

The Saving Son

by Lance A. Twitchell



A winter's eve in Skagway, Alaska. The air moves over the earth's surface, pushed along by a warming southern breeze. Within the town itself, there is no motion and little noise, only an occasional dog bark to defy the silence. Stillness beneath the black of night sky, which houses millions of stars, a few of which twinkle and change their hue. To look at this scene, from afar, one may be looking at a photograph rather than a living community.

Far out upon a spit, jutting out onto the cold, calm sea, the lights of the ferry terminal cast a yellow tint over the paved parking lot and the floating dock made of metal and concrete. This small town is built on industry, and image is its product; though through the winter months the busy port slows and rests, preparing for the summer of chaos, retail, and sale of fabrication known as the tourist season.

Long ago, this place was a gateway to the interior, where winter winds would drive temperatures plummeting well below zero. Trails into the interior required snowshoes and thick skin, determination and absolute will. This place is Lingít country, though none would know by the social climate of modern day Skagway.

One hundred and sixteen years ago, three men hiked back from trading in the interior community of Natasahéeni, now known as Carcross. The men spoke loudly to each other, in Lingít, a language rooted deep in the back of the throat and fully entwined with the land. They told stories of previous trips into the interior, sometimes returning with a full load of moose and caribou meat, skins and furs; other times coming home with light loads, knowing that compensation would come the next season.

Summers were always the best time for making the trip north, but sometimes it was hard to resist the taste of moose meat in the fall. They knew the dangers that the old ones spoke of, they especially spoke of traveling alone and too late in the season. On this trip, a father, a son, and a cousin travel back from the interior with the heavy bounty of their trade strapped to their strong backs.

When they began the walk back, just after a small feast of caribou meat, the sun shone strong in the valley. But as they began their ascent over the mountain pass, a

strong breeze rolled over them, bringing dark clouds from the North. Yéil Kíji, the youngest among them, led the group up the mountainside.

His dark face glanced from the ground – looking for footholds – to the sky – watching the arrival of the looming fall storm. His thick moosehide tunic swayed with each step, and he gripped smooth walking poles made from birch branches. With the poles, Kíji prodded the ground below to make sure it was stable, and also used them to balance the weight of his pack.

Walking behind him was his older cousin Ch'akyéis', who breathed heavily, as he packed more weight on his back and his frame. The younger cousin had a thin frame with tall features, but Ch'akyéis' was much shorter, and stout. His powerful legs drove his body forward, but the steep mountainside was wearing him down as beads of sweat emerged on his face, dripped onto the ground and into his heavy footfalls.

As they climbed higher, snow began to fall. Lightly at first, like tiny down feathers in the wind; but over time growing into larger, heavier flakes that the increasing winds propelled towards the surface. Thick clouds limited the sun's power, and the landscape became entrenched in shadows. The three men instinctively picked up their pace, hoping to summit before the conditions worsened.

"We will not be able to rest, son!"

Ghaakh Êesh yelled above the wind, which seemed to strengthen with every step they took. It pelted their backs with heavy snowflakes, making their loads of furs, hides, and meat heavy with dense snow cover. The father rolled scenarios through his mind, about camps that could be made or that already existed on the trail in case they could not reach the summit before the weather washed them out. His thoughts drifted to the words of his grandfather, who taught him how to track game, to balance heavy loads, and how to bend to the will of the weather and the land.

"This land that surrounds us, grandson, it is the natural home of our people. Everything about our culture, from our very breath to our ability to think and speak, is interwoven into the land. Because of this you must always respect it, must always seek to live within it, like you are only a tiny hair upon its skin. You must always be attached to the land, for if you try to rise above it you shall drift away like an eyelash in the wind.

"Our people have always known these things. We learned them long ago, and the lessons are carried on through our stories and songs. When something claims the lives of one of our people, a song or story is often composed, so we will never forget. That is how we know how to survive, and how to be strong for our children."

Kíji looked back at his father, and saw a faraway stare. This trade trip had been like any other, full of jokes and teasing, stories and the joy of seeing interior Lingít, who are sacred relatives to the coastal Lingít. His father's face was tough, weathered, with a short patch of black hair on his chin. Thick lines were etched around his eyes and mouth, proof that he wore his thoughts for all to see.

Now their journey continued beneath the pelting of the sky, and the snowfall increased until a curtain of gray and white blocked everything beyond fifteen feet. Every motion and thought seemed to come slowly, as Kíji felt his heart beat increasing. As the front walker, he had to move with precision so as to not lead the group into danger. He thought briefly about asking his father to lead, but he had only recently been told to be lead hiker, and wanted to show he was worthy of the task.

As they crested a patch of rock, Ch'akyéis' lost his foothold, and tumbled off the side of a rock outcropping, yelling and spilling his pack. The other men moved to help the moment he began to tumble. They helped gather the goods and repack them, and Ghaakh Éesh tended to a wound on his nephew. Ch'akyéis' wore a heavy worry upon his face; the jagged face of the rock had left a deep gash on the side of his right calf. Blood trickled off his lower leg, staining the fresh white layer of snow, which was shallow but continuing to pile up around them.

In the howling of the wind, the men did not speak. Ghaakh Éesh worked steadily, careful to move slowly and not excite the younger ones. He took balsam pitch from a deer skin pouch around his neck, and coated the gash, and then wrapped it in a paper thin piece of beaver hide, tying the bandage across the top and bottom with thin strips of the same hide. He tapped his nephew's leg twice, smiled and nodded; they must press on to make it to the top.

A flurry of white blew past them, and this trail that displayed such awesome beauty on clear days now seemed so barren and deadly. All of them recognized landmarks of the trail, which had been used so many times for countless generations, but every one of them longed to look up and be able to see the jagged gray mountain tops. The wind smelled fresh and clean, but worked together with the heavy snow to chill the hikers, working a crippling cold deep into their skin.

Ghaakh Éesh sensed uneasiness among the young men. He thought again of his grandfather, and then he spoke.

"Listen up, you two. Everything we do will get us over this mountain." His voice carried upon the howling of the powerful north wind. "You need to watch every single step closely, to move with great care under these conditions. Now, each of you knows this path; have walked it so many times. This is the path that will take you home, and you cannot, you cannot doubt that. Have strength and courage."

His shouts were rhythmic, falling into the beat of their footsteps as they continued onward, towards the summit. The young men absorbed the words, as many had done before them, and drew strength from their elder's speech. After he finished, they began to sing, at first a murmur, and then with a unified strength. It was a trade song from the interior, and their voices rolled into the wind, mingling with snowflakes and climbing this path that so many had done before them.

The song continued, over and over, the same verse with growing intensity. Soon they recognized land patterns that signaled they were nearing the top. The pace of their walking increased as the tempo of their singing picked up. Their muscles worked and pushed the cold from their bodies. Without ever making eye contact, each one watched the ground and felt their actions become part of a whole.

At a faster pace over the snow covered ground, Kíji never noticed the crevasse he stepped over. In the furious commotion of the storm, the song, their pace; none of them noticed what was beneath them. Ch'akyéis' stepped over the crevasse, and felt the back of his snowshoe wobble backwards, tipping down. The singing had them all in a trance, riding the rhythm of the song's melody; and the slight slipping of his snowshoe pulled him out into awareness, but a moment too late. Ch'akyéis' continued to step forward, but behind him Ghaakh Éesh stepped into the crevasse, his heel stepping on the edge and the front of his snowshoe diving down into the narrow gap.

Before the yell could fully escape his lungs and interrupt the song, his momentum and pack weight forced his leg into the crevasse. The snowshoe snagged on a rock, twisted, splintered in half. In an instant, his right leg sunk to the knee, twisted, jerked, and in the narrow crack his momentum slammed his knee against the front side of the rocky surface. He felt brief pressure on his kneecap, then felt a massive pop within the joint, and collapsed awkwardly with one leg halfway in the crevasse and the other slid out behind him.

The once powerful song that had begun to echo in the narrow valley was replaced by an agonizing scream as Ghaakh Éesh grabbed his contorted leg and fell forward, his weight resting on the ground and his back leg kicking in a spasm. The young men froze in a moment of disbelief, their building confidence shattered and jaws agape in mid song. They dropped their packs and ran to their wounded elder.

In a flurry of effort and panic, they pulled Ghaakh Éesh from the crevasse and leaned him against a heavy slate rock. His face contorted as he examined his knee cap, which lay awkwardly above and to the side of its normal resting spot. The kneecap moved freely, disjointed, and the entire area began to swell, stretching the dark skin.

"My son." He spoke between labored breaths, clenched teeth. "Listen to me. My nephew. Listen to me." Beads of sweat began to emerge all over his face. "I will not make it off this mountain."

"No, father. No! Ch'akyéis' and I can carry you. We can make your snowshoes into a sled and pull you down. I know we can, father." The young men took turns protesting, their speeches hurried, one word crawling over the back of the next.

The snow around them swirled and howled, blocking out the light and leaving the mountainside in shades of gray, white, black. In their minds, everything amplified and slowed, though the wind continued to pick up, the snow fall continued to crescendo.

"Son," Ghaakh Éesh looked calmly at his Yéil Kíji, waiting for the darting eyes and tight face wet with melting snow and falling tears to settle. In the father's eyes, a look of resentment and duty, a distant sadness and composure. "Son. This storm will not wait for us to develop any plans. This storm has come without mercy, son, and it is for me now to belong to this mountain. Upon this hill, my son, my nephew, our people have long shared our lives with our inland relatives. And now it is time to give a life to this path, and pay for its ownership.

"My young men, listen to me now if you ever have respected me. Life is sacred, the ultimate gift, but at times it must be relinquished for a greater good. You two are that

greater good. The days of my life, son, add up to you. Do not forget the things I have told you, and that you are a child of your father's people. Do not forget these things, son, and I shall live on through you.

"And my nephew, remember that you are the strength of our people. We share the same heritage, the same house. There will come a time when our stories will need to be told, like this story right here and now, and those will belong to our house. You will need to deliver them for me, correctly, and with respect. Do these things, my young nephew, and the weight of this day will not be lost."

A silence in the midst of a massive storm. The tears, saliva, sweat on the face of Ghaakh Éesh began to crystallize in the winter chill. From the young men came only muffled and choking sobs, and their elder looked upon them with a calm that shone through the storm, through the pain.

"Forgive me, my son. My nephew, forgive me. I should know better than to walk with such recklessness. But perhaps it was necessary to help us up that mountainside. I know I have done well by you two, that our family and people are in good care. And as this storm continues to build and overpower us, I will watch you two on your way home. I will pray for your safe journey and strong lives.

"There will come a time, my young ones, when you will tell a story of this time. You will tell a story about the day when you realized how delicate this life is, and how it is so vital to tell the stories, sing the songs, and to do things correctly. My young ones, those words are my final gift to you." Ghaakh Éesh smiles through the water clouding his gray eyes.

"Your gift to me, my son, my nephew. Will be to stand now and make your way home. We all know that we cannot talk of this forever. In time, these things will add up, will somehow make sense, but now you two must take our bounty home."

In silence, the young men stood and gathered what they could carry from Ghaakh Éesh's pack. Neither of them looked at their elder. Nor did they wipe their eyes or noses. They arranged the pack so it would shelter their elder from the wind and laid food and pouches of water, tobacco, and medicines within the shelter of the pack and in easy reach.

Finally, Kíji looked up at his father. In the older man's face was a look of resolve, even comfort and pride. Trembling, Kíji knelt to embrace his father, stood and gave a quick nod, then turned to walk away. Ch'akyéis' looked up from the ground, thanked his uncle, knelt to hug him, and quickly turned to catch up to his cousin.

The young men faded into the sheets of white and gray, their weighted footfalls giving way to the howling wind. Snow continued to pile upon itself, smothering the hope and pride. Bitter cold. Ghaakh Éesh began to think again of his grandfather, the stories and songs, the bond that his passing of knowledge created, like a bridge across time and space.

Finally, drowning in a winter's rage, Ghaakh Éesh broke. His face crumpled and trembled, his hands dropped the pouch of medicines, his tattered leg began to twitch.

His entire body made a slight collapse, and his quiet cries made only the slightest sound over the blizzard. Upon the mountainside of his people, Ghaakh Éesh went from a cold lonesomeness to a reunion with his beloved grandfather, many others, and the Creator.

The young men walked in silence. Their pain fueling footsteps, quickening their pace and the passage of time. Melted snow washed their tears down their faces and down onto their tunics. With nothing available in his mind, Ch'akyéis' began to hum in rhythm with their footfalls. His melody matched the tone of Ghaakh Éesh's speech when he had encouraged them up the mountainside.

Without any recognition of the fact, only the slight change in their momentum, the young men reached the summit and began their descent back to the village of Deiyáa. Ch'akyéis' continued to hum, louder and louder, until his shaky, sorrowful voice began to piece together the development of a song.

Yéil Kíji began to sing along with his cousin, closing his eyes and nodding along with the beat of their steps. He did not feel the need to watch their path so closely, but felt guided to the path that would bring them home. The song picked up pace, growing louder and louder, until the young men were shouting it into the storm, trading energy.

As the melody of the song continued, Kíji began to sing words, creating the verses of the song that would become the young men's tribute to their elder. Upon that mountainside, on their way back to their families, the two composed a song while in a trance of loss. It would be sung at the end of the story every time they told about Ghaakh Éesh, and how the words of his grandfather saved his son and nephew from a sudden and violent winter storm.

Every time Kíji told the story and finished the song, even until he was late into his life, in another time, a tear for his father would roll down his face as he remembered the sacrifice.

