Time to Write the Next Chapter

Ever since I was little, I had always dreamed of more. When my mom would give me a cookie, I wanted another. When my dad would take me out to play in the snow, I never had enough. But I lived in a small town in rural Alberta, which was not exactly the place where “having more” was acceptable.

The town of Bentley was a standard, run of the mill, picturesque small town. Perfect little houses, on perfectly groomed property. Perfect parents, who raise perfect children. Every weekday the kids would go to school, the dad would go to work and the mom would stay home. Weekends are structured around chores, music lessons, sport practices, homework and, of course, attending church. If anyone missed a Sunday service, God help them, because it would be the talk of the town.

It was the fall of grade 12, the stress of figuring out the future was looming in the air. I don’t know why everyone was stressing, because growing up in this town meant that your future was already planned out for you. As I sat for lunch with my friends, the conversation was always the same,

“What schools are you applying to”, my friend Jenny would ask.

‘The same schools everyone applies to. Why do you even bother wasting your breath asking?” I would think to myself.

“U of C, Mount Royal, maybe even U of Alberta! But I’ll get into them all”, all my friends would reply, confident in their inevitable acceptance.

When it was my turn to reply, I just stared at them blankly; I had no answer to this question. ‘None’ I thought to myself, but I couldn’t speak that aloud, not without clouds of judgment closing in on me.

The thing about living in a town where anything less then perfection is unacceptable is that it limits you. I couldn’t let anyone know my dreams, because they were outside the realm of possibility in this town. What I wanted for my life was not on the list of options for kids growing up here.

I didn’t want to attend university, and then fall into a life like my parents. Not that there was anything wrong with this life; I just wanted more. I wanted to see the world, to blaze my own trail and not follow the standards of this society. I knew there was more beyond the borders of this town, and I needed to know what it was.

So, when the sunny days of June came upon us, and I had turned my tassel from left to right, I left. I took off. I knew no one would approve of my decisions, so I only left a note and the memories of whom I once was.

I drove. All through the days and nights. I was determined to reach the west coast. As I approached a small town that seemed to be falling apart at the seams, an old man whom I would never speak to again, asked “what’s a perfect little girl, doing so far from home?”. I ignored his question but I began to ask myself the same question. As I sat on the lumpy disease infested bed of the motel I had found for the night, I wondered what I had done. I had no money, no plan and no one. Suddenly I was consumed by a dark hole of self-doubt and regret.

In the morning, I found the same old man sitting on a small wooden bench outside the motel. It had been dark when I had seen him last night, and now I could make out his features. He was a small man, with a hunched back. His head was bald, but his eyebrows bushy. As he saw me, he shot me a crocked smile and patted the seat next to him.

I went and sat on the cold wood beside him, and he looked straight into my eyes.

“Who are you kid?” He asked

“That’s a good question” I reply hesitantly

“Ok, how ‘bout we start with a name?”

“Anna”

“Just Anna?”

‘No my name is Anna Elizabeth Carleton, but I’ve always been taught to never talk to strangers’ “Yes” I replied, “What’s yours”

“Harry, Harry Jacob Michelson. So Anna, what’s your story?”

“My story?”

“Everyone who ends up in this town here, has a story, so what’s yours?”

“I dunno, don’t really have one, I guess”

“S’pose you may think that kid, but we all do.”

“K… so what’s your then?”

“Well, you see, me, I ran away from my home at 16 - didn’t think I fit in well where I here came from. Didn’t have nowhere to go, didn’t have no one to go to. Found this little town, and guess I just never knew where to go next. Its not a story someone would write a New York Times best seller about, but that’s ok. Now your turn kid, what’s your story?”

“I dunno.”

He glared at me.

I sighed as I told him “I come from this small town, you probably haven’t heard of it, its called Bentley; its about 37 hours from here. Anyways, it’s perfect. Perfectly green lawns. Perfect red brick houses. Everything is perfect, and everyone is perfect. Everyone knows everyone. It’s a perfect life; people always appear happy there.”

“So why’d ya leave? Sounds pretty perfect to me.”

“I dunno. I guess I never felt like, uhh, I fit in. Everyone there lets others write their story, but I umm, I guess I just wanted more. I guess I wanted to create my own story. I felt like the only way to create it was to leave. So I did.” Once I began to open up all the feelings that I had been holding inside for the past 18 years, I couldn’t stop. In an rushing panic I let everything spill out.

 “I just did it. I just up and left. I don’t know why it seemed like a good idea. I have no money, no job, no plan and no one. I can’t do this. Oh why did I think I could do this? I can’t write my own story! I don’t even know how to start!”

“Whoa whoa there kid, calm down for a second and breathe. You see, kid, you and me, we’re not too different.”

I stared at him in response.

“I’m serious kid, only difference is you’re only on the first couple pages of your story, and I’m on the final chapter. Take it from me, you’re going to make whole lot of choices, big ones too, and you are not gonna always go and pick the right option. But that’s life, and as long as you keep moving forward you’ll be just fine. It seems to me, kid, like you have two choices; you can either keep going forward, or go back to where you came from. Now what you do is up to you, but remember kid, it’s your story, and only you hold the pen. Just promise me this, you’ll make your story a good one. A good one where you figure our your path and aren’t scared to follow it.”

“Promise”

I looked up at the old man, as he stood and limped away slowly. I sat there, on the broken cedar bench for what seemed like only an hour, but as the sky was painted with streaks of pink and copper, I realized I had sat there all day. Just thinking. Thinking about what Harry said, and about what I was going to do next.

I awoke the next morning to blonde dancing rays of light illuminating the dust covered surface of the room; I packed my tiny blue suitcase, loaded my car, and headed off. As I put my key in the ignition, I looked at the open road ahead of me, “Time to see what my next chapter holds”, and I drove forward into the unknown.

Word Count: 1334