

Prologue

A strange, young man I met a long time ago, who called himself Lars (even though his real name was Donald), told me that he was a Viking who also happened to be a Vampire. Of course, he was neither. He was a troubled twenty-five year old who had long hair and wore Norse jewelry and Viking t-shirts. His mother died along with others in a UFO cult and his father beat him religiously until he ran away at thirteen. The reason why I'm starting with this man's story has nothing to do with what I want to tell, however – it illustrates the fact that we are all broken and we all deal with our histories in different ways.

This book is a story of stories, with the main thread being the story of a man who fell in love with a woman's handwriting. Is that possible? Can you actually feel passion for the written word or someone's penmanship? I'm sure a lot of people would admit to some kind of fascination for beautiful handwriting and the written word, at some stage in their lives. Of course, there can be no consummation or proper relationship. That would be absurd. Stuff and nonsense.

If you'd said that to this man, when he was in the grip of obsession for this woman's handwriting, he would've laughed and called you insane. He would've told you that you had no soul and couldn't be trusted with such beauty. Which is so ironic, to me, at least – as the handwriting belongs to Sondra - the woman who is now my wife. I love everything about her and everything that flows from her. Even her breath is sacred to me.

Having come full circle, I can see why and how this man fell for the writing on the mysterious note he received when he first came to Willow Lake. It makes perfect sense, taking into consideration the man he was and what he was going through. I can see that now, but back then I was in a different head-space. So was he.

His name was Liam. I met him on the train that took us both to Willow Lake that summer, so long ago. We sat opposite each other for three hours before we started talking. We did the usual things that men do when forced to face each other, like reading newspapers or books, nodding off to sleep, keeping our sunglasses on and staring out of the window with our earphones in. When we were only forty-five minutes away from our final destination, our eyes locked and I decided to smile, seeing as I'm not a complete bastard.

He had a medium build and was a cross between a hipster and a jock – sans confidence. He had short, curly, black hair and possessed a perpetual smear of stubble on his boyish face. His eyes were large, brown and soulful and his lips were full – almost like a pouty girl. I wagered that he probably kept the stubble to detract from his feminine attributes.

When he spoke, his voice was short and sharp. It wasn't entirely concise, as he usually needed to explain further, due to his social awkwardness and inability to communicate cleanly. He always seemed to be put upon when engaged. His eyes would dart around nervously and he'd bite his lip - often while he tried to think of a suitable response. Most of the time though, he was jovial and polite, as much as he was anxious and complicated.

The Willow Lake Group
By Kelly Proudfoot (Copyright 2016)

He wore the typical jeans, sneakers and t-shirts or sweaters of young intellectuals, in muted tones with mostly grays, blues and browns. He was wearing this uniform of ambiguity when I met him, along with a light grey jacket. He returned a tight smile and looked down at his fingers, like there was something of great importance waiting to spring from them. I decided to break the ice, as his uncomfortable energy had frayed my own nerves during the silent trip.

“Willow Lake?” I asked.

He shifted nervously in his seat and looked back up at me in barely restrained horror.

“Pardon?” He whispered with wide eyes.

I smiled and lowered my voice, doing my best not to startle him any further.

“I was just asking, are you going to Willow Lake?”

He smiled again – obviously relieved – although I can’t think for the life of me what he’d thought I’d said.

“Yes, sorry – Willow Lake.”

“Me too.”

Silence for a moment, while he gave me an earnest look that seemed to say, “Please, no more talking.”

I couldn’t help myself. “Work or pleasure?”

“Um, I suppose – pleasure?” He was asking me like he thought I was playing a game.

“Sight-seeing?” I offered.

“Well, not really. Um, maybe a little...” He trailed off and was distracted by the bridge we were speeding through.

In the darkness I could hear his panicked breathing. I wanted so much just to slap him on the back and say, “It’s okay buddy. Just two grown men having a chat!” I tried a different tack, thinking that talking about myself might warm him up a bit.

“I hear it’s a nice, sleepy town. I’m a carpenter and I have a job waiting there. Thought I might just calm down and take it easy in a quaint little place, out of the way. You know – far from the noise of the city. I might even do some fishing.”

He stared at me and nodded with a wavering smile on his face.

“Sounds good.” This was all he could muster.

“Apparently there’s some good trout fishing there, and it’s not so far from the bay. You also have the forest and some historical points of interest.”

“Oh, okay. Awesome.”

Awesome. What an overused word. Nothing I had mentioned was particularly awesome. He should’ve stuck with, “Sounds good.”

“So, what do you do for a living?” Typical question for men when they first meet.

“Business Analyst.”

He spat it out like premature ejaculation. He seemed immediately embarrassed with his curt response, so he started meandering and fidgeting. It was cringe-worthy.

“Well, that’s what I usually do. I was working for an education program. They were contracted by the, um – Government – but I was a contractor myself. I was only there for a year and before that, well – I did the same thing, but different companies. Kind of freelancing, but you know – contract work - although I write too. Well – I try, heh heh.”

I smiled and decided to let him off the hook. I was older and larger – not fat mind you. I’ve always prided myself in being muscular and have often been told how tall, dark and handsome I am, not that I want you to think I’m short-stroking here! Just the facts.

“Writing, hey that’s great. What do you write, poetry or something?”

He beamed for the first time and sat up straight.

“Well, yeah – poetry. I like Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Keats, although – I’m nowhere near their caliber. I wish!”

He laughed nervously and started playing with his short curls absent mindedly.

“Ah, so you like the Romantics? How about Rilke, or would he be too mystical for you?”

“Oh, no. I love Rilke. I love anything mystical, actually.”

This was much better. He stopped fidgeting and we began a normal conversation. I discovered that he had a deep love for art and literature. He was taking a sabbatical – or as he called it – a hiatus. Hiatus for a twenty-seven year old! Maybe it was my age but I wondered to myself, “What could this nervous rabbit have achieved that requires a hiatus?” He probably needed a hiatus from himself.

What intrigued me the most was his confession of having recently broken up with his first love. They had been childhood sweethearts and were even engaged, before she broke it off at the last minute. The morning of their wedding day, to be precise. It would’ve been easy for me to have thought of her as a nasty bitch. Surely she would have known that something was wrong before the actual day of her wedding? Still, there’s always two sides to a story, so I showed empathy and shook my head sadly.

The Willow Lake Group
By Kelly Proudfoot (Copyright 2016)

“So, I’m taking the last of my savings and spending the next six months at Willow Lake, to see how the writing thing pans out. I don’t know what I’m going to do after that. Probably go back and find another job. I don’t know. We’ll see.”

I smiled and then saw that the train was pulling into Willow Lake station. I was happy with myself for not spilling too many beans about my checkered past, not that I ever had problems with keeping my mouth shut. Certain things for certain people. I was never a terribly bad man. It wasn’t like I was running away from my past. Just taking a sabbatical, or hiatus – if you will.

When we got off the train we said our goodbyes. Liam told me that he would be staying at the Stockton’s Bed and Breakfast and hoped that we would meet again.

I told him, “Sure. Good luck with the writing.”

I hadn’t bothered to tell him where I was staying, not that it mattered. I just didn’t want to spend too much time with a cat on a hot tin roof. Jangles your nerves. So, I waved goodbye and headed over to the Willow Lake hotel, where a neat, self-contained room waited for me. I assumed that I would never see Liam again.

Chapter One – A Mysterious Note

Now, I'm telling you this tale straight from the horse's mouth, as it were. Of course, I will embellish it here and there and fill in the gaps for you, but you'll get the full story - from go to whoa. That's because, after it had all transpired and the dust was cleared, it was just him and me. He broke down and told me everything in minute detail, but only because I had him cornered. More of that later. For now, let's begin at the obvious place.

Like I said earlier, Liam left the train station and settled in at Stockton's Bed and Breakfast, which backs onto Willow Lake – the actual lake. Let me set the scene for you here. Indulge me.

The mist over Willow Lake hung low, as though frozen in time, in a quiet corner of an almost forgotten, New England town. The breeze was stubbornly still - daring not to disturb the foliage. It was the beginning of autumn, with the heat of a fading summer doing its best to hold on. A lone swan drifted along the banks - the only creature stirring and the only thing moving on the surface of the silent lake. It bobbed its head every now and then, like a queen nodding to the invisible members of her court.

The golden haze of the sun crept over the tops of the willow trees that dipped their long branches into the tranquil water. Slowly and shyly, the yellow orb emerged - like a hesitant child peeking over a table to see who's there. As if animated by the warming rays of the sun, several birds began their morning song, while leaves began rustling with the slowly awakening breeze - begrudging and petulant as it started weaving and wafting.

The swan continued doing its rounds, checking for signs of life and sweet grasses to nibble. A distant crowing from a farm further north jolted the morning air and encouraged the swan to ruffle its feathers with a grunt and a whistle. As Willow Lake came to life, so too did Liam Strindberg, after another night of fitful slumber.

It had been only three weeks since his fiancé left him, so his wounds were still gaping. Nonetheless, he was slightly happier now, in a new town where no one knew him, apart from that nosey carpenter he'd met on the train. He lay on his back in the cozy bed and stared at the ceiling, watching the shadows as he wondered what Liana (his fiancé) was doing. Soon, the tears came. He hated himself for crying. He heaved himself out of bed and stomped to the bathroom in a quiet rage. Stopping at the mirror, he gazed into his own sorrowful eyes and winced in disgust.

He then pissed into the ultra-white toilet, making sure not to hit the sides, so he could maximize the noise. He laughed triumphantly at the splattering sound. It was a sound that Liana detested. She'd made him aim for a ping-pong ball, which she'd placed in their own toilet, after her requests for him to hit the sides had fallen on deaf ears. He realized that he was being childish, but he needed something to cut the oppressive pain in his chest.

After he was done, he started dropping the seat, then stopped before putting it back up. Another small, childish triumph. Back at the sink, he didn't dare to look at himself, even though he was grinning at his own shenanigans. He was then startled by a metallic sound at the door.

The Willow Lake Group
By Kelly Proudfoot (Copyright 2016)

When he went to look, he saw a handful of letters and junk mail on the floor. This puzzled him, as he was staying in a Bed and Breakfast and had only just arrived. He went over and picked up the stack, fingering through and shaking his head. There was a flyer for the Swan Hill Community School. They were having a fundraiser to raise money for a trip to the Guggenheim Museum. He tossed it into the trash, along with the coupons for Torliano's Steak and Shake, a furniture brochure and a local newspaper. Thinking twice, he plucked the newspaper out and threw it on the side table, then placed the letters on top.

He turned to go back into the bathroom when one of the letters grabbed his attention. It was second from the top, peering out just enough for him to see the logo. It consisted of a small, red book with a willow tree on the cover. He pulled the envelope out and turned it over in his hand. The handwriting struck him like a lightning bolt. It wasn't recognition or even admiration for lovely penmanship. If asked at the time, he wouldn't have been able to articulate it.

It was as though the script spoke to him on a metaphysical level – almost like magic. He laughed at himself for being so transfixed with the neat, yet wildly creative strokes. The i's were dotted with half-moons and the curves of the letters were slinking across the page effortlessly. There was something sensual about the writing – about the way the words seemed to rise up and out of the paper – yet stayed so much a part of the swirling, twining hand.

It was addressed to a woman named "Elizabeth Bouchamp". He studied the back of the envelope and saw that it had come from the Willow Lake Bookstore. It was then that he realized he was not breathing. He laughed at himself, tossed the envelope back on the stack and went to have a shower. While he lathered and scrubbed, the handwriting wove itself back into his consciousness.

He thought, "Who writes like that anymore? Has anyone ever written like that before? I haven't seen anything quite like it. Who wrote it? Probably some old hag!"

Whoever it was - he eventually decided - had to be at the very least - a fascinating person. Someone he'd want to meet, surely? Those swirling, majestic words had already cast a spell over him. The handwriting made him think of deep forests and magical kingdoms. He laughed at himself again, yet he couldn't stop from going back to the stack of mail, still dripping from the shower. After carefully drying his hands, he picked it back up and felt his heart skip a beat when he saw the script.

Then he had a devilish thought. Where was this Elizabeth Bouchamp? She wasn't there, otherwise he wouldn't have secured the room. He checked the address and it was correct, down to the room number. What could it hurt if he opened it? Even though it was against the law, he was alone in his room and no one would ever find out. With a sneaky smile he carefully opened the envelope and eased out the notecard.

On the front was an idyllic scene of Willow Lake, with weeping willows along the banks and a lone swan drifting on the surface. It was all white and silver with a touch of black and red here and there to accentuate things like the swan's bill, the trees and the pergola to the left.

The Willow Lake Group
By Kelly Proudfoot (Copyright 2016)

In the top, right-hand corner was the logo again. "Willow Lake Bookstore" was embossed along the bottom of the card. He flipped it open.

He gasped when he saw the beautiful note, in that delicious script that had already taken a place in his fractured heart. He could feel the pieces being threaded back together with the lovely handwriting. It read:

"Dear Elizabeth, we miss you! Just to say, hurry back into the fold and bring your love and light. There's much to share, Mon'Amie. Love, all your friends at the Willow Lake Group."

He read the note over and over, carefully saying the words out loud and even stopping to trace his right index finger over the text. He was dumbfounded with how taken in he was. It was at this point that he could have easily said, "I have crossed over into a new dimension. This note delineates my life before and after. Now I am in the world of the mysterious note with the mysterious handwriting."

He slowly and carefully stuffed the notecard back into the envelope and took it to the side table. He marveled at how ridiculous it was to even think of putting it with the other mail – or worse – with the flyers in the trash. He turned and took it to his suitcase. He slid it into a zipped compartment but thought better of it and took it back out, tapping the corner of the envelope on his chin as his eyes searched the room for a more suitable hiding place. Nothing seemed good enough.

Even though he felt foolish, he finally hid it in his jacket pocket and went to get dressed for breakfast. His head was obese with the secret of the mysterious note. It was all-encompassing. After getting dressed, he draped the jacket over his arm like he was escorting a lovely lady to dine. He couldn't stop smiling at the absurdity of his actions, but kept it up for the sake of the jewel he had hidden in his jacket pocket.

Once in the dining room, he sat down and placed the folded jacket on the seat next to him. There was no one else around but he could smell the coffee and bacon – his two favorite food groups. Just then, the kitchen door swung open and an older, bustling woman came out to greet him. It was Mrs Stockton, the proprietor.

"I thought I heard someone!" She smiled with full cheeks and wiped her hands on her dainty apron.

"I'm not too early, am I?" He shrunk back like a mouse, not wanting to be a bother to anyone.

"No – heavens, no. Most of the farming folk have been up for hours in these parts, Sweetie. Can I get you some coffee to start?"

"Yes, please. If that's okay. Black?"

"Of course. Back in a jiffy."

He decided that he liked her homeliness and ample, motherly appearance. Having grown up without his mother present, he had always yearned for a sweet, gentle lady to give him the love he had always lacked.

The Willow Lake Group
By Kelly Proudfoot (Copyright 2016)

That's why he was reeling so hard from the breakup, even though Liana had been anything but loving.

He started to reach for the jacket to try and sneak a glimpse of the handwriting, but was disrupted by the door swinging open again. Mrs Stockton brought a large mug of steaming coffee and gently placed it in front of him as she patted his shoulder with her plump hand.

"Sugar, sugar?" She laughed loudly at her own joke and slapped him on the back.

"Ha ha. Yes please."

He hated how nervous he was around others, no matter who they were.

"Okay – and a full breakfast, Sweetie?"

"Oh, just scrambled eggs and toast, if it's not too much trouble." He didn't want to be thought of as a glutton.

"You're so polite. Of course. It's no trouble at all, but you must have some bacon - surely?"

He nodded shyly. "Sure, I'd like some bacon."

"You're a growing boy. It'll give you more whiskers!" She laughed and passed him the sugar bowl.

Once he was sure she was busy in the kitchen, he furtively pulled out the envelope and stared at the writing on the front. His heart beat like it had just received a shot of espresso. He hadn't even sipped his coffee yet. For quite a while, he drifted into a dream-like state as he stared and fingered the envelope. When he heard Mrs Stockton announce that she was coming, "Ready or not!" he shoved it back into the pocket and started spooning sugar into his mug.

All he could think about was getting to the Willow Lake Bookstore.