

LONG LOST LOVE

Some are from the mud up
Others from the sky down
So one is falling
The other is a star on the rise

So run to me and be my love
Be the hand within my glove
Warm and free speak tenderly
The night will never end

.....Luke

Harry loved the woods but was at his limit on this trip. He sucked in and blew out his breath. He needed a smoke but his tobacco was finished. He had been rolling butts made from butts for more than a week and now he had only one tattered cigarette left, ready to light but stored in his kit. He was saving it for a place called Have a Smoke Portage.

He felt his stomach turn as he threw out his fishing line again. His food supply was reduced to scraps and what he wanted most was a decent meal. Anything would be better than the Minute Rice mixed with bits of instant soup and any fish he might catch. At night he dreamed of ice cream.

Harry looked down at his hands. They were scarred with the scrapes and burns of camp work.

“Damn gloves” he murmured. They had gone missing two weeks ago and his hands were suffering the wear and tear of their loss. He stretched his fingers to ease their stiffness and glanced up and across the lake towards the next portage. The canoe drifted a little in the wind. It felt like his mind was drifting, too.

The loneliness inside him had grown softer in the woods, turning away from the sadness wearing him down before coming here. He had been trying to sort out a new direction and purpose for his life; had chosen this journey as a way to find what that might be. It made his mind work in ways he didn't understand but he thought it was good fortune to feel lighter and steadier, in spite of the physical discomforts closing in on him.

Harry pulled in his line, picked up the paddle and pulled the boat into motion. He was pushing hard to finish his homeward trip north. After five weeks he had learned to travel with little rest so he started early and worked all day. It was only at night, when he lay down, that he felt the exhaustion rising in him. It turned into pain every morning and only went away when he forced himself to get up and move again.

The rain was starting up. He put his head down to increase the power of his stroke. An hour later he was carrying his bags up the rocky trail from the river. The rain was pouring now. The ground was rocky and slippery and he was forced to watch his steps to keep his footing under the pack load on his back. That's how he found the note on the trail.

It looked like a letter. It was so wet he had to peel it apart to see what was there. What he saw made him drop the thing. The paper had one word on it: DEATH. He stared down at it to see if the word would somehow disappear if it was back on the ground where he had found it. He felt a chill go through him. He was suddenly afraid, like he was supposed to prevent something from happening that he could not see coming. He looked down the trail, but there was nothing there.

By the time he reached the river the rain had stopped and a foggy mist settled in. The river was a slow moving, gloomy and airless place, so he pressed on. He was beginning his pass through the first of its bends when he noticed the smell. The air around him was sickly and sweet. It made him choke. It was a smell unlike anything he had ever experienced before. There was something wrong here.

Harry let the canoe drift. Then he saw it. A body was gently bobbing up and down in the current and slowly moving towards him. Harry held himself steady. As it came closer he made it out to be a young man. Young before the water took him away, before the face had blackened and the body had become alien. Only the eyeglasses were exactly as they should be. They remained stubbornly fixed in place as if they were containing one last effort to see the sky.

The next few hours were filled with stillness. Harry did what he had to. He later remembered covering up the body with a silver foil emergency blanket, looping a rope over both feet so he could tow it closer to shore and the slow paddle to a low hanging tree. He tied the tow line around the trunk and pushed off back into the current.

He found an open, upwind slope of riverbank with a spot to sit down. He rehearsed an SOS signal with his old red tarp and tried to calm his nerves by concentrating on the horizon but the wait seemed to go on forever. He heard the sound of a plane before he saw it. He jumped up; scanning the sky, stepping down closer to the water, waving the tarp up and down in sequences of three. The plane flew on as if it did not see him and slowly circled into a second fly by, dipping its wings towards his signal and the silver shape in the water.

As the sun faded, another larger yellow plane returned to pick up the body. The three-man crew had brought an aluminum metal box. Harry sat in his canoe and watched them recover the remains. He asked if they could take him out with them but they said no. He asked if they had any tobacco to share but they said no. Harry felt crushed. It was very bad luck to be involved in an emergency where no one smoked.

That night Harry had his last cigarette. He was too tired to go any further so he had to make his camp at the falls where the young man had drowned. The forestry people told him the accident had happened weeks before. The dead man had been travelling with his twin brother when their canoe turned over in the rapids next to the falls. One brother grabbed the canoe. The other brother tried to swim for the packs to rescue them, unaware that the undertow beneath the rapids was deadly. He had been sucked down and held fast. It had taken two weeks for his body to break free and rise to the surface.

Harry stared at the fire. He tried to get some pleasure from his last smoke but his mind was elsewhere. He couldn't begin to comprehend what dying was like. Was it intense blackness, infinitely deep silence? He looked up at the sky. There were so many stars out. It was a beautiful night. He felt like he was being pulled back and forth between sorrow and joy. Harry said a prayer for the brother who had made it to shore to sit and wait in this place. Then he put another log on the fire and moved in closer. He wanted to feel its heat on his face.

Over the next two days Harry made the hardest paddle of his life. Within a couple of months of leaving the woods his memory of that day faded. He learned to sleep in a room again without feeling he might suffocate. He was thinking about looking for a job when he got a surprising call from a friend inviting him to consider working in a psychiatric hospital. It was the last place he would have ever thought of working.

That night Harry dreamed about the moment on the river and the night spent looking at the sky. The next day he decided to take the job. A month later he found himself working in a locked hospital ward and meeting Luke in a hospital hallway.

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Luke was a year older than Harry. Tall and slender, he had long black hair, an angular handsome face and strikingly beautiful hands. Luke was filled with a restless energy. He was grappling with a whirlwind of secrets, ideas and questions that were so intense he found it difficult to rest or sleep.

Luke was more fascinated, than alarmed by what he saw. He believed he was becoming a spiritual warrior and what was taking place inside him was a part of that change. He spoke with a direct, stark honesty that Harry wanted to absorb. He said that hope was living inside the heart of hopelessness. He told Harry to go and find it there.

Harry recognized a familiar solitude in Luke. He saw it when they smoked cigarettes together; how they lived to smoke and loved to be in smoke. The spiral plumes of burning tobacco filled the empty space between them, joining their worlds together.

Harry asked to work steady evening shifts to make sure he had more time to spend with Luke. As the days and conversations with Luke accumulated Harry began to feel more and more troubled. What Harry saw in Luke was the spirit of a natural poet but here in this hospital he was locked up. He was a patient and a prisoner.

Luke was waiting to be released from the hospital's custody, but he first he had to get to court to face a criminal public disturbance charge. He had been telling people about what his experiences were and this had got him arrested. Now, at the last stage of his ordeal, he was going back to court with a medical assessment outlining his psychiatric diagnosis and recommendations for further treatment. His agreement to follow through on this report was the condition set for his release.

When the day came for Luke's discharge Harry met him for one last conversation. He wanted to ask about the hospitalization. Had it helped? What should be done? What was next? Luke did not hesitate.

"The trouble with medication is it can take away everything."

Harry asked what could be done instead of this. Luke looked at him and said

"I am looking for a place to recover my long lost love."

Harry did not say anything. But later that night he wrote down what he heard Luke say.

Harry left the hospital not long after saying goodbye to Luke. He went down to Mexico and then made his way back north to the Yukon. After six months on the road he returned to the boundary waters of his first canoe journey partly to make peace with the place and partly to consider its influence on what he had been doing with his life.

It took five more years for Harry to see Luke again. They met on the street on a hot summer day. The encounter lasted only a few minutes. Luke was living in a nearby room. Life had been up and down, with admissions to the hospital and failed attempts to find a steady job. Harry mentioned the drop-in called PARC where he was now working and invited him to come for a visit.

Luke appeared a couple of months later. It was a late fall day. He was carrying a football helmet, a classical guitar and a tree branch with flowers wound around it. He was very restless and finding it difficult to concentrate. He had been spending his time wandering around in the large forested park near the drop-in.

For the next two weeks Harry and Luke saw each other almost every day. Although it was never said out loud, Harry knew Luke was coming to see him. They walked as they had done years earlier. They talked about treatment and how difficult that was for him. The rest of their time was spent encouraging Luke's efforts to recover his control over what was happening to him.

At the beginning of the third week, Luke did not return. Harry made some phone calls to find him. Luke had admitted himself to hospital.

For the next three years Harry saw Luke again every fall. Each year was the same. Luke came to see him when he was in crisis. During these periods he spent a lot of time wandering in the park. By the time he came to PARC he was carrying leaves and tree branches. They walked and talked for a week or two and then Luke went away, took treatment and disappeared.

Harry knew why Luke kept his distance from PARC after these annual visits. Luke told him he wanted this struggle to end. He worried about spending time in a place that was linked to the mental health system. He went on and off medications, then took them over longer periods of time. But the treatment had a cost. The medications could make him feel less than who he was. What he wanted was to be free of the hospitals, the doctors, the drugs and the associations with it all. What he wanted most was his long lost love.

Every discharge from hospital was going to be his last one. And it was, until the colors of the leaves changed in the fall.

Harry met him irregularly over those three years. When they got together they talked about the search for balance. Luke was trying to cope with the direction of his visionary spirit, how to live with it; how to find a way to stop it from pushing him into crisis. They discussed art and music. Luke was using these to carry him beyond the periods of turmoil in his life. Creating was what he was born to do. If only he could find some way to live with the ups and downs of his imagination tearing him apart.

Luke began using photography to make illuminated picture boxes. These were like beautiful haiku poems, constructed with phantom images instead of words. He used a razor to peel away the backing from his photos until he was left with their essence; a translucent image. Using cardboard, tape and string, he then sequenced his photo ghosts inside a box next to tiny battery-powered switches that would cast light on his subjects, turning on image upon image - until the story in the box was revealed.

He had one particular box showing an autumn scene of a small pond with blackened trees bending down over the water's surface. On one side there was a set of wires connecting the photo light switch to a gem studded butterfly. When the switch was pressed the image of a young man and young woman magically appeared on the surface of the pond. They were both smiling and leaning into each other in the manner of wedding photographs. Luke never explained the story of this box.

Three years after his first visit to PARC, Luke was settled into small room in the west end, and gradually increasing his visits to the drop-in. Time passed. PARC built housing on its third floor for the people using its programs. Eventually an opportunity for Luke to move in arrived. There were only 10 of these apartments but each one

was special because they were large, open spaces with tall windows and lots of light. It seemed fitting that an artist member of the PARC community should possess this kind of place to call home.

Luke lived there for 5 years: drawing and sketching, taking photographs, writing fiery or melancholy songs on his classical guitar. He made some lasting friendships with the other tenants living near him. One night Harry got a glimpse of an old secret Luke carried in his heart. They were drinking Madeira wine and talking about love. Luke told Harry that he had been deeply in love one time in his life. It had been a true love. Nothing more was said but the silence that followed was as deep as anything Harry had ever felt before.

The cancer came suddenly and moved fast. It was in Luke's lungs. When he told Harry about his illness they smoked together as always. Luke said he should stop smoking but it was impossible. Harry knew this was true. Since they both lived in smoke, it was an unshakeable certainty they would come to die there.

In the months before the end, Luke asked Harry to look after his things when he passed. Harry bought another bottle of Madeira wine. They talked about life lived and what was coming. Luke insisted that Harry take his guitar away, to keep it safe and to play it for him after he was gone. Harry said no; he could see the guitar was still waiting for Luke to play it.

A couple of days later Luke made a surprise visit to an evening drop-in coffee house. He was very frail and weak but he came to play one last song for everyone. It was one of Luke's original compositions, a beautiful and haunting melody without words. Harry took the guitar home after that night. Then Luke was gone.

Harry went into Luke's apartment the day after he died to sit and reflect. He looked around at the paintings, drawings and photographs. He re-read Luke's last will and testament. He opened the envelope Luke had left for him and found a poem Luke had written. Then he picked up the picture box showing the hidden couple beneath the pond. He decided to take it home with him to look at while he made Luke's funeral preparations.

Over the next five days Harry began to pull together Luke's work so that it could be displayed at his funeral. As he worked, Harry could hear Luke whispering to him. Harry knew he was nearby; floating in the shadows above him. He read the poem many times. He read it until he remembered the river travelled so many years before and the twin brothers separated by death just below the falls.

As the funeral date approached, Harry had a dream telling him to do two things. First he was to place an obituary in the local newspaper. Next he was to go into the park Luke always loved, to the place Luke used during his fall visionary journeys and find some birch bark.

The following morning he called the newspaper and placed a short notice about Luke's death. There wasn't much time left. It would go to print only the day prior to the funeral, but he ran it anyway. Later that day Harry set out for the nearby park. He had to search for the birch bark even though he couldn't remember any birch trees growing there. Still, he continued on because the dream was driving him. Eventually he came to a place where the trees and underbrush were most entangled. He left the trail and made his way into the most remote section of the park.

Harry had to push through the bushes to keep going. He kept on moving until he was stopped by a fallen tree. Beyond the tree lay the remains of a fire pit and a vandalized street sign, cautioning drivers to watch out for crossing children. The sign was lying at an angle across the pit, pointing towards the far end of the tree. There, waiting for him, was a large roll of birch bark.

The funeral was a big one, attracting many PARC staff and members. A few people from Luke's life outside of PARC came too: some people from the local coffee house scene, a close male friend from high school and a couple of Luke's distant relatives. The sanctuary was beautiful, with candles throwing a soft light over the tables and the easels holding Luke's photographs and drawings. Harry placed the large roll of birch bark on top of the coffin and turned on the flamenco music but kept the glove he had brought with him in his pocket.

There were many things said that morning because lots of people got up to speak. Harry could not remember any of it after it was over. He could only think about the woman dressed in black. She had kept to herself, speaking to Luke's high school friend and moving around the room to look at what was there. After the service he wanted to speak with her but she slipped away quietly. It was only later in the day, while driving home from the cemetery with Luke's school friend, that Harry thought to ask who she was.

"There were three of us, three best friends. Now I am the only one left alive. Back in high school we did everything together. We were inseparable until that last year of school. Then we began to come apart. Luke fell in love. The girl he loved was the woman in black. They were crazy about each other but something happened and she left him. She took up with our friend and she married him. It is kind of strange. She just buried her husband 6 months ago and here she is at Luke's funeral. She didn't tell me much, only that she had to come today. You know she hasn't seen Luke over all of these years but she saw his obituary in the newspaper.

When Harry got home he got out the picture box and turned it on. He looked at the girl hidden beneath the water of the pond for so many years and saw the woman in black, Luke's long lost love. He wanted to understand what had happened.

It finally came to him one cold day while he was walking home. He reached into his pocket for his gloves. As he pulled them out he noticed one was missing. He shoved

one bare hand back into his pocket, put the solitary glove on his exposed hand and moved on. One hand cold and one hand warm.

By the time he reached home he was thinking of Luke's image of the empty glove and his invitation to fill it. He looked down at his gloved hand. It was slowly getting warm and he felt it now, the unseen ways we hold our love and the unseen ways our hands work to make it real.

Harry took off the glove, picked up the box and turned it on.