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**The Explorer’s Bottle**

 I sit outside high in a willow tree with a book propped up by knees covered with torn shorts. Mosquitos are buzzing around my capped head and despite the copious amount of bug dope I’ve used, I’m am still getting bit. I am not phased because at this exact moment Shea Shannara is finally picking up the Sword of Shannara, and suddenly he is feeling the sword’s power. My 2nd-grade homework will have to wait because the Warlock Lord has woken from his sleep.

“Katie!” Mom yells from the kitchen of our two-story suburban home, her long dark hair pulled up in a ponytail, to keep her cool while cooking dinner on this hot humid August evening. “Time to eat.”

“I’m not hungry, Ma,” I say.

“Get down from that tree! You must eat. You have homework and chores,” she says. Her 5’1” frame doesn’t reduce the volume of her lungs.

“Just a minute,” I say

 In no way do I mean it. If I stop now, I will leave Shea to deal with the Warlock Lord alone.

I lose myself in the stories of Terry Brooks’s *Sword of Shannara* and wish they never ended. As the night cools, the crickets sing their lullaby.

“Katie, time to turn off the lights,” Mom says.

“Just ten more minutes?” I beg from under the covers directing the flashlight at the mystical pages.

“OK, I give. Just don’t stay up too late. You have school tomorrow. Shut the lights off, you know how Jerry gets if we keep the lights on,” Mom says as if she needs to explain the rigidity of my stepfather’s rules. Even in the dim light, I see lines forming on her face aging her right before my eyes as if under the Warlock Lord’s curse.

 Maybe if I fall asleep with the *Lord of the Rings*, under my head the magic of Gandalf will be mine via osmosis. I could use that magic to fix all the problems I face at home now that we live in Minneapolis. I would dream up a magic wand to take me back to northern Minnesota where I could sit in a boat all day, catching fireflies by the fire, searching for shooting stars, and calling back to the loons.My parents’ early divorce when I was four didn’t end in a happy ever after. We moved to a strange land, my Mom remarried to a stereotypical villain, and the landscape of my naïve and innocent life became permanently altered. A trip north can fix anything-even an imaginary one.

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“Dad, can we camp out tonight?” I ask on our trip to Itasca State Park.

“We are camping out. What do you mean?” Dad says. His 6’ 7" frame towers over the other tourists that are taking pictures of themselves on the tiny rocks across the headwaters of the Mississippi.

“We are in a trailer. There is nothing risky about that.” Hands on my hips, I shake my head in dismay as if Dad made a crazy joke.

“Why does it need to be risky?” Dad says, wearing his usual assortment of vacation clothing consisting of patterned shorts, Carhartt shirt, and slip-on shoes with the back rims flattened.

 “We just had a school assembly, Will Steger and Ann Bancroft come to our school to give a presentation on the first ever dogsled powered trip to the North Pole. That’s what all the great explorers do. They survive on their own wits, on what the land can provide for food and water, and somehow they make it,” I say, dreaming even as I say it that Steger and Bancroft, dressed in full winter regalia, were standing with us besides a team of sled-dogs holding a compass pointed straight to north.

“Well,” Dad says, “we can make a fire and survive on the s’mores that the local store provides us. Will that work?”

“OK, Dad,” I laugh. “Sounds great.”

*I forge a relationship with Ann Bancroft, soul sister and soon to be fellow explorer. In my mind’s eye she and I walk side by side down every trail and through every forest valley. She tells me stories of dark polar skies on fire with dancing northern lights and tells me endless escapades that her sled-dogs take her on.*

*I say, “Ann, every day outside in the fresh air is one less day being at our house in Minneapolis where I face certain misery.”*

*Ann says, “We are the same you and me. We feel this sense of great exhilaration that comes with walking and being in the vast unknown that, deep down I know, your future resides. My present is awe filled and purposeful. Your day will come.”*

*Ann goes with me as I continue to camp when I can up north with Dad. That I am less than a mile from our cabin doesn’t deter me from pretending we are on a great Polar expedition powered only by our two legs and the four legs of our companions.*

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 As the years go by, the evil in my stepdad grows. I hide. When seen, I cower. At ten, I make the mistake of playing out past dark making me late in taking out the trash.

“You are garbage,” says Jerry. “Not trustworthy. Not worthy of anything! You are irresponsible and will amount to squat!” On and on, his pointy finger punctuates every word as his voice rises to a howl. Fire red blotches spread over his bald head providing a suitable point of focus and distraction for me as I build an internal shield around my beaten down heart. This barrage of insults goes deep, but it is easy compared to what I usually endure by him.

“What’s the problem? I am on my way to get it,” I say barely able to breathe.

“You are a liar on top of it all! You don’t belong in MY house,” Jerry says with spit landing on my forehead.
He turns away dismissing me in disgust. He storms away to his office and slams the door. Collapsing to the ground, I hyperventilate unable to move. I was under the illusion that, at a minimum, he at least tolerated my presence because I helped around the house so much. Nope.

 *I look over and see Ann grabbing a big ball of snow and throwing it at Jerry’s head. As he falls over, her full winter mukluk kicks his rump as he goes down. She whistles to two gorgeous husky puppies that run over to play on my lap kissing the tears off my cheeks. Sled-dog puppies make everything better. Thanks, Ann.*

*I say, “Ann, I miss my Dad. Why do people get married, have kids, and then leave?”*

*Ann says, “I don’t know kiddo, but close your eyes a moment. When I get sad, I put myself up north again, on a lake, singing with loons, catching fireflies, counting shooting stars, and breathing again as if for the first time. Sound familiar? Try it.”*

*I say into the puppy’s ear what I can’t tell Ann, “No one knows the real badness happening at night behind the locked door. As I feel myself fade away into the north star, even I hope to forget.”*

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 At 15, I am out of inpatient treatment. An eating disorder produces massive weight loss and I take to various self-destructive behaviors such as cutting and self-mutilation, which get deeper and more harmful as time goes on. Finally, I am the one in control of the pain inflicted up me. No one but me dictates terms. Excessive drinking dulls the roar of discontent or constant ringing of annoying truths that bubble up to the surface. My therapist repeatedly recommends medication to help ease suffering, but I stand adamant against it. That would give the doctor control over my pain.

 By my senior year of high school, any dreams I once had are too far on the horizon to make out. Gone are my illusions of control and once again my world is chaos and pain. I separate myself from friends and argue nonstop with my family. Once class Salutatorian, now it isn’t likely I will graduate. Goodbye Yale. Life holds no joy, only pain and suffering. I think of different ways I can eliminate myself from existence. I drive around in my car, not caring if I step out of it again. Someone should do me a favor by crashing into me, so I don’t have to do it myself.

*Ann must be on an expedition.*

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﻿ A suicide attempt at 20, lands me into a more serious treatment program along the banks of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. When you subscribe to an addiction package, you not only get a cloak to hide your wounds, but for no additional charge, you get an even larger, more impenetrable suit of armor which prevents any self-worth from coming your way. Without a security blanket to hide in, I dive headfirst into a pile of memories, put away by a kid unable to come to terms with a negative past. I discover things about my life that I blocked. For the first moment in my life, I feel raw anger. Angry that my right to a childhood was eclipsed by years of harsh times. Angry life pressed down on my mom so hard she had to pass her burdens to me because she could stand no more. Angry that both parents had new families to care about and I don't belong. ANGRY at now ex-stepdad Jerry for all his messed-up abuse, the extent of which I am now cognizant of. How DARE he? Angry no one noticed, and no one stopped him.

 I find channels for the all-consuming fury before it turns inward to self-hate. Dark rage boils beneath the surface of my Minnesota friendly smiling face. I get away with the pretense unless someone looks into the soul of my eyes. They'll see a frenzy of fire sparring above a maelstrom of snow, hail, and wailing winds in the black starry night of an arctic winter. The hospital is confining, and I struggle to shed the cloak and the armor. I haven’t discovered how to strip myself of its imprisonment. It’s almost as if I am a caterpillar wanting to be a magnificent butterfly. However, I am too suspicious to leave the safety and protection of the cocoon; the world has been unkind. Occasionally, I glimpse the pure happiness that lies beyond my iron shielding within the light of my soul and I know it is there. I need to reach out and become that butterfly.

 *Out of the corner of my eye I can sometimes see Ann pointing towards the horizon. Then she fades away. Her puppies run up, jump on my lap, kiss off my tears, and then run off towards adventure found beyond the full moon.*

 *I wake up at dawn to see Ann at the foot of my bed, in full arctic regalia go mode. There is a look that explorers have as they prepare for their next quest. It is full of the thrill of unfamiliar places and experiences, nostalgia of absent friends, tireless mental preparation, logistics, and a massive YES! Yes, I AM GOING! Yes! I am making it today. Today is the day I am putting my foot on this path. It will be tough as nails, but infinitely rewarding. Yes, I am on my way. That is the look of confidence, strength, and raw joy that Ann wears looking at me this morning.*

 *We exchange no words, but together we watch the sun rise over the Mississippi. With a resolute nod, which passes some of her courage and grit on to me, she strides toward her expedition and I sure as hell stride toward mine.*

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 I don’t care that I grew up in Minnesota or that I don’t have the benefit of having explorers for parents as Aspen or Steger did. I review their lives, and the details form the blueprint of my future. They both have a love of nomadic life, the awareness of the gifts that present themselves through toil, and the wisdom that grows with an observation of the world around you. I can smell the wood smoke coming through their stories and feel the crisp Arctic wind blowing through my clothes. The Alaskan Arctic and the North Pole come alive to me.

“Dad, I have it all figured out,” I say.

“Oh really, what are we having for dinner then,” He teases.

“No, Dad! I will fly a bush plane. I’ll live in a self-built log cabin on a lake, eat caribou, have a dog team, and be a great explorer,” my rosy cheeks and optimistic voice give away my enthusiasm. I feel alive again.

 For once, Dad doesn’t have a joke in response. I look at him to see if he heard me, and he turns his head to glance out the window in silence for a few moments.

His voice cracks just perceptively, “The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.” Dad doesn’t often try to inspire us with quotes, even famous ones by John Muir.

 It was in that moment I realize that in being a famous explorer, going deep into the Far North, I will leave him behind. Not just him but my mom, siblings, and all that I know. While the Universe is what I yearn for-my heart might just break in the process. Could I bottle those I love and keep them with me forever?

“I love you, Dad,” is all I can say. I get no reply, but I need none. How does Ann Bancroft balance a need for wilderness and solitude in the Far North with being apart from those she loves?

 At 21 years old, I make my way above the Arctic Circle. As I begin the solo drive, in my ice cream truck, north through Canada along the Al-Can into the Yukon Territories and Alaska, the words of Muir via my Dad echo in my daydreams becoming crisper with every mile.

*See you up there, Ann.*