

For All the Gossips Among Us



By Anna Von Reitz

Here in Alaska we struggle with some exceptional problems. One of those problems is a long history of incest and child molestation in isolated Native communities. From time to time this issue comes into public view more forcefully than others, and certainly that was the case in the early 1980's, when we had a virtual statewide witch hunt in which hundreds of men, both Native and Caucasian, were accused and convicted without oversight by the courts.

My husband was one of them.

He was living in Sitka, Alaska, at the time -- an isolated mostly Native community, where he had carved out a life as the captain of a fishing boat during the summers and working as a successful artist in the winter. He had three children and a wife that he loved.

His eldest child, a daughter, was in High School at the time, and she had a Native friend in school who actually was molested by her own Father. As a result, this other girl was emancipated by the court at the age of 16, and given her own apartment by the State. It promptly became "the" place for her classmates to party, party, party. Jim's daughter got caught up in all this, which included underage sex, marijuana, recreational drugs of other kinds, and a whole lot of skipping school.

That summer, his daughter got a job as a waitress at one of the local restaurants and one night she was invited to a party that required her to have transportation. She stole her grandfather's car, got drunk, and wrecked it on the way home.

Amazed and outraged, her parents told her that she had to start turning over her wages each week to buy her grandfather a car. She seethed and rebelled and went to the authorities and told them that her Father had put his finger in her vagina.

Of course, he never did any such thing, and she later fully admitted it. She just wanted to be emancipated like her friend and avoid paying her grandfather back. She had no thought of what it would do to her family --- that her parents would divorce, that her younger brothers would suffer, and that her innocent Father would be put through no end of humiliation because of her actions.

But the witch hunt was on and Sitka was a remote mostly Native community where such things (and a lot worse) were known to go on, so the prosecutors came in like the Wrath of Joe Public and he was convicted without a plea, without any physical evidence, without cross-examination of the witness, without any valid due process at all.

Afterward, after she saw the damage she had caused her family, his daughter repented, but it was too late. Efforts were made to overturn the conviction based on her recanted testimony, but that required a new trial and reliving all the hurt and embarrassment and disruption again. And this time, though her Father would be cleared of wrong-doing--- she would go to jail for perjury and related offenses, leaving her toddler without a Mom.

The Governor heard about the case and offered a pardon, but a pardon admits that a crime occurred --- and no actual crime occurred.

So damned if you do and damned if you don't.

Jim decided that he was better able to bear the stigma than his daughter, a decision he might have regretted, if he could have foreseen her future. She sank ever deeper into the twisted world of drugs, alcohol, and sexual escapism, gradually accruing a criminal rap sheet as long as my arm and doing long stints in jail.

We don't love her "at her best" any less, but facts are facts.

I once asked her whatever happened to her, that she did this to her family? She lifted her face and looked me right in the eye and said two words: "Public School." Now, over fifty, her health is shattered. We do what we can for her.

I met Jim when I was 32 and he was 47. Neither one of us could claim to be children anymore. We met through my work. I hired him as an artist subcontractor to work on package designs. He was always quiet and very nice to everyone, always got his jobs done on time, always superlative quality, and we got along well for over a year before he asked me out.

To be honest, I was very surprised, but it seemed innocent enough: dinner with some old friends of his, a couple, and he didn't want to go without a date. I understood being the Third Wheel all too well, being 32 and unmarried myself. I agreed.

On the way to dinner, he told me he was a "registered sex offender". He looked like he was going to choke on the words, and I certainly must have looked completely thunderstruck and blank.

Two thoughts hit my brain simultaneously--- (1) This doesn't make sense. A guy doesn't ask you out on a first date and tell you something like this; and, (2) Boy, Howdy--- how'd our Personnel Department screw up on his background checks? I could have been working with an ax murderer....

Normally, everything would have ended right there and then, but my logic circuits and Shinola Sensor were on full alert.

A man who is guilty of such offenses doesn't tell you something like that on a first date. He covers it up, gets his hooks into you, and then waits for other gossipy people to let you know. That's how real sex offenders operate.

There was more.

Jim didn't say anything to defend himself, no explanations, no excuses.

People who abuse children always have excuses. They always have some reason or rationale. They were drunk or high or reliving some trauma of their own, blah, blah, blah.

Not Jim. He sat with his hands folded and looked straight ahead, and I was intrigued. I suspected that there was more to the story, but he wasn't going to give me any excuses and try to make it look better for himself--- so I'd have to take it on the chin for what it was. And I did.

His friends were delightful. The conversation was lively and intelligent and gracious. Dinner was elegant. It was a beautiful evening and by the time we left the restaurant the early stars were out. We walked along the sidewalk, heads down. He took my hand as we reached the corner and our separate ways home.

What do you say under such a circumstance? He shook his head and smiled a bitter little smile. I caught the glint of a tear in the corner of his eye as he looked away.

"Thank you for coming with me tonight," was all he managed.

"Sure," I said. "Let's do it again."

Now, for all the one-in-a-million shots a guy could have, that was one. I would have bet against him for a second date, and I was the one making the odds, but I wanted to know the "rest of the story" --- which his daughter eventually told me. And in the meantime, we fell in love.

Here we are, 31 years later.

I have never known a better, more unselfish, kinder, more generous, more inspired, more gallant, or more enduring soul. And I have never found anyone more loyal to a cause or to his family.

What he has suffered, no man should have to suffer --- not once, not ever. But as long as our culture refuses to honor Due Process and relies on Public Policy instead, such miscarriages of justice and all that they entail will continue.

In an actual court for people, his daughter would have had to face him and lie about him in front of God and everyone else. She'd have to get into the details and nitty-gritty of her accusation. She would have broken into tears of shame and regret in the courtroom under cross-examination, and that would have been the end of it.

She would have gone back to work and paid off her grandfather's car.

And who knows how much better her own life would have been?

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