

## A Whitefish Tale

Short story by Allison Fine

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They say the Blackfeet Indians call the Flathead Valley in northwest Montana the valley of sorrow. I ponder this as I pass a pristine-white UPS van with the words "*The World on Time*" written on its side. "*The World on Time*" has made this UPS driver much older. Relativity says that the faster you travel the less you age, but that's only true of space I guess. Here on earth, the faster you travel the worse you look.

When my friend told me this story of the valley of sorrow, it sounded almost as if the Blackfeet were cursing the valley, giving it a name and an energy that would forever suck the hopes and dreams of white people trying to settle here. Their curse would not be one of anger or vindictiveness, just realization. If you come here, the sorrow of all those past transgressions will somehow visit you; it is inevitable.

In order to wash your spirit clean sometimes you must sink into the valley of tears and find your space. That inner space will lead you to seek something greater than yourself. The Great Spirit will inhabit your soul. That is when you will notice people moving away from your energy. They cannot stand the tribal fire of all the souls that have inhabited your body, the souls that have gone before you and will go after you; they live inside you. People can feel this and sometimes they stay away. Sometimes they come closer. That is the story of loneliness.

My friend also told me the story of how the Flathead Valley sucks the money, resources and energy out of people so that they are kept here in bondage to monetary poverty until they die or leave by monumental effort.

The story goes like this:

Her friend came here twenty years ago from New York with some property and the money from the sale of his business back in New York. Very shortly after arriving he noticed his resources dwindling. He had to take on three jobs, just as many people in the valley do. He would look up at the mountains and notice the great scenery and tell himself the beauty of his surroundings more than made up for his poverty. It was certainly not a poverty of spirit, he told himself. Not long after this his wife developed cancer. They did battle with her breast cancer for many years. After the third bout she gave up and died peacefully on the couch of their rented trailer, watching Hollywood Squares.

He cremated her. Being from New York, his pushy manner did nothing to make him friends, and he didn't want to risk finding that out at a funeral. They didn't belong to a church. He had once been Jewish and had even had a stint as a Catholic. He'd forgotten both religions. His religion was living with despair and making it functional. He kept his fierceness.

He did push to get The Jaws of Life for the police station so that people crushed in accidents along the two main highways leading out of town could possibly be saved from the wreckage. He, himself, was not saved. At age 48 he died of an aneurysm. The first attack made him a vegetable; the second one killed him.

He came to town with money in his pocket. He always said that he'd leave town when he broke even. He never did leave town except in a body bag. Three crows sat on a telephone pole near his gravesite and screamed. They were at the end of the world and he'd fallen off it.

His daughter came in from Rhode Island and made a compelling story for burying her father in the local cemetery. In the end, she said, he was from Whitefish, after all. Even if Whitefish would not exactly claim him, he was theirs anyway.