

Running Away

by

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There are times that my life overwhelms me. There are times when I feel the rolling waves of obligation to family, job, and finances entirely engulf me, cover me, and threaten to pull me under. There are times when all I want to do is drop all of my responsibilities and relationships, unburden myself of the cares of the world, and run to some other portion of the Earth in an effort to start over. Only twice have I actually done it.

Like Thoreau's decision to go to Walden, I went to Alaska because I wished to live deliberately, to discover what living meant, and to cut away all parts of myself that were not a part of living. As painful as that might be, it was better to do that than to find at the end of my life that I had not truly lived.

At the time, I felt that my friends and family had boxed me in. I believed that the expectations of my family and friends confined me. People thought that I could only act in certain ways or do certain things. I felt that I had filled that box all the way to its sharp corners, and that my entire being was now straining against it. All that other people seemed to offer me was a bigger box or a box in a different shape. I wanted a chance to reinvent myself.

More than that, Alaska called to me. I felt a rising song well within me from the moment I received the first letter from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I was able to list logical reasons for going: UAF's engineering program was highly ranked, it had a good theater program, and I would receive a full tuition scholarship. But all of those paled to the music that resonated within my soul.

I was surprised, then, on that cool rainy day when I stepped out of the Fairbanks airport that the music didn't rise to a crescendo. As I looked for my luggage, I realized that I had no idea how to get to the university or what to do when I got there. In place of the song, a burgeoning fear threatened to rule my reason. I would fight that fear and the tremendous homesickness that nearly brought me to my knees. I would forge new friendships and build a new sense of self. To many people, I suppose the new me looked similar to the old me, but the differences within me were dramatic. I was surprised, then, that I would again feel that desire to run away less than a year later.

"Janelle thinks that she might be pregnant." I forced myself to tell the person whom, in the entire world, I least wanted to disappoint.

"I see." Father Jim Kolb's gruff voice conveyed disappointment, but not judgment. He seemed resigned rather than surprised. We sat in a small room at the back of a tiny house in the middle of campus. A large, polished trunk with a large knob at the top stood in the corner to serve as an altar. It was Wednesday. We had just finished the weekday mass and were sitting on the folding chairs along the wall.

"She might not be," I said with the voice of a man desperately grasping a vine above a raging waterfall, a man who feared that he might drown even if he survived the fall. "There's a chance that it's her appendix ... or something else that is affecting her digestive system and her period. She's going to the health center after her classes to find out."

"And you hope that she has some sort of illness or disease that might require surgery just so you don't have to pay the price of your choices?" This time there was judgment, and it was obvious that he found me lacking. Fr. Jim made me think of Moses or Santa Claus. His face

would be the basis for a mural of a gold miner and his voice had the rumble of thunder behind it. His gaze penetrated my soul just as his question penetrated my mind.

I wanted to deny it, but I knew it was true. I would rather someone I cared for suffered than I take responsibility for my actions. The knowledge of that fact seared within my chest and I found it hard to breathe. “I don’t know what to do. I’m scared.”

Fr. Jim’s expression softened, but his words remained hard. “You should be. You should be terrified. Everything in your life is going to change and you’re going to have very little control over the things that happen to you.” He was never one to sugarcoat the truth, but he always tempered it with his astounding wisdom and love. He put his hand on my shoulder. “But you have people who care for you, who care for Janelle. You have friends who love you who will help you through this.”

I felt emotions well up within me. I composed myself and nodded. “I know. I just don’t know what to do. I don’t know if I can handle this.”

“No one knows what they can truly handle until the situation is put upon them. Still, I believe that you will be a great father, and Janelle, a great mother.” He never questioned if we were going to keep the child. He knew us, and in this had faith in us. He grew serious again. “I have two things that I want you to think about, that you might not have considered.”

I thought he was going to propose a solution that hadn’t occurred to me, but instead he gave me advice on two things that had seriously not entered my consciousness. “First, you will receive a great deal of advice from many people who may not have your best interests at heart. While some of this might deal with having the child or not, some of it will include the idea that people who have a child must get married.

“It is important that you and Janelle do not rush into marriage. Just because you’ve made one mistake, that doesn’t mean you should make another. If you marry her right away, the two of you will always wonder if you only got married because of the child. Instead, should you decide to get married, your marriage should be based on mutual love and respect.”

I agreed with him and would only later find out how true his predictions about people’s pressure would be.

“Second, and this is very important, until the two of you do get married, you and Janelle need to stop sleeping together. Getting her pregnant does not give you license to continue to sin. Detaching yourselves from the physical aspect of your relationship will allow the two of you to examine the other portions of your relationship more clearly. Unless you stop yourselves, your decisions will be made through a haze of hormones and emotions.”

I thought about that, and while it made complete sense to me, I didn’t think I could follow that advice. Because Fr. Jim suggested it, I would try, but as the wise sage once said, “Try not. Do or do not. There is no try.”

I believe he had some idea about my hesitancy on that last point, because he unrolled his stole. “I think we’ll count this as a confessional. Do you want to be absolved of your sins?” At my nod, he kissed the cross on the stole, placed it around his neck, and began the confession.

A weight lifted off me, and I would feel lighter with each person we told. Janelle and I had been with each other for a while and the guilt that I felt for some of our actions weighed on me. Being able to openly talk about it with others gave me a tremendous sense of relief.

Janelle would confirm that she was pregnant at the health center. Our friends and family dealt with the news in a variety of ways. Chris was the first one we would tell, and he simply

didn't believe us. Granted, it didn't help that I started laughing soon after telling him. It's how I deal with stress, and doesn't convey a sense of truthfulness. Desmond encouraged us to abort the pregnancy or to look into adoption. As my roommate that semester, he would have plenty of occasions to try to instill the fear within me that the child might be sickly or deformed, or require more care or help than I could provide. My parents would be disappointed, though my father claimed that he had come to expect the news based on how I talked about Janelle when I was home for Christmas. Meanwhile, Janelle's parents would apparently switch their view on me; they had originally told her to back out of our relationship but were now encouraging us to get married. Some of our acquaintances would hate me, some would even stop talking to us, but most of our friends and family were supportive.

I was faced with a sudden dilemma. I had a ticket to return home that semester. Before Janelle discovered she was pregnant, my plan had been to return to Michigan, live at home, and get another job like the one I had the summer before at Meijer. My first plan after discovering Janelle's condition was that she would join me down in Michigan. There turned out to be several problems that I hadn't considered with that idea which were pointed out to me by several people. What finally turned the tide was Janelle's insistence that we could make more money over the summer in Alaska than we could in Michigan. Because we would soon have a child to support, we believed that it was in our best interest to make as much money as possible. For me, that ruled out returning to Michigan.

Before we knew about her pregnancy, Janelle found a summer job with the Princess Hotel in Denali, the national park that's home to the highest mountain in North America (You might call it Mount McKinley, but most people in Alaska just call it Denali, its native name).

Princess was a chief supplier of summer jobs at UAF. Several of our friends received jobs down in Juneau, working with the Princess cruise ships. Unfortunately, by the time we discovered Janelle was pregnant, Princess was no longer hiring.

According to the employment department of UAF, almost everyone was done hiring for the summer. The woman I spoke with did have one interesting opportunity that provided food and board as well as a good salary. It was the first that I would hear of Chicken, or Greg and Susan. Since Janelle and I were going to be separated anyway, I figured that I might as well make the most of the summer.

The truth was that I was running away again. Several of my friends stayed in Fairbanks and despite paying rent and buying their own food, they would end up making more money than I did that summer. Denali had buses that traveled to and from Fairbanks for a very reasonable fee. I could have seen Janelle on a semi-regular basis. While I convinced myself at the time that I would go to Chicken for reasons of profit, I knew myself better.

Chicken sounded perfect to me. The mail arrived only twice a week. There were no phones. I would be cut off from society. I could hide from my responsibilities in the brush of Alaska.

To my shame, that was not the full extent of my plan. I had decided that once the summer was over, Janelle would fly down to Michigan to live with my parents. We decided that she couldn't live with her parents due to the isolated conditions they lived in at the time. Due to some of the most ridiculous rules I've heard, she couldn't stay in the dormitories on campus because she was pregnant, yet she couldn't live in any of the campus housing for families because the child was not yet born.

My brilliant solution was for her to go to my parents while I continued school in Fairbanks. I would fly down on breaks to be with her, and then return to school. How tidy. I would have a child and a mother of that child, but I wouldn't need to take care of either of them. More amazing to me, Janelle and my parents agreed to this. My first letter to Janelle from Chicken included crude maps of my parents' house and yard that I drew so she would be more familiar with them. How thoughtful.

Now and again, thoughts of running away pop into my mind again. I still find myself feeling boxed in by the obligations and expectations of life. I know, however, that I could never do it. I tried when I ran to Alaska. I tried when I ran to Chicken. I left so that I could live deliberately, to discover what life could offer. I did discover what living meant. It meant staying near the people I love.