



Lost In The War Of The Beautiful Lads

a short story by ADRIANNE HARUN

a waiflike soldier of the teenage wars, Corrie was never without her backpack. It was stuffed with the midriff-baring sweaters I didn't like, as well as makeup and an abundance of iconic offerings she kept for new friends: fragile worry dolls, stippled beach rocks, a henna tattoo. And cigarettes, a silver lighter from an old boyfriend, hair clips shaped like butterflies and set with fake gems. Gum, pencils, tissues. Startlingly, a change of underwear. When the officer handed the backpack to me, Corrie's belongings were organized neatly — or as neatly, at least, as if she'd packed them all herself.

Three kids in a pickup truck. In a field. And Corrie in the middle. Her head on a shoulder. Another leaning against her. The three of them like a trio of knocked-over pins. One window shattered. Glass on their laps. An empty open CD case on Garrett's knee. Corrie's hand clutching a wilted moss

rose so tightly the woody stem had split, leaving a thin gash across her tender palm.

Just three kids out for a ride, listening to music, maybe firing up a blunt, although the ashtray was closed, no matches in any of their pockets, that lighter of Corrie's way down at the bottom of the pack. No bottles either. Just the music, the flower, the broken glass, a bullet each, and nothing else disturbed.

May Shannon, my neighbor, commiserated: "You might expect it in a city, even a school or a fast-food joint — but in a field? And on an island, no less."

I knew what she meant. You couldn't help seeing circles in your mind: tight, impenetrable. The three of them in the center, the field around them, the island shore and surf ringing them all. And my daughter Corrie, the bull's-eye. It's not true that no one in Canada keeps guns. Someone here has one. A

.45 fired at close range. And only the one ferry, arriving and departing like the tide.

Enemies? the Royal Canadian Mounted Police asked us. Strange characters lurking about?

Well, what did they expect us to say to *that*?

It's no secret that, put anywhere else, most of us on the island would appear odd. Last year, I went down to Seattle on my yearly shopping trip. I was scanning the racks at Nordstrom's, bowled over more by the other customers than by the merchandise. So much affluence, so young. I had no place there. I was too old and foreign, and my intentions weren't honorable. I would not under any circumstances buy a tiny leather skirt or a sleeveless cashmere sweater — not even for Corrie. I wanted a winter coat, something just slightly more refined than the usual island wear. Apparently what I was searching for did not exist. I could have sewn one easily, I supposed, but sewing was what I did for a living, and this trip was a chance to treat myself. I halfheartedly considered a quilted white parka with a fur collar. Ridiculous, a white jacket, meant only for a rich twitch to wear out to dinner at the ski resort. I would dirty it beyond repair just climbing into the truck. Yet there I was, holding out a sleeve, stroking the collar, when a bag lady came up beside me. Her back was to me. I saw scraggly gray-blond hair, shabby mismatched clothing, sweaters over sweaters, brown lace-up shoes the worse for wear. Then, in the next instant, the bag lady was Helly from the island. Helly with her big pink flower satchel. Helly at Nordstrom's! We, who hardly spoke to each other at home, had lunch together. She showed me a lipstick she'd bought. I opened the box containing my new boots. In the mirror behind our restaurant booth, I saw us as we must have appeared to others: two ragged people, friends with uneasily full wallets, waiting for the waitress to grace them with her attention. Helly was going on to visit her sister. I hadn't even known she had a sister. After lunch, I accompanied her to the bus stop, watched her revert from Helly back into the bag lady as she hauled her bundles up the steep bus steps behind two young girls in identical black sweaters and black leather skirts.

And that was only Helly. We have far queerer folks on the island: Blunt Bob, the marijuana farmer. Ashley, the broad-shouldered transsexual. The Samuelsons in their yurt complex. Our hermit, who lives in the exact center of the island and has his groceries delivered to a red plastic crate by the abandoned logging road. And don't forget the ex-navy commander who gives palm readings and sometimes becomes hysterical when we pick plums and wild strawberries in the metal-strewn lot behind his trailer.

Corrie went to him last year for a reading — my own idea of a birthday present for a fourteen-year-old who thought she knew everything.

In the cramped stall of his trailer, the white-haired commander sat stiffly beside her. He took her left hand as if he might bow to kiss it. He held it out in front of him and squinted, then brought it close to him, turning her palm upward. With a finger he traced the six major lines on her palm, gave their

names: Heart, Head, Life, Mercury, Apollo, Saturn. Her hand, he pronounced, was conical, the fingers long and knotted. He deciphered the crosses and stars and little hatches that marked her palm. He clucked over the feathery lines, the presence or absence of "padding"; declared, without irony, with surprise even, that Corrie had a heart. She preened, smirked at me a little. The commander bristled when he saw.

"Listen up," he said, sternly. "This isn't a prize, girl." He dragged long and hard on his hand-rolled cigarette, letting the smoke escape slowly as he continued. "Having a heart —" he smiled, showing a mouthful of long yellow teeth — "just means that you can be stopped."

He offered to read my palm as well, but the truth is, ever since I moved to the island, just before Corrie was born, my future has been clear enough. And I certainly had no desire to be called down for my failings. (Corrie was already doing a fine job of that, thank you.) Besides, despite his pressed exterior, the old man's hands were filthy, stained by cigarettes and fruit pulp, and his fly was half unzipped. I couldn't wait to get out of that musty trailer, rank with the smell of nesting rats and rotting plums.

Before we left, he drew my daughter toward a tiny copier machine on his kitchen counter.

"Just like that," he breathed, pressing her hand tightly over the flashing roll of light.

I expected him to offer us the copy; my hand was open for it. Instead, he slipped the blackened image of Corrie's hand into a flesh-colored folder.

"It's mine," he said, pushing the door open for us. "Who knows what I'll see here in the future."

over the phone, May Shannon tells me there are investigators on island. They've visited her, promised to visit everyone. They are probably listening right now over the party line, getting a feel for who we are and how we conduct our business. She giggles a little at the thought that we are all suspects, then immediately apologizes. "It's not funny," she says. "I don't know why I'm laughing." Nothing makes sense, I want to say; why should this? She's whispering now, asking if I've been out to the field. She knows it's on my way to the beach where I usually clam. (Never mind that I don't clam during this cold, windy season.) She makes us sound like conspirators, and maybe it's because of that, because they might be listening, that I pretend to be afraid. "Do they think we're safe?" I ask May. The silence that meets my question tells me that May has never thought of this herself, has never wondered if another inexplicable murder will follow this one. It's just not the way we think here.

And then we have the funerals. They are almost too much for me to bear. Three in a row. One boy's family is Catholic. They take his body to the mainland, and we all go down to the ferry and see him off. Garrett's family, although not churchgoers, holds a service in the Methodist church, the only real church on the island, a sweet gray clapboard chapel close to the beach. For Corrie, my partner Jasper and

I forgo a formal funeral. Instead, we rent the kitchen shelter in the provincial park. Jasper's idea. He's the one with all the ideas now, although when we had Corrie here, he was clueless, always retreating to his studio when she and I butted heads. "She's your daughter," he'd say when I asked for help. And yet Jasper and Corrie sometimes seemed more kin than she and I did, the way they each burrowed away from me at times, reveling in solitude and secret projects.

At the kitchen shelter, we serve high tea, Corrie's favorite. As a little girl, she loved to linger in the lobby of the Empress Hotel in Victoria, hoping we'd come up with the thirty dollars a head to treat her to tea. We never did. So we have tea now. We choke down scones and Devon cream, little sandwiches smeared with salmon paste or chopped egg. May Shannon's husband, Ed, keeps a flask of whiskey handy and doctors my tea each time I hand him the cup for a refill.

the vancouver police find Corrie's fake ID on a runaway. The runaway insists a boyfriend got it for her, but — surprise! — the boyfriend is nowhere to be found.

"They all vanish," I mutter to Jasper as my eyes close that night. I hardly hear his answer. I used to be the one awake until dawn, charged with dread, as I listened for her. Now, for what seems like the first time in two years, I collapse deeply, astonished each morning by the calm autumn sun warming my face.

After the initial shock and tumult die down, our neighbor the hermit brings us a Bundt cake on a chipped china plate rimmed with hand-painted forget-me-nots. He unlaces his muddy boots at the door, one filthy hand balancing on the doorjamb, and sidles into the living room. He stays to eat two pieces of the cake himself, expressing a querulous preference for the Hawaiian Kona coffee we once served him over the cinnamon tea Corrie favored, which still crams a cupboard shelf. A narrow-faced, gray-haired man with bloodshot eyes, he looks as if he's been weeping. Once he's had his coffee and cake, he might as well be alone, so fierce is his concentration. Even when we lay our forks on our empty plates, we have nothing to say. But our old Lab, Pamela, who's been pining for Corrie, likes the hermit, and he wrestles with her on the living-room floor until the coffee table topples over. A blue pottery dish filled with beach glass is upset. Tears fill the hermit's eyes as he apologizes, scurrying around on his hands and knees to pinch up the pieces before he flees.

one of the boys, the Catholic one, Danny, had a record on the mainland. He stole parts from cars, they tell us, and, worse, hustled sex-starved tourists at the Granville Market. Not uncommon, we're told. There's a cadre of lost children, boys mostly, who survive in the city this way. But Danny did not live in the city, and whether his past plays into "the incident" — as the police call it — is not certain until the Vancouver police and the RCMP rub

heads together and come up with the first big lead of the case: Danny could have carried Corrie's ID to Vancouver, possibly to present to a girlfriend. They show the runaway a photograph of Danny, and she shrugs. "His hair was longer," she says. The RCMP and the Vancouver police are not fazed. They congratulate one another on this revelation and let all the families know in turn. I shake my head. Always these days I'm shaking my head.

The local newspaper prints Corrie's yearbook picture. It's the first time I've seen it; the proofs went straight to the school, and no one wanted to upset us by sending them over. She's unbearably beautiful, even in the grainy newspaper reproduction. Her sometimes spotty skin has been smoothed. Her hair shines; her smile is without guile. She is my bright toddler brought to fruition. None of the painful transformation, the awful twisting of my girl into the screaming wretch she became in the past year — none of that is visible. Not for the first time, I wonder if there's been a mistake, if the girl in the truck was a genuine stranger, perhaps someone Corrie befriended at school off-island. The island school is just for little kids. Come high school, we put our children on a boat every morning and send them to a bigger island, where they meet children we'll never know, like Corrie's supposed friend Alicia.

Two weeks after the funerals, Alicia reveals a skimpy diary in which Corrie, in an unfamiliar rounded hand, blames her father — that would be my ex, Kenneth — for unspeakable injuries. In the diary, she details her plans to leave for Vancouver. Money, she insinuates, is no problem. An unbearable excitement throbs behind her proclamations that no one will believe how easily she disappears, how her tracks will be so well hidden even Pamela couldn't sniff them out. I find myself rooting for her, whispering words I could never say when she was here. *Go, I urge as I read. Leave. Hurry, sweetheart, hurry.* The only mention of me comes in the last paragraph of the diary, where she writes: "My mother will have no problem renting my room. She's always said she could get big money for a room by the beach."

Of course this isn't true. Likely none of the journal is true, just a bit of drama dreamed up by Corrie or, perhaps, the all-too-helpful Alicia. Kenneth has lived in Toronto since Corrie was a year old and does not, to this day, acknowledge his part in parenting our glorious girl. I found a number for him and left a message on his machine right after the RCMP came, but he never called back. If Corrie had seen him in recent years, it was only in her dreams. And our house is a mile and a half from the beach, in a meadow bordered by an alder-choked clearing and a field full of purple thistles. Jasper and I can't even find a summer renter for the studio we made in the barn — and studios, as you may surmise, are in great demand here.

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