

## Sunset

James Lynn Smith

Channel Three Newsflash: Officials rescued a man lost for two months in a wilderness of snow near Mount Logan, Canada. He was the passenger in a Piper Super Club that went missing. The man survived despite leg injury, but his pilot was not found. Apparently, the plane was blown off course and crashed on the side of a mountain. More news at 10:00 pm.

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Three months later, the owner of a high-rise flat overlooking the ocean celebrated her new job as city manager with a lavish party. One guest, Sally Adams, ventured out onto the spacious balcony to enjoy the breeze and smell of the ocean with a friend, Mike Jones.

“Look,” she said to him, “that red-haired man at the rail’s just been standing there for a long time, looking at the sun go down over the water. Think he’s troubled with something?”

“Probably, that’s Jerry Franks. His last relative died not long ago. The end of his family bloodline must be depressing.”

“He left the party inside and came out on the balcony half an hour ago. Think we ought to say something to him?”

“Like what? Seems a bit coarse to walk up and say, ‘Sorry about the end of your genetic line, pal.’”

“That’d be a crude way to put it, but yes, it might agitate his grief if we intruded.”

“Agreed, we should just respect his space for now,” Mike said.

Sally looked away and tried to find something else of interest, but kept glancing back at the man. It was not long before she gave up. “Ooh, I can’t stand it. I hate to see him so forlorn. Maybe if I just meander over close by and commented on the view, it might help him snap out of it.”

“Okay, but be prepared for...whatever. I’ve heard he’s something of an enigma.”

She casually moved near Jerry, seeming to have no intentions. She hummed softly for a moment. “Nice sunset.”

There was no response.

She tried again. “Ahem, nice sunset, right?”

He looked at her. “Oh, excuse me. I didn’t know you were speaking to me. Yes it’s very nice.”

Sally smiled and introduced herself. *He seems to be holding up.* “Makes you want to forget your troubles and tune in to nature, huh?”

“We should not forget troubles, just transform them. Nature can do that when you see it properly.”

“How’s that?”

He looked back over the ocean. “I feed my troubled thoughts to the sunset and let them burn away. Out comes the light that was always hidden in them. I see pink clouds with golden edges against an orange sky. All surrounded by gentle tones ranging from purple to aqua blue.”

“You see all those things? I don’t get that far after three martinis.”

He smiled. “The best elixir for healing disappointment and stress comes from your own mind chemistry.”

“You a chemist or a doctor?”

“No, I was a CPA but retired last year. So when I say ‘chemistry,’ I mean *soul* chemistry. To me it means a combination of spirit and brain biology. Probably

not the right words, but I'm no philosopher or theologian."

"Couldn't prove it by me. Invent all the words you want. You seem to be on a roll, and so far I get it."

"Taking the elixir is a matter of practice. In time the brain begins to obey the spirit."

She raised her brows. *Getting profound or vague?* "Wait now. Your brain is not its own master?"

"The brain is a magnificent tool that adapts us to living in this world. But, left to its own devices, it's vulnerable to learning limited or even wrong lessons. It can learn how to do your job, how to conduct a meeting, but also to fear, hate, and struggle with things not worthwhile."

"Isn't the brain supposed to discover how to conquer all that? Some say that we are in this life to learn."

"I'm not sure the soul part of us knows what the brain learns. Maybe it engages the brain as a means to gain *spiritual* knowledge. Once that occurs, details and memories the brain had to go through are no longer an issue."

"How does your soul engage the brain?"

He took a deep breath. "I really don't know. I guess the brain gets us through this physical world. But conflicts arise and decisions have to be made. Questions occur for which brain doesn't have answers. For example, what you will have faith in, whom to trust, how to love. These decisions are what the soul learns from. Also I think the soul has an innate sense of rightness. If we let that come forward, both soul knowledge and earthly mind improve."

"That's kind of deep. Do you meditate?"

"Yes, that was what I was doing while watching the sun set."

*Blundering me.* "I'm sorry. As a burglar, I'd wake the guard dog to see if he was asleep."

Jerry chuckled. “Quite all right. I knew this flat was not a monastery. It’s good talking with you.”

“I mistook your meditation for sadness. I hear a close relative passed recently.”

“Correct, but I’m not sad. My cousin lived a rewarding life. Vera and I were close. We had quite a few laughs together. I remember those things, without a pang insisting that I mourn the fact they’ll never happen again. Her smiles and good humor have now become a part of me.”

*This man’s outlook is uplifting, like the smell of roses in a garden.* Sally looked into his aqua-colored eyes. *So why do I sense a disturbing history behind it?* “Wasn’t she the last of your blood kin? Is that a problem for you?”

He shrugged. “Yes, but no problem. My bloodline or specific genetic makeup is not what is important. There are many who have similar enough traits. The soul doesn’t trap itself in blood or DNA. Who knows, I may live again as an entirely different species.”

“Like a holy cow in India?” *Damn, insert foot.* “That was crass, I’m sorry.”

Jerry laughed. “That’s okay. Who knows?”

Sally motioned to her companion. “Mike come on over. He’s not down in the dumps at all.”

Mike approached them. “Hi, guys. Listen, Jerry, I’m sorry about your kin passing.”

Jerry extended his hand to the big man in greeting. “I was just telling Sally, I’m glad I had time with my cousin while she was well.”

“It’s good you can take that attitude, man. I know it’s not easy to come by.”

“Actually, I come by it naturally. Her presence was a loving gift. Now I’m on to something else, but her influence is still with me. It doesn’t die.”

“Oh man,” Mike said, “that brings back something that happened with me a

long time ago. I'd forgotten how to think that way."

Sally's brows furrowed in concern. "What happened, Mike?"

Mike shook his head. "When I was a Boy Scout I had this friend. He was kind of dorky and it embarrassed me to be with him when other kids were around. When it was just us, he was good company. Actually, I never understood it, because he wrote poetry and I was into western movies and adventure comics. Still we managed to do homework, practice knot tying, that sort of thing together. One summer at camp, he must have wanted to prove himself and gain acceptance. He took a boat out from the lake dock without permission. When the sky grew dark and rain began to fall, the camp leaders took a roll call. My friend was missing."

"That must have been traumatic, Mike," Sally said. "I'm so sorry."

"The look on our scoutmaster's face is burned in my memory. His face was ashen and long, his breaths came in short, nervous pants... For a long time, I thought if only I had spent more time around my friend at camp, he wouldn't have drowned. I became depressed."

"You weren't to blame," Jerry said.

"Just the same, whenever I thought about it, it was like hot sand in my chest pouring into my gut. Finally, my mom said she knew I loved him like a brother. She told me to take something of his and carry it until I felt that it was a part of me. I chose to take his poetry and actually read it. For the first time I paid attention and it was like an angel pulled the cloud of gloom away. Everything seemed to radiate new light. Most of his poetry was amateurish but I can still remember one part:

'I paddle away, arms grow tired. My canoe slips silently through.

Ahead I see the waters are dark. I discover my vision was true.

Above, the clouds shade depths below. And a voice comes from the deep.

Abide with me and immortal be, young lad with a mission to keep."

“My lord,” Sally said, “I think his poetry was prophetic. The lake was his last adventure in this world.”

Jerry placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m glad that acting on feelings for your friend was what healed your depression.”

Mike nodded. “I’ll say this: We all need to reflect more on what’s important. There’s no promotion or earthly honor that matches that connection.”

“And sharing it with others in such a caring way,” Sally said. “Thanks to both of you guys, I’m going to watch the remaining sunset and see it *again* for the very first time.”

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After he left the two on the balcony, Jerry exited the flat and went to his car. He mumbled to himself, a habit he developed from spending so much time in solitude. “Hope I gave a little lift to those two. But there’s hardly any way they could understand my mindset without living through what I have.”

While driving, his mind drifted back. Vera had always been his favorite cousin, and they had their best times late in the afternoon with sun going down.

Often they sat on his mother’s porch. She waved toward the horizon. “Clouds beautify the sun’s rays,” she had said. “Mysterious purples, fiery pinks, surrounded by gold. How can anything people create match that?”

“I don’t believe it can,” he said. “And it’s magnified to me because you are here so we can enjoy it together.”

“You’ll always remember me at sunsets, huh?” she asked, smiling and punching him in the ribs.

They had grown closer in the following years as all other family members passed away. Neither Jerry nor Vera married or had children. He felt some momentous purpose awaited him and required him to be unattached. Vera was

highly independent and didn't want to be tied down. It was eight years ago when Vera told him she was moving to Alaska and would spend her inheritance to become a bush pilot. The task wasn't quick. First, she had to qualify as a commercial pilot and then get training for the bush. It took her six years. Finally, her appeals for him to move north had an effect. He would visit and get a sense of her lifestyle.

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Vera had been delivering in the bush for a year when he arrived. Her lithe shape was the same, but her black hair was cropped shorter. Jerry was glad to see excitement still showed in her brown eyes.

“Fly with you?” he asked. “From where to where? Do they allow that?”

“Sure, I've already signed you up. Just need to put your signature on a form. I have a delivery run from Juneau to a rural area near Anchorage.”

After consulting weather forecasts, Vera told Jerry that threatening weather was moving in, but she had time for her Piper Super Club to complete the mission first. She also mentioned having considered equipping the undercarriage with skis to facilitate landing, but there was no time. Her destination was not thick with snow anyhow.

With some trepidation, Jerry strapped himself in the narrow passenger seat. As they gained altitude, he finally relaxed. He was thrilled by his cousin's expertise until her radio announced an unexpected advance of the weather moving in from the west. To avoid contact with the front, Vera angled to the northeast, hoping to fly north of the turbulence and back westward later. Snowcapped mountains appeared below, beautiful and yet perilous. Winds at this altitude were carrying them too far eastward, so Vera descended above the mountains, barely high enough to avoid treacherous currents over their peaks. Clouds and mist

thickened and a blanket of fog began obscuring the mountain terrain. She was forced to rely almost solely on instrumentation.

A burst of adrenalin hit Jerry when a clearing patch of fog revealed a mountain peak directly in front, closing fast upon them. The response of a rapid upward pitch and change of wind direction added drag to the plane and they began losing altitude. Vera frantically looked for anything resembling a landing site. Whiteness was all Jerry remembered until a powerful jolt knocked him senseless.

It seemed that eons passed before he heard her voice.

She was looking down at him, a gash on her cheek oozing slowly under a makeshift bandage. “Jerry, I’ve put a splint on your leg. It may be broken because of how it was trapped in some wreckage. And it was bleeding.”

“Vera?... Oh my god, how long has it been?”

“Don’t know. Maybe a day. We’re in trouble. Radio’s wrecked and we were off course so rescue’s not likely to find us. I checked our cargo and saw a propane tank and grill, as well as a tent for hunters and campers. At least we can set up camp. Problem is, no easy game up here, not that we could kill it even if it were. There’re only a few tins of food from the cargo hold.”

Vera set up the tent and grill because Jerry’s mobility was difficult. Several days passed and hunger plagued them. There was a pistol on board the wreckage, but looking about, there seemed nothing to hunt. Maybe in the lower elevations, but treacherous terrain, deep gullies, snow, and ice confronted them. When the tins were gone, they considered an arduous hike to lower areas, but Vera became ill and rapidly lost strength. It was then that Jerry heard what terrified him.

After a long rattling cough, she said, “You know what our only option for food is. The one of us that leaves the body first offers our remains to the other. That may be enough to hold out for rescue or finding the way out.”

He felt a sick, heavy sensation pass through his chest down to his abdomen. “I could never do that. Why do you think I—”

“You can. I would, if you were to go first. You’d become a part of me. Primitives used to eat organs of others they thought would bring them the character and strength of those persons.”

“How’re you able to think this way?”

“I wasn’t trying to be a bush pilot the whole time after I moved from the South. I was once on a safari that went badly awry. A maniac took control and put everyone’s life in danger. People without proper weapons and wild beasts attacking are deeply affecting. You learn to think in a way you never could before.” She coughed again and, at length, continued. “Some hunters up here kill game and yet, hands covered with blood, they have the highest reverence for the animal’s spirit. Necessity changes you.”

“I’m going to get you well.” He looked away and then back. “If I go first, you’re welcome. Better than rotting in the ground, or filling some scavenger’s belly. But we’re going to make it out of this together.”

She raised a finger. “One more thing. Take unused remains and bury them. Tell no one. Just between us, okay?”

Days went by while Vera grew worse and finally succumbed. Jerry’s concern for her condition, his painful, encumbered search for food, and the moral stigma before him were exhausting. There was no energy left for grief. Starvation muddled his head. A change of brain chemistry seemed to justify the animalistic. Still, where possible, he looked away from his gruesome task of preparing a store of flesh for the grill.

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Jerry drove directly from the party to his house. He entered the living room, still thinking of the ordeal they suffered in the Canadian mountains. His rescue

came two months later when a rare flight spotted the wreckage and tent. He told rescuers the pilot had gone looking for help, since he was unable to walk just after the accident. That was certainly true, but rescuers were the ones who surmised she wandered off too far and became a frozen corpse hidden underneath layers of snow.

He sat on the living room sofa and sighed. A photo of Vera was on the end table, and he picked it up, bringing it close. “True, it’s just between us,” he said, “yet it pokes and jabs me for expression. I’d like to tell the world, but it would only spark sensationalism and judgment, not understanding.”

He sensed her voice. *“No need, you only have a duty to find that purpose you once felt was your destiny.”*

“That’s a problem. What purpose justifies living after what I had to do? It presses on me every day until evening. It’s like a force driving me to get beyond where I am.”

*“And you’re doing just that. You changed awareness of what’s important for those two at that party. Life’s real rewards are in those moments.”*

“Then I’ll endure the problem...and, once again, let it burn away while we watch the sunset together.”

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