

The Man on the Riverbank

“Who’s this a sketch of?” My sister, Erin, was absently nosing through the little room I call my studio. She came across the drawing carefully saved in my large portfolio where I keep my best and most favorite sketches.

“This isn’t even very good,” she commented as she examined it and flopped herself down on the large floor pillow.

No, I thought to myself, it’s perfect.

“He’s cute though, who is he? Ohhh, and I see it’s dated last September. I knew you and Zach were having problems last year even though you denied it. My sister-sense just knew that the perfect couple was in deep crap. Besides, you always looked so miserable, that was the giveaway. You had never looked like that and don’t now, I’m happy to say.” She gave me a deep, questioning look.

How could I tell her this story, we hadn’t spoken of it to many people since it happened and I feared reliving all those crazy emotions once more. She noticed my hesitation and could tell by the look on my face that this wasn’t a story I wanted to share with her but she pulled me down on the old rag rug next to her, with the portfolio in her lap and the young man staring at me from the sketch, prompted me to tell all. Her

expectation of a steamy affair would fade in comparison to the stark and scary truth. I hoped she would be able to accept the tale for what it was.

September 11th, the day was beautiful, a dog day summer morning. Warm, humid with winter still a distant thought in the clear blue sky. I helped Zach load the car in silence. Fifteen years of marriage and suddenly we were acting like strangers. Thoughts of divorce tainted the air between us, whether they were his thoughts or mine, I couldn't tell. Work, a teenager, money and every day life, all were factors in our steady decline. There were days when I didn't care if I ever saw him again and I hoped this wouldn't end up being one of those days.

Josh flew out of the house, dragging his wet suit on the ground, bits of leaves sticking to it as he tossed it in the back of the jeep on top of the tanks.

“Damn it Josh, that's not how we treat our gear.” Zach admonished him.

He gave his father a look he had been practicing for only the last 14 years. It spoke volumes in reflection of what our family had been going through lately.

Zach had planned a scuba trip to the Delaware River Gap train wreck and it included Josh much to Josh's displeasure. He preferred the company of his friends, video games and anything other than his dad and me. I decided to go along, not only to keep

the peace between overworked father and bitter, teenage son but hoping to re-discover some of the good times we used to experience before all the other stuff got in the way.

I ached for what used to be when we would spend the weekend diving, but how to get it back eluded me like a dream that tickles your memory then drifts back to its unreachable state before you could fully grasp what was happening. I felt like we, as a family, were fading away.

With an attitude only a 14 year old can wear, Josh threw on his earphones, turned up the music on his iPhone and flung himself into the backseat. Zach sighed with annoyance and angrily loaded up the rest of the gear.

“Why don’t I take my gear, it’s a shallow dive, no more than twenty feet. At least we could dive as a family.” I offered.

“No, Nina!” Shot out of Zach’s mouth before I had barely finished, “The cardiologist said no diving and he meant it.” Abruptly he turned to get in the front seat. “Little idiot, do you think I want to lose you?” I heard him mumble under his breath.

Heavy hearted and ticked off at Zach and Josh and the rest of the world, I climbed into the front seat and we drove for a silent two hours to the train wreck. How appropriate, I thought, a great analogy for my marriage and life – heading to a wreck.

Once we arrived, dragging our gear down the gravelly slope didn't help tempers as they flared with every twist of an ankle and slip of a shoe. It was a very rough, short downhill walk. My two guys suited up in their wetsuits while already wearing an armor of angry silence. I was mad at both of them for making my life so miserable.

Both stomped into the water without a good-bye glance to me and I hate to admit how happy I was to be alone for at least an hour without the constant barrage of tension that flowed steadily through our family whenever we were together.

Breathing in the warm air and smell of damp leaves, I settled down on my little lawn chair to sketch, with pastels, the peaceful river and the bluff on the other side. My troubles faded with each color and line I drew as I was drawn deeper into the scenery around me. So deep into the deep greens and dark river grays that when the voice behind me commented on what a lovely sketch I was doing I nearly fell out of the chair.

Surprised I hadn't heard anyone come through the woods with all its leaves and branches nor down the treacherous, gravelly slope I turned to see a young man standing behind me, the sun making him a dark silhouette as I shaded my eyes to see him. Probably in his early 20's, I would guess, by his scruffy and sparse beard. His stringy hair was tied back in a ponytail and a dirty old bandana was tied around his head. He was wearing shabby jeans and a flannel shirt over a t-shirt which could no longer be called white, more a lack-of-wash gray.

But none of these details unnerved me as much as the look in his eyes – he had run out of happiness, fear and all of the emotions we normally feel. He either ran out of them or was good at hiding them because his eyes – they were totally empty.

Unnerved, I continued to sketch to keep my composure, he plopped himself down on the tarp we had laid out to keep the scuba gear from getting full of dirt.

“My husband and son are out diving the train wreck.” I said more to let him know I wasn’t alone than to start a conversation but he seemed to want to talk and this gave him an opening

“Murky down there after the storm last night. Probably can’t see more than a few inches in front of you.” He commented while staring at the river.

“Do you dive? Were you out there already this morning?” That would explain the stringy hair. It’s just that he didn’t look like he was just diving and with his next sentence he confirmed my feeling.

“No, I don’t dive. I just always know what it’s like down there.” He replied as he started to roll up the sleeves of the flannel shirt exposing part of a tattoo which looked similar to one that Zach had.

Goosebumps ran up my arms as I thought, what does he mean, that he knows what it's like down there.

“Why aren't you diving with them?” He asked as he turned and looked at me with dead dark eyes.

I shivered at his glance and turned away as I answered, “I had some heart problems a few months ago and I've been officially beached.”

“You sound bitter.”

His cool voice seemed to penetrate right to my soul. Until he said that I never realized how bitter I was about the whole thing. Those three words stung my heart with a realization that I didn't want to admit to. I was just beginning to see the light through the hurricane of my emotions.

“I guess I am. I hadn't realized how much until you mentioned it just now. It changed our whole life, I can't dive anymore and we spent our vacations and weekends doing that as a family.” I was now whining. Bitter, now whiny, good grief, what will I discover about myself next.

“But you are with your family now, isn’t that what’s most important? You probably weren’t always in the water at the same time, were you?” He slipped off his flannel shirt as the morning heated up.

Staring at him, I held back the tears but realized this young man had put my life back into perspective. All of a sudden it felt like there was a shift in my world and planets were once again aligned. And, he was right, if I were diving on this trip, the moods of everyone would have been different. It had been me, not them. Zach was correct when he called me a little idiot – I was more than a little idiot that was for sure.

My hand was sketching away my tears as I concentrated on the drawing and mumbled foolishly, “You are so right.”

Feeling fragile I changed the subject and asked him about his tattoo, which as I thought, was the same one that Zach had.

“Were you in the 101st Airborne? My husband, Zach was too. Did you just return from the war?” I was rambling, something I do when I get emotional yet I realized I no longer felt uneasy around him.

He affirmed my questions with a shake of his head. But now I realized why the empty look in his eyes. When Zach returned from Viet Nam he had the same look.

Zack was my brother's best friend and when he returned from Nam I was still just an annoying, gawky 15 year old who wasn't worth any attention. He would sit in silence with me just wanting to be around someone when my brother wasn't home, looking for some normalcy in his life after all the grief he'd seen and caused. It took him a long five years of travel and volunteering before he could come to terms to what he had done and to finally notice me. Our most recent war was probably doing the same emotional damage that all wars cause to young people. Here, before me, was another victim.

Feeling a little more confident around him, I flipped to a fresh page in my sketchbook and started to draw his profile. Under his lack of hygiene I discovered a handsome young man.

"Been back awhile, can't seem to find any peace. Too many John Wayne movies made me want to be a hero but I never was. I saw too much pain and hurt too many..." He couldn't finish his sentence, choked by his own tears, which he wouldn't let fall.

Haltingly he continued, "Well let's just say I never could really appreciate anything here until I saw what was there."

Quietly I said to him, "You're a hero to me, to go over there and fight for our country and freedom, which makes you a big hero in everyone's eyes not just mine."

Some emotion seeped into those fathomless eyes, and suddenly he seemed like a hurt child more than a man. I leaned forward to touch his shoulder in understanding, but just before I could, the quiet morning was shattered by a high pitched wail, “Mom!”

Jumping up, I knocked over the chair and dropped my sketchbook. About 30 feet from shore my son was gasping for breath and yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Josh, relax and inflate your BC.” I calmly commanded him.

He put more air in his Buoyancy Compensator so he could stay afloat. Like a life vest, the BC kept him on the surface without struggle.

“Now tell me what’s the matter?” But my heart was palpitating and I knew that there was trouble. Josh had been diving since he was 12 and snorkeling since he was 6. He knew what to do in an emergency and I had never seen him react like this.

He was still panting from exhaustion or fear I wasn’t sure which, but he sputtered out, “I can’t find Dad.”

Looking at my watch, I gauged that Zach had at least 10 more minutes before he ran out of air assuming he was breathing like he normally did. He was wearing a small tank but he never used much air. He probably was searching for Josh down there and the rule was if you can’t find your buddy go to the surface and look for him there.

I told this to Josh but he was still in a panic.

Yelling across the water, “Mom, there was a tangled mess of fishing line down there by one of the train cars, my tank got caught in it and I couldn’t get out, it was everywhere and every time I cut it off more seemed to wrap around me and then I dropped my knife. Dad came up and got me untangled and he gave me the signal to surface. After I started, I realized Dad wasn’t with me. I went back and tried to find where he was but the water was so murky I couldn’t see anything and I was running out of air so I came up but Dad’s down there, Mom and he’s in trouble, I know it.” He stopped on a sob.

“Josh, swim into shore.”

“But, Mom...,” he started to plead.

“Now! No buts.” I yelled, “You know the rules for this dive, we wait a full hour from the time you entered the water before we start to panic.” But I was already panicking. Without another tank to search for him I could only snorkel and if it’s as murky as Josh says, I’ll never see him if he’s in trouble.

I turned to my forgotten companion to ask him to go for help but he was gone. Maybe being a soldier he had assessed the situation more quickly than I and had already gone for help. I could only pray that he did.

Sobbing, Josh struggled with his gear as he climbed up the slippery rocks on the riverbank. Collapsing onto the tarp, he tugged off his gear. I decided to check his air supply; maybe, just maybe there would be enough air if I had to search for Zach. But as I read the gauge, my hope faded, Josh had broken one of the main dive rules, never go below 500 PSI, and he had sucked his tank completely dry.

It was now five minutes past the hour and no Zach. My heart was beating erratically and I knew snorkeling would be near impossible. I silently pleaded with God, “I lied, God, I can’t live without Zach, I need him with me, I’ve been a fool. I know he’s been trying to protect me from my own faulty heart. I know it’s not his fault I can’t do all those things anymore and I blamed him and made he and Josh both miserable and scared. I promise I’ll do anything you want. Just, please, bring him back to me in one piece.”

Seeing Josh quietly mumble his own prayers, I gently took his snorkel and mask and headed towards the water just as Zach, gasping for air, exploded to the surface. Josh and I shouted and waved at him as he laboriously swam to the riverbank. I could see fishing line draped around his tank and arms. Good God, he had been trapped, I thought to myself. And silently thanked God for bringing him back.

As Josh and I helped him take off his gear, I could feel him shaking with exhaustion. Glancing at his pressure gauge, his tank was also dry.

When Zach's tank was off, Josh threw his arms around his Dad, in the first hug in months. Crying into his Dad's wetsuit, the two just held each other. Zach looked at me and pulled me into their hug. We stood there for several minutes in the fading morning and held on to what we had. I thought about what the young man said, I never appreciated what I had either and that was going to change.

Josh was the quickest to recover and hiked up to the car to get the cooler and some food. Zach righted my lawn chair and sat down. I sat down where the nameless young man had been and slipped my hand into Zach's. There are no words for some emotions that pass between two people who had experienced life together and we sat like that for a few minutes understanding exactly what the other was thinking but not wanting to talk just yet.

Bending down Zach picked up my sketchbook and flipped it over, dropping my hand, he just stared. "Who is this?" He quietly asked.

"I never got his name, he came and sat down here and was talking to me."

"He saved my life."

“What?” I was staring at Zach, “How?”

“After I cut Josh loose, I gave him the signal to ascend. I started after him but then, I started to get tangled up in all that fishing lines. Like a spider’s web, every turn took me deeper into the lines. Then I dropped my knife. Like Josh, I was trapped. I stayed pretty calm until I noticed my air going down to nothing. I kept trying to untangle myself but it kept getting worse. I was on the bottom and maneuvered myself so I could search the bottom with one hand, hoping to come across my knife or any sharp thing I could use. What I did come across was a bone, it was human, some sort of leg bone but it was human. That’s when your young man appeared out of the murk and handed me my knife. He must be one hell of a swimmer to be down that far without any equipment. I chopped myself loose and made a beeline to the surface. Maybe we’ll be able to find him and thank him.”

So he really is a hero. And, a Free Diver, that would explain how he knew how things were down there, I thought. I laughed at my previous paranormal thoughts.

“Thank you young man wherever you are.” I mumbled into the breeze.

Josh had returned with the ice chest and a couple, Pete and Hildy, who were getting ready to dive the wreck. He was explaining his adventure with the fishing line. While I was getting lunch together, the couple came over to talk to Zach and ask how he was. He was still holding the sketchbook, when Pete noticed it.

“Nice sketch of Ted you have there. Did you know him?”

I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck and goosebumps cover my arms again.

Zach shook his head, no and Pete needed no further urging.

“He had worked with my Dad before Nam but when he returned from that war he became a drifter. His Dad had died while he was away and the army never got him the message. One of those Army screw ups I’m sure but he had nothing when he came back, no other family, no close friends and no one respected those Vets, not like they do today. Living mostly in these woods, he lived off the land and my Dad and I would see him fishing sometimes right off this riverbank. He probably hadn’t been back more than two years when the train wreck happened and no one ever saw him again. They say his body is down there somewhere under one of the cars but no one has ever seen anything. There have been sightings and talk of strange things happening, but you know how people love a good ghost story. More than likely he took off and headed to some other part of the country. Today’s the anniversary of that wreck September 11, 1975.”

Zach and I looked at each other. No words again but we both knew that we had met Ted.

Pete and Hildy left deciding the visibility was too bad to dive and never asking how we came to have a sketch of Ted. Maybe they didn't want to know.

On our way home, like old times, we shared the story of Ted, all our different versions and discussed what we thought we should do. Josh was ecstatic to be part of such a adventure and was more than willing to help.

And, just like that, I had found my family again or maybe I should say, I had found myself again.

My sister, was speechless, unusual for her. Staring at the sketch she asked what we did.

“Never leave a man behind, that's the creed the soldiers in the 101st lived by, so Zach called up a few of his buddies, still in service, and with the help of some other divers and Josh, they were able to get the remains of Ted out from under the railroad car. His dog tags were wrapped around some bones so identification, when the Army was done, was no surprise, Theodore Ansel Tailor, or Ted for short. He had no other relatives that the Army could find so we had a full military funeral for him and buried him in Arlington Cemetery. His headstone just says, Theodore Ansel Tailor – Our Hero.”

My sister looked at me, a tear falling down her cheek and said, "I was wrong, what I said before about this picture not being good. It's just perfect."