

Word Count: 2476

A HARD LESSON LEARNED

Unalaska Island, Aleutian Islands Alaska, 1931

The split bamboo fly rod whipped the air. The woven line curled back before the forward thrust of the rod sent it shooting out over the brackish pool. The red and white fly settled. The boy gave the line a tug. The rod bent double as a chrome sockeye salmon went airborne.

“Got another one,” called Woody.

“I don’t think we have made two casts without hooking a fish,” said Mark. “How can we miss?”

“Woody and Stephan have been giving the fish a break,” laughed Chad. “Seems the kids only get the fly to the water about every ten casts.”

“Don’t call us kids,” snapped Woody. “Were only a couple of years younger than you two.”

“The wind is picking up. I suggest we clean our fish and head home,” suggested Chad.

“It’s my father’s boat, and I am driving,” replied Mark. “Let’s give it another thirty minutes.”

An unnamed Unalaska Island lake drained into the Pacific Ocean a short boat ride from a fish cannery that four young fishermen called home, for the summer.

Grass rippled in the wind, unhampered by trees from the shoreline to the tops of the mountains. To the north, south, and west there was no trace of man for hundreds of miles. The

Aleutian Islands prove the end of the world is not Dante's Hell, but a place pure and haunting. It is wilderness unknown even by those who crave wilderness.

The boys flopped their fish over the side and stored their rods. It took all four to tug the beached boat out to where Chad, manning long oars, rowed it into deeper water. Mark wrenched on the cord of the Elgin outboard motor, which finally belched smoke and a growl on the sixth pull.

"Looks like bigger waves around the point," said Stephan. "How long is the run back to the cannery?"

"Maybe an hour."

The boat shouldered the green water out of the way, wallowing up and over each wave. An overcast to the north was lowering. Sunshine made its way through thickening clouds, igniting a rainbow where a shower dropped from the overcast.

A southeast wind, partially blocked by the mountains, met the boat head on, as it crept around Cape Cheerful ten miles from the cannery dock. Two-foot waves they had been plowing all the way from the lake were replaced by combers twice the size. A spray thrown up each time the bow plunged soaked the boys. In the distance, the bay began to disappear in a rainsquall.

Chad picked up a bucket and began to bail furiously.

"You have to get in closer where the wind is blocked a little," he screamed over the whine of the wind and the growl of the laboring outboard.

"We can't get too close," said Mark. "There are rocks running way out into the water. In three more miles we will be into the outer bay."

Chad wiped the worried look off from his face. "Woody, Stephan pull off a boot and help me bail."

The boat labored up the face of the next wave, hanging in the wind. The water filling the boat flowed toward the stern. Then the wind dropped the bow, the boat crested the whitecap pitching down. The water reversed course, rushing toward the bow. The extra weight drove the boat into the oncoming wave, then under it, filling the vessel. Somehow, Mark managed to keep the motor running.

“Run her up on the beach,” screamed Chad. The younger boys sat clinging to the railing, eyes the size of golf balls.

The swamped boat staggered toward the rocky beach only a hundred yards away. They were close enough to throw a rock ashore when the stern of the boat dropped onto an underwater boulder. The jar launched the boys from their seats; the propeller smashed, its brass blades bending in half. The driveshaft, that drove the propeller, ripped from its bearings. A shriek of grinding metal overwhelmed the wind, before all sound from the motor stopped.

Chad pulled the oars from the brackets and managed to get them into the oarlocks. Standing, he pulled with all the strength that a ten-year-old boy could muster. They were thirty feet from safety when the boat grounded on another rock. As the wave ran on, the boat rolled over on its starboard side and capsized.

Chad fought his way upright, finding the water only waist deep. Mark and his little brother struggled toward shore, each successive wave knocking them down. “Woodrow,” he shouted. “Woody where are you?”

Chad watched his brother’s head bob to the surface, then disappear again. Chad struggled onto the rocky shore and began to run. He splashed into the waves and grabbed Woody’s coat collar, dragging the boy up the beach.

Summer training at Boy Scout camp took over. He rolled Woody onto his stomach, with his head downhill. Chad began to push on Woody's back with steady heavy pushes. He was rewarded by a gush of water from his brother's mouth and a minute later by a gagging cough and the heaving of his chest.

"Is he Okay?" asked Mark.

"I think so," Chad mumbled through chattering teeth. "How are you and Stephan?"

"I think Stephan has a broken arm. I'm just really cold. If we can get a fire going and some cover we will be alright."

The older boys managed to tip the waterlogged craft, now wedged between two rocks. They pulled a canvas tarp and everything useful from the boat. They found a place sheltered from the wind, then struggled to tie the tarp over an oar jammed between two boulders.

Offshore, clouds and mist settled toward the ocean, bringing more rain and wind.

Mark scrounged among the rocks for driftwood as Chad helped the two boys to the shelter. Stephan's arm was strangely twisted. Woody showed no signs of injury but he shook uncontrollably, his walk a stumbling shuffle.

Mark dropped an armful of driftwood next to the shelter. Chad used his trembling fingers to open his pocketknife and punch a hole into a can of oil from the boat. He poured oil over the wood and then began to search through the pockets of his coat.

"Thank God." He unscrewed the cap of a film canister and managed to extract one match with hands shaking so hard that he had to cradle the tiny aluminum can against his chest. "Made, these at camp last year," he mumbled. He scraped the wax from a waterproofed wooden match. Finding a dry rock he struck the match, dropping it onto the oil soaked wood. The fire began to smolder then flame as the oil heated.

Four boys sat close to the fire, steam rising from the front of their jackets. “You remember that old Native at scout camp?” asked Chad. “What did he say about white men building big fires, sit way back and get warm on one side?” Woody leaned against a rock, Stephan next to him, the broken arm loosely in his lap. Neither made a sound.

“I am so sorry that I talked your father into letting us use the boat,” offered Chad to three downturned heads. “I wanted the boys to try out their new fly rods. I am so sorry.”

“There isn’t much firewood in this cove,” said Mark after a long pause. “When this burns down, we will have to find more.” He stripped off his coat and began wringing out the water.

“We should head toward the bay. If we can get across from the cannery someone will see us,” replied Chad. “They will be looking for us pretty soon.” He followed Mark’s lead, wringing his coat with trembling hands. “Before we go, I need to warm up.”

Chad’s head tipped up. The other three boys were asleep around the dying fire. He shook Mark. “Mark, we need more wood.” He looked over at the other boys. Their bodies shaking, their lips blue.

Pulling their collars tight, they stumbled from the crude shelter, heading directly into the shrieking wind. Driven rain stung their faces, pouring from their coats. They pulled the driftwood they found onto the beach where they could pick it up on their way back. They walked a half-hour before they found themselves faced with a cliff that reached high above them, dropping into deep water at its base.

“We aren’t going to get to help this way,” mumbled Mark. “We will have to go over the mountain.”

“Let’s take the wood back to the camp. We can leave most of it for the kids. We should carry enough to build a fire when we get somewhere that someone can see us.”

The boys arrived at camp just in time to stir the ashes of the fire and rekindle a blaze. “We’ll build a smaller fire, so that it doesn’t burn up the wood so fast,” said Chad. He reached over and shook his little brother, but quit after he couldn’t wake him. “We need to get help.”

Mark sat with his arm around Stephan, who managed to respond to Mark’s questions. “I am so cold, Mark, but I can go the other direction and find more wood. How long will you two be gone?”

“Three, maybe four hours.”

The rain and air were now one, the clouds resting on the hillside only a few hundred feet above. The visibility was only the length of a football field.

“Listen,” mumbled Stephan, “I think I hear an engine.”

Chad couldn’t hear anything over the shrieking wind, the thunder of the waves and the pounding rain. Mark shook his head, no.

“I really did hear something.”

Chad poured half of the remaining oil into the fire, the flames erupting as the oil vaporized. He tossed the oilcan and cupped his hands under the torrent of water running from the tarp, splashing it onto his face. He turned back to his friends who somehow laughed.

“You burnt off your eyebrows and singed your hair,” said Mark. “Does it hurt?”

“Nope,” lied Chad, wiping the water from his undamaged eyes and staring out to sea. He saw nothing. He poured more water over his face. They boys lost track of time.

“If we don’t go now, we will be too cold to walk,” uttered Mark. “Stephan, something is really wrong with Woody. Don’t let this fire die. We are going for help.”

Chad and Mark each picked up a couple of sticks of driftwood. Chad found that while some of the oil had leaked from the cardboard can when he threw it, there was enough to start more fires. The two began clambering up the mountain behind camp.

Remembering the huge cliff, the boys continued climbing until they found themselves surrounded by clouds. They guessed at the direction of town, continuing up. The terrain was rugged, with steep gullies and jumbled rocks. Between the gullies only grass covered the ground where snow and ice offered no tree a chance to survive.

“Chad, are we heading the right direction?”

“I think we are,” responded his friend. The rain is still in our face, but I can’t see fifty feet. The walking is keeping me warm, but I sure am tired.”

The boys climbed out of another gulley filled with rushing water trudging into a small hollow. To their right a crude shelter of stacked rocks with an arched roof covered by dirt and grass was built into the hillside. Mark stooped to enter, finding himself in a small room, lit only by the light from the doorway and one small opening in the rock wall. Inside it was dry and out of the wind.

“The Aleut people used to build shelters like this where they could watch for seals and whales,” offered Mark. “Some men who work for my father told me about the old times, before the Russians.” He picked up a rock, running his hands over the surface in the dim light. “This is an old oil lamp. The Aleuts poured oil from fat into the depression in the center then lit a wick. A lamp could keep a small underground house warm.”

“If we use some of our oil and make a wick out of a stick and some cloth, maybe we can warm up for a little while,” suggested Chad. “It is to foggy to go down the mountain.”

“All right,” agreed Mark, “but only for an hour.”

The warmth was welcome. The fumes from the smoke burned the boy's eyes so they closed them. When they awoke, the skies had cleared. The wind still left white streaks on the water, but the whitecaps were gone. To their right the white painted cannery stood out like a beacon. Below them, four boats were spread out along the shoreline.

"They are looking for us," said Mark.

The boys gathered their small cache of firewood and started downhill. They worked their way to a point above the beach. Mark broke up the small supply of wood. Chad cut open the cardboard oilcan spilling what little oil remained onto the sticks. In a minute they had a fire that stood out like a lighthouse against the dark green of the hillside.

A powerboat towing a skiff turned toward the fire. The boys met the skiff as it reached the beach.

Michi Ishihara leaped into the surf and lifted his eldest son, pulling him tight to his chest. He reached over and tussled Chad's hair with his free hand, tears streaming down his face. "Where are your brother and Woody?"

"Under a tarp with a fire a few miles from here," responded Mark.

"We have been up and down this beach since the storm let up," replied his father, "we haven't seen anything like that. You will have to be our guide."

The two boys sat in the skiff as Michi rowed toward shore, still not sure where the camp was. As the boat grounded, Chad and Mark jumped ashore, running along the narrow beach. In the tiny cove where they had left Stephan and Woody, the overturned boat was still wedged into the rocks. Where the camp had been there was nothing except water where high tide lapped at the rocks. Even the tarp was gone.

"We'll find them," said Mark.

He and Chad headed up the hillside, stopping to search every place that might offer shelter. They found their brothers bundled into the tarp. They unrolled it just as Michi caught up with them. He felt for pulses on each boy, finding none.

Chad watched as men from the cannery loaded the bodies into a boat. His tears and the fingers that cradled his face blurred the view. Under his breath he muttered, "I am so sorry," over and over again.