me he will haul it up hill. I smile and extend my appreciation. I tell Dave that I'll be up in a few minutes as something has come over me.

Everyone makes their way up, past tall thickets, into the cabin beyond. Dean's Cessna now skidding across the surface of the water slowly ascends and soars off. I am alone now, in the midst of God's intended world of calm and serenity. Absolute peace, that is until a ravenous 400lb grizzly bear comes charging around the rock protruding out of the water and completely destroying this moment, ripping me to shreds. It's a possibility, but thank God that never happened. Instead, now I think about how much I fought those four years as a commercial fisherman. Four glorious years without any romantic companionship, unnecessary bills, tangible money or the quote on quote "*indispensable*" cell phone. There are very few places in the world where that brand of freedom still exists. A class of freedom that changes people. Rendering a truly free person as strange or abnormal. When in fact, it is you who are aberrant.

Nostalgically, I long for this former time and regret that I expedited those days. Foreign were headaches, sore throats or diarrhea of any kind. Vitality and brio pulsed through my veins. My skin gained a crimson hue, on account of the copious amounts of sockeye salmon ingested. A livelier day has yet to present itself. Now all I do is aimlessly float through a mundane life loaded with devices able to connect myself with the outer cosmos, though never truly taking me anywhere. It's confusing and empty. People who still use the simple, yet anachronous flip phone

are shunned and eventually seduced into upgrading. But the more I sit back and consider, it is the downgraded life that is upgraded.

I regularly link up with the crew at Valley Point, though always through a digital device. We are all older now, Garrett, included. No one ever directly expresses it, but I believe those four years stood out in time.

And so, eleven years later I still find myself nostalgically longing for the simple past. Archaic is the grueling sixteen-hour workdays and swollen arthritic fingers from having picked nets loaded with monstrous Sockeye Salmon. An ability to endure pain is a testament to one's character. I still crave the illusive freedom from technological distractions and material possessions. I still long for the "*object to which the action of the sea is directed.*" Guidance only Alaska can provide. I still long for the **Great Land**; when we were truly free.