

Linnea

Linnea never lacked for anything. That being said, she led a hard life. I never knew the full extent of her tribulations, she was never one to complain, or mine others for pity, but you could see it in her eyes, and the way she carried herself, like a dog kicked all too often by its owner. There was a mingling of hope and despair; longing and fear; that would sometimes cross her face when she didn't think anyone was looking. It was that vulnerability that made me fall in love with her.

Not that I told her, of course. There are certain things that one simply does not do. But she knew. Of course she knew. I was never good at hiding my feelings, no matter how hard I tried. As they say, I wore my heart on my sleeve for the whole world to see. I could tell by the way she smiled at me, the extra twinkle in her eye, an extra warmth that wasn't there when she smiled at others. And she smiled a lot. Despite everything, she never lost her smile.

My family moved to Presque Isle, Maine, shortly after I entered my tenth year, late spring of 1936. The move was both exciting and scary, as most big changes tend to be. My father had gotten a job as a foreman at Jehnnsen's Furniture, the largest furniture manufacturer at that time in Aroostook County. My mother was hired on as well, in the upholstery department. She would spend ten hours a day padding chairs, and sewing on cushions by hand, then come home and do the cleaning, and cook dinner for father and me. Yet she would always find time to sit with me and go over my school studies, or read a story to me.

I was too young to work in the factory, but was plenty old enough to spend my spare time working on the neighbor's farm; picking stones out of the fields, digging holes to plant seed, picking potatoes once they flowered. Back then, everyone earned their keep.

Calling the place we moved into a house was a generous exaggeration. It was, for lack of a better term, a large three-roomed shack; a bed room, living room, and kitchen. The previous owner was not big on comfort, or convenience; the first three years we lived there, we relied on the out-house in the side-yard to take care of business. I slept on a cot in the corner of the living room, which I would fold up and put away every morning after I woke. We had limited running water, and bathing was done either in a small copper tub, or on warm nights in the Presque Isle Stream which wound lazily through the trees behind our property.

I was hired on at the Wilette farm a month after our arrival. The fields were on the far side of a copse of trees that bordered one side of our property, and stretched as far as the eye

could see, but the house itself was nearly a mile away. My father and I walked there early one Saturday morning; me somewhat reluctantly because I knew what was coming. I didn't want to waste my time getting sunburns and blisters for only a few dollars a week. I wanted to explore, and fight pirates out on the sea, or hunt tigers through the tropical rainforest behind our house. My imagination was at it's peak then, and I knew instinctively that once I started working, it would begin to shrivel and atrophy, perhaps even die completely. But as I said, working was expected of me.

If I close my eyes, I can still feel my father's hand on my shoulder as we walked up the drive to the Wilette house, his fingers calloused from years of working with wood, the occasional squeeze of my shoulder as he pointed out different things to me.

We mounted the steps, and father rapped on the screen door. "Good morning," father said to the girl as she appeared at the door. "May we see your father?"

The girl looked at us with bored curiosity and nodded. "He's in the barn," she pointed behind us and to the side, her finger brushing against the screen. Father thanked her, and we crossed the yard to the barn. Inside was huge, larger than you would expect upon first glance from the outside. The aroma was a mixture of soil, manure and hay, an earthy and cloying smell that was intensified by the heat and humidity within the barn. It was a smell I grew to love over the years.

Peter Wilette was at the far end of the barn, sharpening the blades on one of his many plows. He was a traditionalist; what these days we would call "old school." All his plows were horse drawn, even though motorized tractors had become readily available a few years prior. "If it was good enough for my pa, it's good enough for me," was his favorite answer to many of life's questions.

"My boy needs to learn about responsibility and earn his keep. Ferquesson said you're always looking for field hands."

"Not always," Wilette answered, never looking up from his plow blades. "But I never turn away help, neither. You never know when you might need it." Leaning back, Wilette pulled a kerchief from his back pocket, wiped his forehead, and nodded. "Ayuh. Suppose I could use extra help cleaning stone and seeding."

My father nodded. "The boy will be over after school, Monday."

"Ayuh," Wilette sighed, bending back over his plow.

We left the barn and headed back home. At the edge of the property the girl was picking berries. She held the corners of her apron in one hand, forming a pouch to catch the

berries in. She looked up as we approached, shading her eyes, and gave me a half smile. "Guess I'll be seeing you a lot more."

I nodded, rather sheepishly, truth be told. "Good," she said. "I wanted somebody to boss around." Her smile grew, and instantly I knew we would be friends. That's how I first met Linnea Wilette.

When I was 14 I broke my leg. It was a stupid accident, really, one that never should of happened. But then, isn't that really what defines an accident, an aberration from the norm? It was a gorgeous afternoon in May, school had let out for the summer the day before, and Linnea and I had spent the first day of summer break hiking and exploring and running and playing, basking in each other's presence and friendship. It was nearing nighttime, the sky a mottled orange and red and purple. We were climbing one of the trees bordering the Presque Isle Stream, an Eastern White Pine, if memory serves me. And my memory is pretty patchy that night, coming in jagged flashes, and smudged recollection....but I remember the branch.

I had climbed up the tree no problem, skipping from branch to branch, like Tarzan in the serials. I stood in the upper branches, my shoulder against the trunk, and stared out at the stream, the golden-orange flames of sun dancing on the water's surface. The view was breathtaking, truly, and I caught myself wishing the moment would never end. Linnea was on the branch beneath me, and even though she had the same view as me, I wished there was room for her on the branch beside me.

"Hey, jungle boy," she called up.

I smiled, and grunted down at her. "Girl don't belong in tree. Only Tarzan and monkeys."

She nodded. "Alright, but where's Tarzan?" The brilliance of her smile rivaled that of the sun, and there was a quickening of my pulse which I didn't understand. I stared into her eyes, and for a second, something seemed to change, like a door opening just a crack, and I caught a glimpse of something wonderful and beautiful, something that I wanted to explore, and lose myself in. Then she lowered her gaze, and the moment was lost, and I suddenly realized I was holding my breath. I let it out in a hot rush, and I had to lean against the tree to steady myself. "It's getting late. Papa will tan both our behinds if I'm late for dinner." she said, starting to climb down.

"Ayuh," I breathed. I started down, lowering myself from branch to branch. I was three-quarters of the way down when I stopped to wipe the sweat from my eyes. the branch

was at least four inches thick, easily twice as thick as the one I stood on at the top of the tree, but it was half rotted, filled with woodpecker holes, and without warning, it sagged, then snapped completely, and I tumbled down the tree, bouncing and sliding down the branches, the limbs scratching me repeatedly, then I crashed through the bottom, and I landed, hard, and the pain was immediate and nauseating. I can't remember if I screamed, I'm sure I did. Once I hit the ground, my memory becomes unreliable, and all I can see are red-tinged flashes, like over-exposed snapshots. Linnea leaning over me, crying. My father and mother above me, holding my hands. An overly bright hallway, lights flashing by in quick succession.

The first clear memory I have after the fall was of Linnea sitting in a chair at the foot of my hospital bed, staring out the window. She held something in her hand, turning it over repeatedly, but I couldn't see what it was. She hadn't noticed that I was awake, and I watched her for several moments, the way she chewed at her bottom lip, her eyes bright yet nearly vacant as she stared outside, and I was certain that what she was seeing was not on the other side of the window.

"Penny for your thoughts." My voice startled me. It was hoarse and gravelly, and my throat felt dry and cracked. I licked my lips and swallowed, but it did no good. I looked around, hoping for some water, and saw a cup sitting on a tray to my right. Linnea was at my side instantly, and she held the cup out to me. I drank from it greedily, spilling half of it down my front.

"Slowly," she said. Her voice was low and soft, almost meek, and there was a tightness around her eyes, a barely hidden pain which I hadn't noticed before. Had it always been there, but I had just been too naive to notice it? Or was it newer, fresher, perhaps brought on by my fall. "Don't ever scare me like that again," she said.

"Sorry," I said.

"Me too." She stood silent for several moments, as if unsure what to say, or do. I know that's how I felt, anyway. "This is for you." She held out her hand, clasped, and when I raised my own hand she uncurled her fingers. A piece of wood fell into my palm, roughly three inches by one.

"It's wood," I said. She smiled briefly, and in that split second melted my heart. She reached into her back pocket and pulled something free.

"Here, this goes with it." It was a penknife, and I turned the two over, a blank stare on my face. "My Papa has been whittling wood since he was a boy, and he taught me how to do it. I figured I could show you how. You know, while your leg healed."

I grasped her hand , giving it a quick squeeze, and smiled at her. "That would be great."

Over the course of my eighty-plus years, I've come to accept some universal truths which few people seldom talk about, and even fewer understand. Like how inevitably, it always rains after you wash and wax your car, even on a cloudless day. Or how, when you lose your car keys, you can check the same spot three times and nothing is there, but the fourth time, when you've all but given up on finding them....there they magically sit. Life can be fickle and mean spirited, it can be a temptress and an illusionist, it can be both benign and malignant, it can be unpredictable yet inevitable. You can devote your entire life to the pursuit of peaceful purity, oneness with the cosmos, yet in an instant become possessed with an unbridled rage. Life is about passion, and without it, what is there, really?

My love for Linnea was subtle and deceptive, hovering just out of view, because I never realized just how much I loved her until the day I met her fiancé. I knew she had a boyfriend, of course. We were best friends, we worked in the fields together, we played together, we ate together; we were practically inseparable. There were no secrets between us, other than the ones we created together. Not once did the words "I love you" cross my lips, let alone my thoughts. Yet she knew. Whether consciously or spiritually, I'll never know. But I've come to realize over the years that yes, on some level she knew.

Linnea's engagement party was held on the second weekend of March, 1944. Fear and hatred had the world on it's knees, not a day went by when stories of bloodshed and death didn't saturate our lives. The tide of the Second World War had finally begun shifting in the favor of the Allies, and young men by the thousands eagerly volunteered to help send Hitler back to Hell. Bradley Gustoff, Linnea's future husband, was one of them.

The engagement party was held at the church, in the center of town. The pew benches were pushed against the walls, creating an open space, and three tables were lined down the center of the room, end to end, laden with food. Despite the ever-present threat of the war, and the sub-zero temperatures outside, the atmosphere inside the church was lighthearted and jovial, laughter and music filling the small church.

I was standing near the back of the room, a plate full of food held close to my chest. I saw Linnea when she was still halfway across the room. I smiled, and she returned my smile, and waved. It was a couple seconds later when I registered the soldier behind her. He looked unbelievable young in his dress uniform, the hat nearly covering his eyes. A sourness filled my chest, heartburn I thought at the time. I smiled again, and awkwardly hugged her with my plate held out to the side. Chicken threatened to slide off my plate, and I shifted it just in time. "Congratulations," I slid my gaze to Bradley "You're a lucky man."

"Thank you. We're glad you could make it." he said, slapping me on the arm.

"Wouldn't dream of missing it." Sourness flooded my throat again, and I swallowed it down. Linnea caught my slight grimace of discomfort, and cocked her head slightly. "The pasta was spicier than I expected," I replied to her unspoken question. She hesitated a split second, staring at me, then laughed.

"Perfect! It'll help keep you warm tonight on your way home." She combed a stray lock of her auburn hair behind her ear. "Bradley is shipping out next week."

He nodded. "We're flying out of the air force base, heading over to France. We've got the krauts reeling! It's only a matter of time before they run back to their Fuhrer!"

"That's good news," I said. Linnea shifted, to hug Bradley's arm a little tighter, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the pendant hanging around her throat. "I see you still have it."

Linnea reached to her throat and rubbed what hung there. It was a small wooden thrush, crudely carved, its edges rounded over the years. "Of course, I'll never get rid of it. You put a lot of effort into making it."

"Well, I had a lot of spare time on my hands." I rubbed my leg absently, a phantom twinge passing through it. It was because of my leg that I wasn't wearing a uniform like Bradley and heading off to war; the reason that I was currently stuck in Presque Isle, both a blessing and a curse. I hated what was going on in Europe, the mass killings and subjugation, but I sure as Hell didn't want to risk my life for them. My life meant more to me than that. Selfish, maybe, but true.

"Henry!" Bradley said, waving his arm above his head. "Come on," he said, heading off with Linnea in tow, saving me from any further awkwardness.

"Talk to you later!" she called back, before they got swallowed by the crowd. Feeling strangely melancholy, I went back to eating my food, but it had gone cold. I left shortly after.

Three weeks later, spring finally decided to come to Presque Isle. The sun shimmered off the stream as the wind tickled the newly budded leaves. Spring had always been my favorite time of year, the promise of new beginnings. Spring also meant the start of planting season, and I loved farming nearly as much as I did spring. I was in the Willette barn, sharpening the plow blades that Linnea's father no longer could because of the arthritis. I had been working on them all morning, sweat dripping off my nose in huge salty drops. It was nearing lunch time, and my mind kept drifting to the apple pie that would be waiting for us in the

Wilette house. When I straightened up to stretch my back, I saw the black Pontiac.

I stood up slowly, because a car like that doesn't belong on a farm like the Wilette's. I left the barn, wiping my hands absently down the sides of my overalls. The day seemed unnaturally bright, and I found myself squinting as I headed towards the house. As I passed the car, I glanced down, confirming the suspicion that had started to burn in my chest. It was a government plate. Just as I was about to mount the steps, the screen door opened, and an officer left the house. He nodded to me and headed to his car. I didn't spare him a second glance.

I bounded up the steps, and was halfway down the hall before I saw her. She stood in the doorway of the living room, a yellowed letter held loosely in her hand. Her face was slack, strangely free of emotion, at least at first glance. But Linnea was my best friend, I knew her better than anyone. I could see the shocked pain, the betrayal, struggling to break to the surface; but she's had a lifetime of experience hiding her emotions, and she held them in check, barely.

She flapped the hand holding the letter, like she wanted to throw it away but was afraid to. I was at her side in two large strides. Our eyes locked, and we spoke without speaking, as only the closest of friends can do. I pulled the letter gently from her hand and read it, even though I already knew what it would say. Bradley's plane was shot down over France, his body unrecoverable.

I lowered the letter, and the pain in her eyes was unbearable. Her mouth opened slightly, about to say something, when without warning she fainted into my arms. I carried Linnea into her room, laid her onto her bed. I moved a chair in from the kitchen, placed it in the corner of her room, sat down and waited.

I dozed off at some point, and woke with a start. Linnea was still in bed, but her eyes were open. She was staring at the vase of flowers on her nightstand, pink roses; her favorite. They weren't there when I brought her in, I'm almost certain of that. News spreads fast in a town like Presque Isle. Her face was red and swollen from crying, her pillow damp from tears. I pulled the chair closer, reached out and took her hand.

"I feel so empty." Her voice was barely above a whisper, yet it seemed to fill the small room. She pulled a green, woolen blanket up around her shoulders. "And cold." She shifted her gaze to me. "Is this normal?"

"Yeah," I said, thinking of my mother. She had passed away the year before from pneumonia. You would think that a tragedy like that would bring a family closer together, but instead it drove a wedge between my father and myself. He became withdrawn, cold and

distant, and angry. Linnea helped me work through my grief after my mother's death; I owed her nothing less than my complete love and support.

She sighed, and turned back to the vase of flowers. "Damn."

Not long after, Linnea applied for, and was accepted into nursing school. The school was in Bangor, and even though it was only a couple hours away, it might as well of been on the other side of the country. We had several long talks over the intervening weeks, most of them difficult and uncomfortable; none as light or carefree as they once were. What came out of our talks was the belief that by helping others get over their pain and discomfort, Linnea could work through and overcome her own.

All too soon, the semester was about to start, and with a heaviness in my heart that I didn't want to completely acknowledge, I drove her to the bus station. We both promised to stay in touch, and to visit every chance we got, but we both knew that was easier said than done. She had her nursing classes, and I had the farm. Now that her father was all but debilitated by arthritis, I basically took over the running of the farm. He still made the decisions, but I saw to the day to day runnings and to be honest, I couldn't be happier, farming had become my life.

I stole a glance at Linnea as we pulled into the bus station. She was staring out the window, seemingly a million miles away, and I thought *no, I could be happier, if only.....* But I never finished the thought, I'm not sure if I knew how to. I've had too many years to relive those last moments before she stepped onto that bus, too many second thoughts and what if's, too many regrets and recriminations. Too many years of not knowing.

When we entered the station, her bus had already started boarding. I carried her luggage to the bus and stowed it while she got her ticket squared away. She started to mount the steps when she stopped; one foot raised, her hand on the rail; and glanced back at me. Her face softened, and a bit of the warmth that so defined Linnea in the past broke through, and her face and whole being just lit up from within. I hugged her tight, letting my body tell her what my mind couldn't. Pulling away, she gave me that half smile that started it all, and I knew then that I would never see her again.

She climbed onto the bus without another word. Her seat was three quarters of the way down, and as the bus pulled out she gave me a small wave. I waved in return, watched as it pulled onto the road, then walked slowly back to my truck and drove home.

It's been nearly sixty-five years since that bus pulled away with my best friend, and I've done a lot of living during that time. I've had three wives, divorced two and buried the last; I have five children and twelve grandchildren, with the thirteenth on the way. I've seen the Willette Farm prosper, and nearly fail; I've seen floods and blizzards and near droughts. I've seen Presque Isle transform itself from a community into a city. I've witnessed three wars, and several near-wars and occupations. I've met hundreds of people, but none quite like Linnea. Which is a good thing, because it proves just how special and dear she was to me.

The envelope that arrived in the mail had no return address, but was postmarked Dover, Maryland. The envelope was thick, bulging, and with a curious trepidation I sat at the kitchen table and slit it open with a knife. I pulled out the contents, and my eyes misted over as I saw what was wrapped within the letter. Even after nearly seven decades I recognized the handwriting.

My dearest friend;

Where to begin? I'm sorry that I didn't stay in touch as promised; I was afraid that it would keep alive certain memories which I wanted dead and buried, put away and forgotten because the thought of them was too much to bear. And it did help, at first. But after awhile, I realized that in doing so, I lost the one thing I wanted, and needed the most. How much easier this all would have been if I hadn't shut you out completely. I'm truly sorry for hurting you; I know I must have, because it hurt me. The hours spent with you were always my happiest, how I wish I could have those back. Swimming in the stream, climbing trees, running, jumping, laughing. Always laughing. You always knew how to make me laugh; you always knew when I needed it the most. How I loved you for that, and the way you could make me forget my pain, and self-doubt. Those memories got me through some rough patches over the years, and for that I thank you. When you read this, my Love, I would of lost my battle with cancer. I'm tired, so very tired of it all. The memories of you, and our friendship, have gotten me this far; you may not have been in my life these past years, but you've never been far from my heart. I dream of the time when we can run through the fields again, with nothing but the wind at our back, the sun in our face, and joy in our heart...

Always yours,

Linnea

Tears blurred my vision, and my heart ached worse than I thought possible. I picked up the charm I had carved for her all those years ago, and kissed it. *Never far from my heart....* I sat there holding it, and thought about Presque Isle all those years ago. I thought of a young boy meeting a young girl, not knowing at the time how profoundly their lives would change. I remembered the joy and freedom we had shared, and I thought to myself Linnea was right; how wonderful it would be to do it again, like two thrushes, with nothing but the sun in their face, the wind at their back, and the joy of the other in their heart. How wonderful indeed.