

## A Story

*“If you are not good enough before the gold, you are not good enough with it either.”*

From the film, “Cool Runnings”

### I

It was a cold, rainy Friday night. The holidays were upon us and somehow, you convinced me to go and see the Falls City Beavers and Schulenberg Shorthorns play a high school football game. At halftime, the Beaver marching band took the field wearing silver miners’ helmets, complete with three different colored lights shining from the top. The band members – all twenty of them – maneuvered those lights, synchronized to the glorious music of the season, to form a slightly imperfect Christmas tree near the fifty-yard line. To this day, it ranks as the greatest halftime show I have ever seen.

The handwritten letter arrived yesterday in a white envelope, postmarked Houston. There was no return address, but his name – Thomas Jefferson Welder – was printed neatly across the front. He held the pages of her stationery in his lap and rocked the porch swing gently back and forth. A late afternoon sun beat down from a high, blue Texas sky, and a male cardinal explored the grass in the shadow of a large oak tree nearby. Tom had begun to read the passages for a third time when his gaze lifted and sailed onto the summer wind; many days had passed since that night.

### II

We returned to my apartment that night and made love until early morning, she wrote. Afterward, I watched you sleep while your head rested across my stomach, your hand in mine; I remember being overwhelmed by the stillness, by the peace I felt inside. We were exhausted and full of one another, but from that moment forward I recognized

that I would love you for the remainder of my life. A couple of weeks later, we traveled to your parent's home for the holiday celebration.

"Alexandra and I will clean up the kitchen tonight," Tom said, following dinner.

"Does your family always serve hot tamales and flour tortillas on Christmas Eve?" she asked. "They were really good – I've just never had them at this time of the year before."

"Yeah, it's a tradition that started some time ago, thanks to the LaChuga family," he said.

"Who?" asked Alex.

Rudolfo and Maria LaChuga lived on a farm about an hour south of town; they did not own the several sections of land they worked; they were tenant farmers and had lived there and plowed the fields there since the day they were married, more than fifty years ago.

Seven children had been raised in the two-bedroom frame house. It had one bathroom, a rusty tin roof, and speckled linoleum floors that slanted ever so slightly. The kids were gone now; all worked in either San Antonio or Houston, and had families of their own. But Rudolfo and Maria, now in their seventies, still made their living from the land; together they raised hay, grain, corn, pecans, turkeys and hogs, and Maria tended to the chickens and garden, selling the eggs and vegetables in town.

"Dad met them more than ten years ago, when he was scouting for a place to train his bird dogs (German pointers) to hunt quail," Tom said, "and from that time forward he and I have had a standing invitation for lunch on the Saturday prior to Christmas Day."

Tom told Alex that Maria's table that day was one any chef in American could defend, one filled with carne asada, fresh pinto beans, tomatoes, onions and peppers, tamales, and flour tortillas made one-by-one on the top of her two-burner gas stove. He told her how he and his father brought groceries when they visited and always took a newspaper for Maria. He told her how Maria loved politics and listened to everything she could on the radio and television. He told her that when they left, at least five dozen freshly made tamales traveled home with them.

"Being in their company centers me," Tom said. "They work hard and barely make ends meet each month, but in my eyes and I think in theirs also – they are wealthy people."

We laughed and spoke of many things that night while we washed, dried and stacked the dishes, Alex wrote in the letter. Small things burn bright sometimes. Later, you visited me in the guest bedroom. I was content and did not want the feeling to ever end. We were twenty years old.

### III

Tom, I hope these thoughts find you happy and wise; they arrive out of nowhere and perhaps that is unfair, but I needed to speak with you and figured this note was the best way. Please forgive me for being so cowardly. Actually, I know few details of your life (I'm not sure I wanted to know too much), except that you never married and have worked in some interesting places; however, I would like to tell you some things about mine.

First off, let me say this to you – I miss, more than you will ever know, the times we shared together. There is not a day that goes by in which I do not consider what might

have been between us if I had not decided to marry Jeffrey rather than to take my chances with you. He was safe and dependable, and you were the exact opposite – wild, excited by life and its pending adventures, confident of your place in the world, and certainly not willing to settle down any time soon. That said, you are still the sweetest man I’ve known in my lifetime, and I have understood for sometime that I made the wrong choice. It was the biggest mistake of my life, and sometimes I have this stabbing pain in my heart and a frustrated, unfathomable loneliness because of it.

“Jeffrey has asked me to marry him,” Alex said, one night on her apartment balcony.

“What are you going to do?” Tom asked.

“What should I do?”

“I can’t answer that,” he said.

“I know,” she said.

Tom looked away from the page. He thought it odd how some memories – even those long in the tooth – cling to a person for a lifetime; some as permanent and fresh as the natural features of the landscape. Who completely understands what triggers their appearance or keeps them alive in us? They may result from experiences, missed opportunities or choices made, but they often contribute to the scale on which we weigh ourselves. Second bites from the apple are rare, and maybe they ought to be. The boy, Sellers Turner, was such a memory.

Sellers Turner was small for his age when Tom first met him in the ninth grade. He transferred into school that year from some other small town, had strawberry-blond hair cut in a crew-cut style, and stood no more than five-feet-two inches tall. But despite his size, what a track athlete he was. He came by it naturally; his older twin brothers had

been All-American sprint champions at TCU. People said that you could watch them train together and at certain angles, it looked as if one man was running rather than two, their strides so perfectly matched.

Sellers Turner taught Tom about the joy of running and letting go that year; he also introduced him to a new athletic events, the low hurdles. With no official track in town, Sellers Turner stationed the wooden barriers at the appropriate distances on the grass of the football field. There he showed Tom the proper techniques of hurdling: how to count the steps between the hurdles, which leg to extend in order to skim smoothly over them, and why it was important to get the lead foot on the ground quickly as possible before moving towards the next one. There too, he taught Tom about fearlessness and passion.

For the longest stretch of time Tom was more tentative than aggressive in his approach to hurdling; he worried more about fouling up rather than trusting his athletic skill that had been built through concentrated practice. One day, for no particular reason, Tom finally threw caution aside and ran with his heart rather than his mind. It was his fastest time of the season and from then on out, his expectation rose and his times declined steadily. He had suddenly cleared a different hurdle, a more pronounced one than the tangible wooden barriers that stood before him on the track. Thanks to Sellers Turner's encouragement Tom carried those lessons with him for a lifetime. He learned too, they were challenging to duplicate.

In 1968, Sellers Turner died in Vietnam. He was nineteen years old. A year later, when the president removed all student deferments, Tom stood for the draft. He watched along with friends and many other Americans as a man pulled Ping-Pong balls out of a hopper on national television, one by one. Each ball had a date printed on it. The ball with

Tom's birthday ranked three-hundred and twenty-one, well down the list to even take a physical for military service. Things could have turned out differently.

#### IV

I hope that you do not interpret my words as pathetic or believe that I am casting for sympathy, because that is not my intention, she wrote. Life has treated me well. Jeffery has been a fine husband and father, and loved me despite the fact that I have never granted him complete access to my heart and soul. I have always wondered if he knows that, but deep down he must. We have two boys – Chase and Logan – attending university, and one daughter, Kathleen, who lives in Dallas. She is married and has a two-year-old daughter named Lily Alison. Can you believe I am a grandmother?

I have headed a branch of our library for more than fifteen years, and recently placed the first books on Lily's shelves. They are the Beatrix Potter story collection that you sent to Kathleen when she was born. If you recall, each is about one-third the size of a regular book and inside the first volume you wrote,

*“I hope reading becomes important to your child;*

*I know it has made a difference for me.*

*Beatrix Potter must have thought that too when she wrote and illustrated these tiny books.*

*Small books for small hands, right?”*

I hope my granddaughter builds a house of books; it was something you and I always talked about doing.

My mother is ill and I am home taking care of her. You never did meet her in person, but you are famous for calling her at the bank every so often, asking where I lived and

how I was doing. She knew about us and like most mothers, more about the truth of my heartbeat than I care to admit.

Tonight while I write to you from her bedside, I confront my own mortality. We all do eventually I guess. There is a sense of loss in seeing her spiral downward and wither away. She gave birth to me and nurtured me; I realize now, with deep sadness, that she will never be able to do that in the same way again. Occasionally, I wipe the fever from her forehead; I hold her hand as she struggles for each breath. I am here because I must be.

To ease these moments I think of you. I have fantasies of our life together, a secret that is mine and mine alone. I am like the day; one-half light, the other filled with darkness. Most see one side – the light – and no one is allowed to view the other. Do you mind? Do you suppose we all share this capacity? The idea of being with you in this way is a comfort, but the chaos it creates inside of me is growing more intolerable.

Remember that night on the River Walk in San Antonio? We had danced around one another for months, becoming good friends and flirting non-stop.

“The river is so beautiful at night,” said Alex, taking his hand.

“Nothing compares to you,” Tom said, turning to face her, and then kissing her.

“What took you so long?” she asked.

I remember the moment you kissed me; the excitement I felt when you unbuttoned my blouse and touched my breasts. I close my eyes now and when I think I cannot stand it, I take it one step further. I sense your smell, your touch, and how you held my head in your hand and searched my face while making love to me that first time, and the many times afterwards. As you know the heat and desire of those moments were magnificent,

but I miss the conversations – the times you encouraged me to chase my wildest dreams. You were different than anyone I had ever met; traveling at 140 mph when fifty was my comfort zone. Besides, you were beautiful to boot.

So there is a deeply rooted sense of loss - of days missed and ones that have passed, she wrote. Ones that might have been different had I not panicked and settled for less. I know I hurt you and remember that you called from your office in Washington D.C. a few times.

“Hello, this is Alexandra,” she said, answering the phone one afternoon at work.

“Alex, its Tom – can you talk for a minute?”

“Sure,” she said. “Where are you?”

“I’m in Washington D.C., inside the Library of Congress reading room. Talk about a house of books,” he said.

God, if you only knew what was traveling through me during those times. Or how many days I almost left everything behind. But you might have thought less of me - I know I would have - if I had acted so recklessly. I have made love to you a thousand times since you left – you should know that.

## V

What is wrong with me, Tom? I have this secret love for you, this longing that melts my insides, but today as I write about them, my hands tremble. Confession, they say is good for the soul, but how many dare to expose themselves, to put their hearts above their minds and on trial before another?

I like that you are the one who knows me best, I like that we were close friends, something I value as I get older. I remember our bathtub side chats, and of reading aloud

to one another. The leather-bound volume of Shakespeare sits on my desk at home. Just last week I read the words of Tennyson written by you inside:

*Tho' much is taken, much abides;  
And tho'  
We are not now what in old days  
Moved earth and heaven; that  
Which we are, we are;  
To strive, to seek, to find,  
And not to yield.*

There have been times when I have been lost. I do not know if this is one of them since I had the courage to write and let you know you continue to live in my heart. My desire for you cannot be underestimated or succumbed to – that is the dilemma. Am I immoral, unethical for thinking of you, but on the flip side good and decent for not acting upon my desires? Is this letter to you as good as meeting you outside my marriage, of making love to you, having my way with you and you with me? Our bodies are surely not as lean and strong as they once were, but my heart is larger, and my capacity to love is greater too. If you showed up at my home today (and please do not), would I have the strength to turn you away? I write about you and have for years in pocket-size diaries I keep in shoeboxes, hidden in my closet. In them I write poetry, fiction and thoughts about life, including a life with you. In some of the entries, I left Jeffery or made him go away in some way or another. A few years ago, my husband stumbled across them.

“Alexandra, I accidentally found these boxes today,” he said, sitting in the chair when I arrived home from work. The boxes were unopened, just stacked in the middle of the room.

“What are they?” he asked.

“They are my journals, I have been writing in them for years,” she said.

“Can I read them?” he asked.

“I don’t believe that is a good idea,” she said.

It was terribly unfair of me, I know that, she wrote. So I confess to you after all these years I love you. I do. There it is, all out there for you to see. You may be flattered (I hope so) and in a saner moment, pleased that things turned out the way they have. I miss you Tom, with all my heart. I confess...Alex Brown.

## VI

Before he slid the final page of the letter back where it belonged and let the stack settle in his lap, he pulled the sheet closer to his face in order to sense her fragrance. It was there. He glanced at the cardinal and wondered if a bird could not fly, would he still believe in himself? On the backside of one of the pages, he began to write:

*Small and one of Nature’s delicate gifts  
The cardinal visits every day.  
Black mask against bright red coat,  
He wears a crest for a top hat and has a stout yellow bill.*

*From his own perch, the man  
Thinks of the constellation of events in his life,  
As he watches the bird and listens to its rich voice –  
What-cheer, cheer, cheer; then, sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet.*

*The cardinal has a history too.  
Named after the red robes of the Roman Catholic cardinals,  
He is the pride of St. Louis and Stanford University.  
And with grace and elegance, he serves as the state bird of seven states.*

*The man watches closely as the creature punches the blades of grass.  
And all the while avoids the mockingbird and jay nearby –  
He is a beautiful living thing,  
So much so the man’s blue eyes fill and move beyond the backyard fence  
Even though his legs will not carry him there.*

*Time has robbed him,  
His flesh and mind wither away toward only the echoes of wavering memories.  
The cardinal allows the man to remember and forget  
Because his heart knows things can never be the same again.*