

# one story

## WHAT IS ALASKA LIKE?

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There were only three rules you needed to know to be a chambermaid at the Blue Lake Lodge. One, make a room look clean. Two, if you've really cleaned it, you're taking too long. Three, don't talk to the guests. Number three kept you from having to explain things, like the smell, which nearly all the guests asked about. All you had to do, according to the rules, was point your little finger in the direction of the wooden shack that was the office and say, "Please contact the manager."

Not that it was any mystery. There was no lake at Blue Lake. The Lodge was a stucco motel on the Clam River, about an hour north of Boston. The stink came twice a day with low tide: mud and mussel shells and half-eaten crabs baking in the sun like the darkest casserole. It didn't take a genius to figure out the smell, but these tourists from Ohio would stuff their faces into the sink like there was an answer in there. They wore visors that got in their way. "Sewage?" they'd ask me. "Sulfur?" I'd send them to Miss Lucy, who owned Blue Lake and told people what was

what. I don't know what options she gave them, but usually they didn't stay for more than a night or two.

I'd never had any trouble following Miss Lucy's rules. Keeping your mouth shut wasn't for everybody, but I barely talked to my parents, let alone strangers. My brother, Jimmy, was brain-damaged and, according to everyone but me, couldn't understand a thing. I was used to keeping to myself. I had worked for Miss Lucy since I was fifteen and by my fourth summer, when I'd just finished high school, the summer I was determined to make my last at Blue Lake, her rules were like instinct to me. I wasn't like the girls she hired to pick up my off-shifts, girls who lasted two weeks at most. The only wrong thing I did was add extra hours to my time card here and there. I knew Miss Lucy wouldn't catch on: for all her boss talk, she was lazy. Besides, you heard things, like how somewhere, somehow, with someone, she had the means to give up the place if she wanted. I figured she could spare a few extra tens. All I wanted was enough by the end of the summer to buy a cheap car and go. I guessed Miss Lucy might even understand, especially if I told her I was putting some of the money aside to give to Jimmy when I left, money he could use some day when his sense of things recovered.

Then one morning in late June, I found a picture of Ellen Crane under the pillow in room twelve. It was clipped from the newspaper, yellowed and crackly, a shot of her holding a pumpkin under a tree.

I did what I was supposed to do. I put it back and finished smoothing the bed. When I saw another one taped to the bathroom mirror—a color photo where she looked about my age—I ignored it and wiped down the sink. Then there was a third lying on the dresser, this one a drawing in charcoal: it wasn't

much better than a kid's, but the eyes, the neck, the hair—it was absolutely Ellen Crane.

In the town where I grew up, certain things you're born knowing, and Ellen Crane's story was one of them. She was in people's blood like the salt water that seeped into our wells. She was the wife of Howard Crane, of the Crane Family Orchards, but their son was another man's—a Randolph Cunningham's.

It had happened way back, no wedding or anything, Cunningham disappearing as soon as she started to show. There were other details, too, which changed with each teller: he'd stolen her car, or money for the bus; in one version, he'd robbed a bank. The general idea was that Howard had saved Ellen, and saved her kid, too, raising him as his own and raising him well. Derek Crane had graduated three classes ahead of me, captain of the football team, the kind of boy a girl like me knew only from a distance.

When I was younger, I had seen Mrs. Crane every Thanksgiving when my mother and I went to the orchard to pick up pies. I would ding the little bell on the counter and Ellen would walk out from the giant freezer with wisps of her red hair frozen into O's on her forehead. She was quiet like me, but somehow on her it was angelic, maybe on account of that hair.

It was spooky finding her picture all over, but not so much weirder, really, than other things I'd found over the years. Paper plates cut into dolls. Tourist pamphlets folded into frogs. Fingernail clippings balanced into little teepees. Like all these guests had some same longing to turn one thing into another. Then there were things that didn't fit any pattern: jigsaw pieces stuffed into air conditioner vents, a champagne bottle dressed up like Snow White, a whole set of marbles in the toilet like

underwater planets. These things got me excited. I took them as evidence that travel really did change people.

I looked at the charcoal Ellen Crane a little longer. The more I studied it, the more accurate it seemed, not the shapes themselves but what they gave off: her exact way of looking at you like she was somewhere else in her head, the way her mouth seemed on the verge of speaking then didn't. It took me three tries to put her picture down, then I sprayed the room with freshener and rolled my cart out the door.

In the shack, Miss Lucy was lounging in her recliner, playing both hands of a game of gin rummy, pearl clip-ons stretching her earlobes like sinkers.

"The guy in room twelve," I said. "Is he the one—is he who —"

"First time that fat son-of-a-bitch set foot in this town past fifteen years. Maybe twenty." Miss Lucy kept her eyes on her cards.

"Randolph Cunningham?"

"Cunning Sham's more like it." Miss Lucy rolled the syllables on her tongue. "He promised he'd marry Ellen Crane—Ellen Harlow she was back then—he told her he loved her, oh he ran around told everyone, horny little brat. She was seventeen, he was twenty-one. And what do you think he did, Darlene?"

She looked up at me, squinting. I shrugged. It didn't matter that I knew, she would tell it anyway, and besides, talking distracted her. I pulled my time card and glanced at the clock: 3:15. I scratched 3:45 into the box.

"He knocked her up, then ran off to Alaska to work the salmon boats. The kind they work offshore, almost all the way to Russia. I hear that's how he got fat."

I'd never heard this part of the story. I'd wanted to see those

boats ever since I'd taken out a library book called *The Foods We Eat* to read to Jimmy. The book talked about how salmon swim thousands of miles from the place they're born, then swim all the way back to the exact spot in the exact creek to die. Jimmy didn't laugh out loud, of course, but I could tell he thought it was as funny as I did. We'd grown up in a clamming town. Clams just wait for you to catch them, dumbstruck in the sand.

I slipped my card back out, made it 3:55, then turned to face Miss Lucy. "How do you mean he got fat, from the boats or the fish?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Either way, he's a pig."