



Alaska

by Z.Z. Bone

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My ex-boyfriend—let's call him David, because that's his name—somehow convinced me to move from Los Angeles to Ketchikan, Alaska. He'd been there only three months, but he called after the first week-and-a-half and begged me to drop it all and come live with him. At first, I was adamant; our three-year relationship had spiraled from fascination and lust to indifference and unresponsiveness. But David persisted. He called every Saturday, sounding happy and confident, and pledged that he was born-again in a non-religious sense.

We'd met, or more accurately I first became aware of him, through a note he left on a basket of laundry. My parent's washer had fritzed, so I'd gone into a laundromat on West 6th Street, found it was packed, left my basket on top of a washer that was nearing its spin cycle, and went next door to pick up *People* magazine. When I got back, there was a folded half-sheet of loose-leaf on top of my dirty clothes. **I HAVE AN ASIAN FANTASY**, it said. **IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW MORE, CHECK ME OUT TOMORROW AT NOON OUTSIDE THE MAIN ENTRANCE OF THE ELYSIAN PARK MUSEUM OF ART.**

I disregarded it at first—just another guy with some exotic misconception of Chinese women—but the following day I dragged my friend Nicole (a non-Asian) to Elysian Park. She checked the dude out, came back, reported. Normal build, Irish-looking, nicely dressed. According to Nicole, he didn't appear to be the shovel-and-shallow-grave type, but they never do. Fuck it, I thought. I walked up and introduced myself, and that evening we ate hot dogs at Skooby's on Hollywood Boulevard.

As I mentioned, David wasn't one to give up easily.

"Zoe," he told me on the phone one August night after a particularly shitty day at my job, "Ketchikan is magical. It heals. Just come see and decide for yourself."

He'd gone to Alaska lured by tales of high paying construction jobs. "In the summer," his friend Bradley told him, "daylight can last for like twenty-four hours. That means you put in like a twelve hour work day, get paid overtime, knock down like \$3,000 a week." Bradley had never "like" been there, but he knew somebody who had. And for David, twenty-six years old and working at Starbucks, hearsay was all it took. He left during the first week in June after talking me into driving him to LAX at midnight. No long goodbyes. He was thoughtful enough to have me drop him off in front of the Alaska Airlines terminal so I could avoid the aggravation of short-term parking.

The fifth or sixth time he called, I found myself becoming interested. I hated my job as an events planner, I hadn't dated since David left, and I had recently gotten into a fender-bender on the Santa Monica Freeway. I still lived with my mom and dad, adoptive parents who loved me so much they held on like drowning children, native Angelinos who encouraged me to go no further than Pepperdine for my education.

Ketchikan, Alaska seemed far away and, with David at my elbow,

exciting but safe.

So I went. I gave two weeks notice at work, I disregarded the pleas of my parents, I scraped together the necessary funds, and eventually David and I were reunited at the Cove View Mobile Home Park where he lived.

Ketchikan was as beautiful as a screensaver, with its fishing boats, colorfully painted houses, and lush verdant mountains. People were generally friendly. Compared to Los Angeles, traffic was almost non-existent. Alaska seemed, at first, like a second chance. David, overjoyed to see me, opened a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and cooked us fish and chips. The manufactured home he rented—he refused to call it a “trailer”—was clean and orderly. We made love that first night on the freshly vacuumed living room carpet as if we were prison inmates on our first conjugal visit.

But like milk left on a radiator, things went sour pretty quickly. David, who had established his own living pattern over the summer, quickly became territorial. We’d never lived together, and our lack of practice showed. I drove him crazy by washing my hair in the kitchen sink. The clothes in his half of the bedroom closet were color coded, mine were random. He never trusted me to drive his 12-year old pickup truck; he claimed I rode the clutch. And he became frighteningly incensed one night when, unable to find a clean pot, I heated sauerkraut in his European coffee press.

But this was hardly our biggest problem.

David, who had found construction work but at a rate far lower than he’d expected, was laid off two weeks after I arrived. He landed a part time job at a liquor store, but it barely covered expenses. By week three, he suggested I look for work, “just something to tide us over” for eight months or so until summer returned. I went on a couple of interviews—an assistant to the library director, a staff job at the Ted Ferry Civic Center—but my lack of enthusiasm buried me faster than a California mudslide. In the beginning of October, when the unceasing rain started and frozen pizza became a staple, my heart was back in L.A., back at my parents’ house only minutes from the beach at El Matador, snugly secure between the blankets of the bedroom I had known since the age of ten-and-a-half months.

Soon afterward, David confessed that he’d been seeing someone else. A female professor who taught at the University of Alaska Southeast. She was seven years older than he was, and drank Skyy vodka. “It’s like Morna and I were separated at birth,” David explained, which was when I realized that he and I, like Ketchikan’s infamous bridge project, stood on a road to nowhere.

My dad was only too happy to send \$400 for my plane fare home. This time it was David who drove me to the airport, who dropped me off outside, who kissed me on the cheek, whose tiny red taillights I watched vanish into the morning mist.

But this is not the story of love lost, nor is it the story of a woman scorned. This is more the story of my voyage home, specifically the second leg of my journey, my two-and-a-half hours in the air between my layover at Sea-Tac and my destination at LAX.

The flight from Seattle, a 4:20 pm departure, was packed and I, like some first-time flyer, had unwisely chosen a window seat. Next to me, a worn-looking, middle aged couple sat with a squirming Chinese infant.

The kid was the size of a porcupine, dressed in yellow sweatpants and a tiny Lakers jersey, and shrieking as if her fingers had just been pinched by a car door slammed shut.

The adoptive mom, who sat directly next to me, gave an exhausted smile and said, "Well it looks like you two have a little something in common."

For at least an hour, the child's wailing didn't stop. The mother cuddled, the father cajoled, the flight attendant offered hot water for formula. Other passengers, on their way to the restroom, passed by and glared. A few offered advice—"joggle her," or "play pat-a-cakes"—but their suggestions were as useless as rubber fishhooks.

It was approaching the dinner hour and passengers were becoming tense. Business people, planning a couple of extra hours sleep or some laptop time, were denied. Families, at least some of which had probably been traveling all day, began to snipe at one another. Still, the din continued.

"Let me take her," I finally offered, not so much out of kindness as out of desperation. The mother handed the girl over instantly, and a second later her seat reclined. I held the baby under her armpits, stood her on my knees, studied her broad, flat face. She returned my gaze, then went silent. Both parents were asleep, or at least successfully faking it, within a matter of minutes. The baby, without any visible emotion, continued to stare.

The other passengers, as one, seemed to calm. Muted conversation and gentle snoring could be heard. It was as if some calming vapor had been pumped through the plane's air circulation system.

I thought I had my future worked out. I'd go home, get my old job back, perhaps get my hair cut short, save my money and buy a new car. That was the short-term plan. But now, with this infant boring a hole into me, it seemed less like a new start and more like an old continuation.

I had an ex-roommate from college, Lulu, who had moved to San Francisco two years before. She'd opened a clothing and accessory consignment shop, one among millions, but she was meeting ends. At Pepperdine, I'd nursed her through the H1N1 flu while her parents were unreachable in Argentina, and she emailed at least once a month with the promise to help set me up if I was ever to make the trip north. David, without ever having met her, declared Lulu a lesbian, and my parents tagged her as someone to stay far away from.

The infant standing on my lap never returned my smiles, never responded to my gentle cooing. When the announcement was made that we were approaching the airport, the mother awoke, took her baby, smiled and told me if I ever needed babysitting work it was mine for the asking. Her new child, looking once more into that tired, lined, unfamiliar face, took in a lungful of oxygen and began again to scream.

"Maybe she's not a Lakers fan," I said, but my attempt at humor went over like flaming dog shit in a brown paper bag.

My parents met me at the airport, dressed as if they were going to church, holding a balloon bouquet and a tin of Mrs. Fields cookies. On the ride home I'd tell them that I was here only temporarily. They'd smile and pass it off. "Los Angeles is like a magnet," my father would again tell

me. “You get only so far before it begins to pulls you back.”

I'd fight back the urge to phone Lulu from the car. To call the airport and check on rates into San Fran International. I'd figure those things could wait. At least until after dinner. At least until after a hot shower and a shampoo. At least until after a decent night's sleep outside a manufactured home.

Z.Z. Boone's fiction has appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Tulane Review*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Pank*, *Weave*, *Eclectica*, *The Adroit Journal*, *The MacGuffin*, *Annaleema*, *SN Review*, *Word Riot*, and others. Z.Z. holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College, and teaches writing at Western Connecticut State University.

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