

# The worst day: putting alaska's life in perspective



" After. Nothing is ever the same" (Green 12). After the worst day of Alaska Young's life, her whole world is turned upside down and rearranged. John Green's novel, *Looking for Alaska*, demonstrates the power and importance that death, suffering, and unhappiness have in life. Following the traumatic death of her mother, Alaska struggles to let go of the guilt and sadness associated with this one day of her life. These emotions are transformed into habits that continue to define who she is. Alaska's excessive activeness, risky behaviors, obsession with suffering, and familial relationships are a direct effect of the worst day of her life.

At Culver Creek, Alaska is always the first to have an idea, the first to lead a prank, the first to do something new. She is constantly leading the way and making decisions for herself and those around her. One of her friends, Miles, cannot help but decide, " That if people were rain, (he) was drizzle and she was a hurricane" (88). This hurricane that Alaska has become envelops her friends in a way that her passivity could not envelop her mother when she was dying. When Alaska's mother began to die, Alaska only screamed and cried while her mother held her head and jerked around on the floor. After her mother had stopped moving and was dead, Alaska simply sat on the floor with her. She did not call anyone for help, not her father or the police (119). Although she probably could not have saved her mother, Alaska sees this moment of complete passivity as one of her weaknesses. This brief moment in time leads Alaska to be excessively active in the years to come. Heavy smoking, drinking, and other risky behaviors are just another part of Alaska's daily life. She is the person that Miles and the Colonel go to for " hook-ups": cigarettes and alcohol. Whenever possible, Alaska tries to keep several

bottles of Strawberry Hill wine buried in the forest. Aware of the health risks that smoking and drinking impose, Alaska partakes in substance abuse unabashedly. She goes so far as to say that, " Y'all smoke to enjoy it, I smoke to die" (44). However, substance abuse is not the only risk that Alaska takes in life. Rules are meant to be constantly broken, both at school and in the rest of life. And although Alaska and the Colonel plan out their pranks with every minuscule detail accounted for, Alaska still manages to risk everything when she sends out twenty extra progress reports (109). This constant rule breaking, trouble making, and risk taking are direct effects of Alaska's worst day. Her mother died of an aneurysm, which is unexpected and shows no symptoms.

There is no way that Alaska or her father could have seen her mother's death coming. This sort of death is particularly hard to comprehend, as it is so unexpected and there isn't a situational factor to blame. On this day, Alaska learns that death and life are fickle things. Alaska doesn't participate in reckless behaviors because she does not value her life, but rather because she understands that people die every day for no good reason. During her junior year and throughout the rest of her life, Alaska develops an obsession with human suffering. Fifty-two days before, Alaska tells Miles, " There's always suffering ... homework or malaria or having a boyfriend who lives far away ... suffering is universal" (82). Alaska also uses the topic of human suffering to write her final paper in religions class. To Alaska, the most important question that human beings must answer is, " How will we ever get out of this labyrinth of suffering?" (158). Finally, Alaska writes in the margins of her book that the only way out of the labyrinth of suffering is "

straight & fast" (155). It is clear that Alaska's every day was consumed with the thought of suffering, both her own and that of those surrounding her. Yet, this obsession with suffering must have originated somewhere. Like most of Alaska's habits, this one also stems from her worst day. While her mother is lying on the floor, holding her head and jerking, Alaska screams and cries. It is not until her mother finally dies that Alaska settles down. When she tells the story, she says that, " I thought [my mom] had fallen asleep and that whatever had hurt didn't hurt anymore" (119). This idea that her mother had stopped suffering when she died is something that Alaska struggles with the rest of her life.

Is suffering only defeated in death? Does to live mean to suffer? After her worst day, her mother is not suffering at all, but Alaska is suffering a great deal. On that fateful day, Alaska loses more than just her mother; she loses her father, as well. Although her father is technically still alive and around, their relationship can never be the same. Her father only blames Alaska briefly for her mother's death, but this short blame will add to the constant guilt she carries around. From that moment on, it will be hard for Alaska to spend time at home, where her mother's absence is the felt the strongest. When it comes time for Thanksgiving break, Alaska elects to stay at Culver Creek and convinces Miles to stay with her. Miles asks her why she won't go home, and Alaska answers, " I'm just scared of ghosts, Pudge. And home is full of them" (80). Whether accidentally or on purpose, Alaska distances herself from her father, as well, when she distances herself from the ghosts. Everything about Alaska is the way it is because of her worst day. Her habits, thoughts, and familial relationships have been largely impacted.

Alaska made the mistake of letting a single day rearrange her past and her future. It would be easy to say that her mistake was in not forgiving herself and holding on. But, what if the true mistake was actually in differentiating between a best and a worst? A notable Buddhist koan attempts to show us, “That there is no best and no worst, that those judgements have no real meaning because there is only what is” (195). Maybe if Alaska had accepted her mother's death as just another day, it would not have had to color her entire world. Maybe without the labels we give to days and hours they wouldn't be so significant.