



Off To Uni...

(After A Gap Year)

By Raymond Howell

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(After A Gap Year)

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Authors Note

This very short story came about after listening to a section of an autobiography called the Gap Year written by a member of The Birmingham Writers Group which was about his gap year in the 60's. The story ended as he and his girl friend set off to University together. Naughtily, I took the liberty of moving the story onto a conclusion not included in the reading.

To protect the original writers reputation I have changed the characters names and if he reads this I'm more than sure he won't mind at all!

Happy Reading.

Section One

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**M**y gap year, which started full of promise, but on reflection gave very little back, hit the sweltering sun of July, where it enjoyed basking on the beach for a little too long...

Lazing in blissful dreams I almost forgot about September and University. Only for it to come crashing in with a Titan's roar, where the foaming waves of reality forcibly cast aside those last carefree days.

The powerful wash of September's sudden arrival brought with it excitement and trepidation. Fantasy tinged with hints of pop art and ideas of free love were all caught in the current heading for the bedroom walls and those posters I had collected over the years. 'Take some of us with you' those thrilling yet trepidatious waves urged. The need was so strong that my hands started floating towards them until I was stopped by a sudden irrational fear that removing the posters might irrevocably deface my childhood.

As if holding on to what I knew for a little longer, I chose to pack my meagre belongings on the island, my bed, that has held childhood dreams and seen me safe for so long and which, as if preparing me for this very moment, had already seen one massive change, the duvet. Where Superman once flew in comic pose through a cartoon world, stripes of adult green lay much like early grassy runways, ready and waiting to ease me into my own flight. And now, the multicoloured waters of my uncertain future were washing its purpose in my life away.

They washed over me too, refreshingly diluting my worries, leaving

within their glistening wake a new psychedelic trail of tingling emotions, youthful expectations and yes, doubts.

Zippering up the case suddenly made all the planning and speculations feel so real, so urgent, so of the now. I was literally teetering giddily upon the shores of a new life beckoning, nay, pushing me out of the door strongly with promises of learning and wonder. Plus, who knows what else I might discover on the journey with dearest Alaska at my side, my girlfriend since play school. And now my anchor and link to the home port, but also my ship, the one I hoped to sail off into another future with someday.

A future which started in my Dad's treasured and highly polished black and red Ford Consul. The status symbol of his time and the generation that witnessed that dreadful war to end all, although in reality, it merely laid the foundations for new ones. Those wartime experiences still scared him at night, although to spare us his torment he suffered those times and worry for the future in silence. But we knew. Now, that loving parent, as prideful as the Queen's chauffeur, was about to drive Alaska and me down to London and our respective lodgings.

And yes Mom, I heard your parting words as Dad pulled slowly and majestically away from the kerb with a parting little toot of horn.

I admit, my tears were yours as yours were mine when I watched you waving dementedly, while getting ever smaller, as if you were becoming the child and I the adult.

As the familiar houses where my mates lived slipped by in that now strangely breath-held empty street where footballs are gone and scooters hid, those invisible connecting strings of my heart were pulling hard. Goodbye old streets they sang, those places where I roamed and the home that bore my cries of laughter, frustrations and joys so well. You all watched me grow

from boy to fledgling man, but now, like my old school uniform, you have become too small to be a comfortable fit.

I realised, I so needed this change. I needed a different light.

Filled with excitement and unhindered by the rules of seatbelts, as we were then, I hunkered down in the large all embracing soft-leather backseat. It smelt wonderfully, just like our polished Johnson's waxed home. The aroma invoked a slight pang and a flash of Mom getting busy with the duster on Saturday mornings. But then delightfully, Alaska snuggled up and I took hold of her warm and soft but slightly clammy hand. It could well have been leaking excitement, much like mine were doing. Having settled, I lay back and smiled at Mom's parting but economical words which had expressed her love and views about me so simply and wonderfully.

"You know wrong from right."

It was said firmly, but with a soft smile that longed to cry for the loss of her baby. Or so I wanted to believe... But in there somewhere I felt sure she was also making plans to use my room.

Yeah, thanks, Mom!

There was also her unspoken and proud, 'my lad', blessing the parting. It had held so many emotions that as we turned the familiar corner but not to play, to seek the great beyond, the sense lay thick like a warm welcoming hug in the air.

'Yes, I do know wrong from right Mom' I thought. 'But my sense of them is probably not the same as yours'.

Looking forward to discovering just how different our views were, I

squeezed Alaska's hand and looked and smiled into her twinkling eyes, where I happily noted she was just as excited. And like me, she showed no concern for how dangerous, or life-defining those differences might turn out to be. All we knew and cared about then was that we were about to dive into a thrilling sea awash with adventure. And yes, we were happy to let the current take us wherever it may.

And it certainly did...

## Section Two

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''W

e're in Kew," Dad suddenly announced as he drove past the famous gardens where the natural socialist in me was struck by what appeared to be a continuous display of vulgar wealth wrapped in the coloured tissue paper of a department store's false opulence as we headed into Fulham. Each house larger and grander than the simple, small, plain terrace house I grew up in. Even the posh houses as we called them back home were shaded by these. This, my heart pumped, is empire made real and I suddenly felt very small and a little alone, even humbled.

We stopped first to drop Alaska at her new room. In awe of all the great buildings surrounding us, with growing trepidation we opened an artistically scrolled ornate gate that led into a small neat well tended front garden, that screamed, don't dare litter here. Then with Alaska bravely leading we followed her up a poshly patterned tiled path, which along with the immaculate garden and just like the foyer of an opulent opera house, created the atmosphere for the stage to come. That was dominated by a tall Victorian sculptured monolith rising sternly and judgementally at the back with its forebodingly black shiny front door, which as we approached almost spoke in a deep commanding plummy voice, if you must knock do not rap upon the wood, use one of the many symmetrically aligned large white ceramic bells placed for such purpose to the right. I was to realise in the months to come that those bells along with many others around the area were a growing sign of the city's fading wealth, but not then, because I was too intimidated to do anything other than stare ahead as we all waited nervously for the portal to suddenly swing open and suck us in.

Thankfully we were not sucked in, but rather, we were swept in upon a tide of bonhomie and the smell of boiled seaweed and sizzling mackerel or some such fish and vegetable and dumped into a large but sparsely furnished hall with more posh floor tiles leading to numerous shut doors, where at the end in a show of past wealth a wide luxurious stair case awaited to whisk Alaska off to her new realm. “Stay here and wait for me, please” she said nervously as the house mother, a large chatty woman with unruly hair and flowing embroidered Afghan dress offered to show Alaska up to her room. “You’re right at the very top dear,” she explained indicating the stairs. “So we’ll know if you try sneaking your gentleman friend in, now won’t we,” she added with a smile, as if to soften her meaningful barb. “Now, come along dear... and let me help with your things.”

Dad and I just as nervously as Alaska waited and mumbled desultorily about silly stuff and then we heard Alaska’s voice.

“I’m sharing with Petunia,” she called breathily as she came clattering down the stairs about ten minutes later. “She’s from Skelsthorpe you know, so that’s all right, isn’t it, Gregg.” She declared lightly and with a skip as she crossed the hall to where we waited. “And she has tall hair,” Alaska declared glowingly, while indicating just how tall it was. “Which she said I can help pin up and lacquer and she says she knows all the best places for us to go Gregg, isn’t that wonderful”. Only for her to use a word I have never heard her use before, which she pronounced poshly without any trace of her soft Yorkshire accent. “The room and Petunia are... divine...” she said, “Yes... Divine...,” she repeated as if examining how the word fell from her newly and quickly acquired accent. “And I think I will like it here.” Then almost dismissively she said, “So I’ll see you later Gregg, OK...”

Section Three

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**T**he brush of lips against my cheek was almost imperceptible, where usually her kisses were so luscious and deep and warm, but before I could pull her in for a proper hug she remembered my Dad and flittered butterfly like from my arms to him. After shaking his hand and thanking him profusely she turned in a swirl of excitement and with a skip of heel flounced back up the stairs where I could not help thinking as she disappeared, Crikey! In just ten minutes my quiet Alaska has changed... And I was not sure if I liked it, but then that might well have been my nerves speaking as my turn was looming. Sitting in the front seat of Dad's car those psychedelic waters that had washed over me in my room suddenly felt turgid and the undercurrent far less friendly than when we first set off.

The only good thing about my room is that it was close enough to be comfortably near Alaska's, but also far enough away to leave ample space for me to play and grow in. And, yes, for Alaska to continue to stretch up and grow and boy, didn't she just, except not in the way I expected or how I wanted.

## Section Four

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We mixed and made friends as you do as students and yes this was the 60's so we toyed with drugs. Or rather I experimented, while Alaska dived head-first into the drug culture where she happily stayed under for as long as she could. I tried countless times to pull her up and out and onto dry land, but... with a little wiggle back she plunged into that colourful but uncertain sea.

She tried various things to fund her habit where eventually she became an escort. She only saw high class clients at first but encouraged by her distaste for her own life style her habit increased. So her working nights grew longer and she became haggard and underweight and according to her pimp, much less marketable, until she ended up working the poorer more risky end of the market - the dangerous streets around Kings Cross. When I was able and when I could find her, I gave her food and cloths as it was not usual for other working girls to steal them, but one day without word she dropped out of university and we lost touch as the streets swallowed her up.

Section Five

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**F**or 18 years I wondered and worried about what I could have done to have changed things while unsuccessfully trying to locate her. Thankfully I had yet to come across a death notice or more happily for her a marriage announcement, so I kept looking. I was not alone in my search, her family had not heard from her either and for nearly as long where they often said I ought to forget her and move on, but how could I? For one I feel responsible but more important and pulling is my love for her - she is my Alaska after all, the ship I had taken a few delightful little trips with and hoped one day we will sail together around the world. And I guess I was still hoping for that even as I turned the TV on to escape my maudlin for an hour or two. But what came up, a new series, Death of a Prostitute. "Oh, great," I groaned, "as if I need reminding...", except maybe I did for suddenly my stomach knotted as my eyes caught the opening credits way before my conscious fully did - written by and starring Alaska Spring.

I actually shouted "Wow." And then there she was, my Alaska! In the flesh and a little older but just as beautiful. The end credit was even more interesting... I dedicate this story, it read, to all those families who are waiting for news of their child who due to drugs became a prostitute and my parents too, but lastly to Gregg my dearest friend to whom I owe so many apologies.

If that's her..., I thought with a huge beaming smile an hour later after I called the channel's switchboard and my phone started ringing, Boy do I intend to collect on that debt!

The rest? Well that's for me and Alaska to know... But if it helps, we both agree that we like the idea of sailing together around the world where, I have to smile, no ship will ever be needed or sea touched unless it's during a day trip and we fancy a spot of harmless snorkelling. It's taken a while to get here but I believe we are all the better for it and so, to my joy, does Alaska.