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When the Furnace Talked

The first guy my aunt married, burgled all their friends. He was always coming into sudden amounts of cash and other valuables. Maybe in New York City this might've worked out for him but they lived in Nome, Alaska, surrounded by icy tundra in all directions.

Speculating on other people's business was the main entertainment during those long winter nights. Following the time-honored pattern of John Cheever's *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill*, my new uncle would wait till everyone was at a dance or a dinner, excuse himself, and head off to whatever residence had just acquired something worth swiping.

"It's amazing!" those burgled would declare. "Somehow the burglar always seems to know what we've got, as though he were eavesdropping." In that tiny, close-knit community, the robberies by my still undiscovered uncle were a main topic of conversation. My aunt, and most of her friends, had been born and raised in the far north, sons and daughters of prospectors. Some of their parents had struck it rich. Most had not.

But my shy little dark-haired aunt, raised on a mining claim with mostly men, was certain she was one of the lucky ones. Her new husband had been an elegant visitor from the States, what my father called, "the lower forty-nine." My new uncle came up on the first boat in the spring, as soon as the ice on the Bering Sea broke up, tall and handsome, bringing with him talk of how things were done in the best circles, to which he had entrée. Out of all the women he could have chosen to be his bride, he chose my aunt, an unquestioning someone with no society background at all.

Dancing at their wedding in her white satin dress, she didn't even question his purpose in slipping away a bit. But there he'd been, burglarizing their guests, stashing his loot away in trunks which already bore shipping labels, ready to go out on the last boat south.

Fortunately, for everyone but my aunt, the best brains in the community had ruled out everyone else and were watching her bridegroom as he entered the homes of his new friends and made off with the sort of riches

only Alaskans would have lying around. Lots of gold nuggets which were such a commonplace, no one thought about sticking them anywhere else than loose in a drawer till the need arose.

As planned, my new uncle *did* go out on the next boat. Unfortunately, it was in handcuffs.

Wedding annulled, my aunt was in the market for another husband, this time with a background that could be checked. My next new uncle, Henry, was a laid-back man who smoked a pipe and seemed to be as interested in the same mundane activities as she was, especially church, where he played the organ with his long fingers.

“Such a nice change for you, dear,” people would say when they saw the well-dressed Henry turning over the sheet music, up front. Her second marriage had been just a quiet ceremony at city hall, coming, as it did, less than a year after that first disaster, which my aunt was determined not to repeat.

Henry’s organ playing was pitch perfect but then he devoted a great deal of time to practicing, especially when the new blonde choir mistress came along. Married with four children, she still managed to make time for a life outside the home. Both she and Henry left very sweet apology notes for their spouses when they ran off together in the spring.

The husband slot seemed a tad unlucky and so, abandoning a third try, my aunt came out on the boat to visit her brother and his family, which included me. At ten, I had one of those high-pitched voices that grate on the adult nerve, with which I questioned nonstop any topic adults seemed to be tiptoeing around. Such as the absence of any new uncles.

Sometimes you’ll hear that someone became “unhinged,” a door that used to swing usefully back and forth has begun to sag and creak, dragging at the bottom, needing propping up and seeing to, finally breaking, if nothing at all is done. Fancy telling such a door to smarten up, go back to what it used to be, pretend that the screws in the hinge have not come loose and dropped, one by one, to the floor.

My aunt began to hear voices through the broken radio in the old brown ‘50s Ford she bought during her extended stay with us. She’d also got a house and moved in, but the furnace talked to her, muttering away in the winter, whenever she attempted to turn it on. So she didn’t. Even though we were further south than Alaska, heat is a definite requirement when there is snow on the ground.

My father would come and turn her furnace on. It would begin to complain to my aunt who would promptly turn it off, then call my father to complain she was cold. She would pile us kids in the car for some

errand or another, and then begin to scream at the radio, which, according to her, would scream back. I complained that I didn't want to ride with her anymore. There were no seat belts, of course, and the four of us would bounce around the Ford like loose change in a pocket as she took the corners on two wheels, ricocheting at high speeds up and down the hills of town, trying to get the broken radio to shut up.

My parents took no notice. The art of pretending all was well had faithful observers in my family. Their solution for everything outside death and taxes was if you ignored it, sooner or later it would go away. In order to help my aunt out, financially, my parents would now and then find little jobs for her, the latest of which involved having her babysit the four of us while they took the rare opportunity to go out together alone.

My mother had just finished torching the outbuildings in back of our quasi-farmhouse, a home which she would not succeed in successfully burning down till a few year's later. Whenever my mother felt stressed or the house was particularly messy, her solution had always been matches. Back in Alaska, she sent our first home up in smoke before I was three.

At fifty degrees below zero Fahrenheit, the water froze in the firemen's hoses before they could put the blaze out. After a few years, any dissatisfaction my mother expressed got my father's instant attention. However, my aunt's difficulties were not helping my mother's inclination to arson.

What is it about being from the North that lends itself to high drama and desperate solutions? Maybe it's the closed up nature of the life in winter that turns in on you, the small house and the same company, day in and out. "Cabin fever," they call it but no ambulance will come and take you away till there are bodies around—and blood.

I am still hazy about which of my questions caused my aunt to pick up the butcher knife but somehow one of the many voices in her head suggested she eliminate me as a source of pain. Undoubtedly I had been burbling on about what she'd been up to in Alaska before she'd come to visit, bringing back all that memory of missing husbands and public humiliation.

She countered by suggesting I wash the dishes. I said it wasn't my turn and I wasn't going to and—voila! She had a long, sharp knife in one hand, the one mother used for cutting up chicken—and she was crooning to me in a singsong voice that was a long way from the sharp tones she normally used. She took a step towards me, beckoning, the knife in one hand.

I stepped back, wondering where my brothers and sisters were. My aunt and I seemed to be alone in the house. We lived a mile outside town

so as to be free from the bylaws and petty ordinances that cluttered the lives of others, doing our own garbage pickup, disdaining sidewalks, streetlights and other amenities, all of which I longed for, as manifestations of civilization.

No matter how far an Alaskan travels, self-sufficiency is always the byword. There was a broom beside the high stoop outside our front door. If a travelling salesman rang the bell, we had instructions to grab the broom and push him over the edge.

I turned and ran as my haunted aunt took quick light steps after me but instead of heading out the back door, in supreme misjudgment I raced down the familiar steps to the cellar. There was no time to turn on any lights.

Some dark is palpable, full of regrets and follies, clinging to your skin like a shroud. I looked frantically around for a place to hide as I hit the bottom step. At least I knew this cellar better than my aunt, who, as far as I knew, had never been downstairs. There was that nemesis of hers, an oil furnace right in the middle with big octopus tentacles stretching to every room in the house. I considered it briefly since she was afraid of the one in her house. But once inside, I would be trapped.

I had to make up my mind quickly. She was coming, knife glinting on the last little bit of light from the top of the stairs. I ran to a corner and crawled under an overturned wheelbarrow that my father had been using to haul bricks, scrunching myself into the smallest ball I could manage. Clutching the sides with both hands, I thought maybe I could overturn it on her toes if she approached.

Close now, I could hear her crooning in that odd voice she had never used before. If you only heard us and didn't know what was happening, you'd think she was saying something sweet, wanting us to play together, and having a little fun till the folks got home.

I don't know how long I lay curled under the barrow, listening to her bang into the five-gallon cans my father kept for various projects. "Damn!" she said once, language my parents would never let us use, but then she went back to the crooning.

I could hear her bump the hoe and the shovel, a clatter as they fell to the floor, a pile of paint cans going over when she jumped back. Fortunately she had no idea where the light switches were. My father, doing his own renovations, always put them in the oddest places.

Then overhead, I heard the creak of our front door opening and my father calling my aunt's name. My parents were home. While I wasn't sure how much they'd care, at least they had a better use for knives than

slashing away at your kin. And to her credit, my mother usually checked to see that none of us were in whatever building she was considering torching next.

Still, I waited until I heard my aunt call back and go reluctantly up the stairs. I could hear my father's voice forming a question, something surely about what she had been doing down in the cellar with a butcher knife. After that, there was a little silence.

Then my father opened the front door and walked my aunt to the car, as my mother began calling my name, tentative somehow, as though she wasn't certain I could hear anymore. Her voice sounded strange too but it was a good kind of different, shaky and concerned, just on this side of scream.

I crawled out from under the barrow, trying to see if my voice worked. The darkness all around me seemed filled with dark-haired women crooning and clutching knives. I ran for the cellar steps and scrambled up, screaming for my mother.

"What *did* you do to your aunt?" my father said when he came back. "We only left you with her for a few hours."

My aunt, it turned out, was going off to have a nice little rest at a place out of town where disappointed people could be cared for until their doors became hinged once again and the real world of silent furnaces and radio on-buttons, kicked in.

It wasn't till a lover called to me in what I'm sure he thought were dulcet, coaxing tones and I ran from the room, that I began to see what I had carried away from that afternoon. Not a fear of sharp knives or worries about the dark, but the changing voice of someone looking me in the eye and saying one thing, while flowing strongly underneath is something else altogether.

Still, all these years later, let a minister or a politician venture a few false words and I am out the door, into the car and on my way home before it sinks in that once again, the knife and darkness are playing in my head. So far, the furnace hasn't said anything at all.