

## *The River Keeps Healing*

Evelyn Larson

The creek murmurs mellifluously with the vocal crickets, perhaps sharing a secret it had heard somewhere upstream. The sun begins its steady descent behind the pine-covered South Dakota mountains, and the sky fades from forget-me-not blue to evanescent lavender as twilight hastily approaches. The mica and rose quartz that speckled the rich soil no longer glint under the rays of sunlight that had streamed through the rustling branches what seemed only moments before.

Vesa fixes her gaze ahead, across the brook, resting it on an aspen where the initial “B” had been etched into the bark. She had walked far enough that she could no longer discern the chatter of the crowd gathered in the weathered cabin nestled a little way up the hill. Her childhood home. Her Grandpa’s home. Or at least had been.

She inhales. The air is rich with the scent of memories. In the cool of the evening, the fragrance from the trees, the earth, and the distant campsites seems intensified and fresh. So different from the suffocating city air of Dallas, which simmers in the heat and makes a person crinkle their nose if they breathe too deeply. Vesa didn’t notice that anymore though. It isn’t until she is standing out here, enveloped by the mountains, that she realizes how clear the air could be.

Clear air. Clear head. Deep breath. One. Two. Grief is a funny thing. It comes so suddenly but lingers so long.

Vesa had gotten the phone call from her mom three days ago. Two words. Broken up with a muffled sob. Pain carved into each syllabus, like the letters on the tree upon which Vesa was transfixed.

*“Grandpa passed.”*

A lump forms in the back of Vesa’s throat at the memory of that crippling conversation. Her vision blurs, until silently a tear slips down her cheek, joining the water burbling at her feet. Deep breath.

One. Two. Grief. But it wasn't just that. No, Vesa had felt that before. The pure ache of the absence of what was once such a constant certainty. This feeling was different. There was something else mixed in with her emotion. Guilt. Regret. The feelings entwined themselves deep within Vesa's core. The lump that began in her throat sinks into her chest, the tendrils of its burn spreading through every part of her being. And Vesa knew why.

It wasn't from an unresolved fight. A bitter slamming door. Virulent words like daggers thrown carelessly. No, it was nothing that intense. Yet, Vesa almost wished it had been. Because then at least Grandpa would have known that she remembered he existed. Instead, the source of her deep remorse was from actions more subtle. Passive. Negligent.

**March 2, 2023:**

*Grandpa - "Good Morning Sprout! I saw a hummingbird trying to drink from the top of one of the garden gnome's hats. I remember how sad that would make you. You hated how they used up energy for nothing. I need to buy a feeder. Maybe we can hang one up when you come to visit next."*

**April 8, 2023**

*Me - "Haha, poor thing! Sorry, I got busy with work. But yes, next time I'm there we for sure can."*

**April 10, 2023**

*Grandpa - "I hope work is going well. I am very proud of you."*

**April 23, 2023**

*Grandpa - "Happy Sunday! Thinking of you."*

**May 4, 2023**

*Grandpa - "May the Fourth be with you!"*

**May 10, 2023**

*Me - "May the Fourth be with you too!"*

**May 10, 2023**

*Grandpa - "When are you coming home?"*

**May 30, 2023**

*Grandpa - "Did you have bad weather?"*

**June 5, 2023**

*Grandpa - "Have a good day!"*

**June 13, 2023**

*Grandpa - "Are my messages coming through?"*

**June 20, 2023**

*Grandpa - "Love you!"*

**July 2, 2023**

*Incoming call from mom*

She always had an excuse justified in her own mind why she couldn't answer his texts. Work was too crazy. She was too busy. She simply didn't have the capacity to respond to him. Except she did. Opening the old messages, she saw it.

*"I love you too."*

Those four simple words. Already typed. Ready to be sent. But she never did. Why? Why couldn't she have just hit the arrow? Why couldn't she have just called? Because now she never can.

Vesa wraps both arms around herself. She stares into the water, wishing the water would drown her sorrow, and wash away the pain. But as she stares, the rippling reflection of her own face is replaced with the face of a little girl, staring back at her with large mournful eyes. In an instant, Vesa is whisked back in time. Into the past. Her past.

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*She sees her younger self crouched on the same bank. Barefoot, scuffed knees, a mess of brown curls hanging in her face. Curls so wild they almost hide the tears. Almost. Her little hand clutches a worn dog collar. But where was the dog?*

*In her memory, Vesa sees Grandpa patting down a fresh mound of soil at the base of an aspen with a newly carved "B" engraved in its bark. He stands slowly and dusts off his jeans before masterfully stepping on a few nearly submerged stones to make his way to the other side of the creek. When he is finally beside the little girl, he bends down to kneel at her level, even though his knees probably protest.*

*"How're you doing Sprout?"*

*"Why do things have to die, Grandpa?" Little Vesa's voice cracks with grief, her first introduction to the feeling.*

*Grandpa is silent a moment, then says as he stares out across the old aspen, "Old things have to pass to make room for new things. It's a gift we get to learn how to love again."*

*“But I don’t want to love again. I want to keep loving Bean.”*

*“And you can. Just now, you will learn to make room for more love for another Bean.”*

*“Why aren’t you sad Grandpa?”*

*“Oh, I am. I just have some years on me and express it differently.”*

*“Will I ever not be sad?”*

*Again, Grandpa lets a few moments pass. In the quiet, the trickling of the water seemed to engulf the two figures in a tenderness that comes from the juxtaposition of old and new. Grandpa reaches out a gnarled hand and picks up a stick wedged in the wet sand near their feet. He begins to dig something in the shallow part of the river, where the water barely skims over in a gentle flow. His expression is one of introspection. Little Vesa’s in one of confusion. Grandpa lifts the stick a moment, then retraces the lines carved into the bank, deepening the outline of a heart. Vesa’s focus shifts between the heart and her grandpa’s face.*

*“Sadness,” Grandpa says still staring at his design, “can cut pretty deep, looking like it will leave a permanent mark,” he gestures at the heart, before using the stick to make the outline even more prominent.*

*“But healing is like this river. With time, it will slowly erase the remnants of that sadness until it doesn’t really show anymore.”*

*Both old man and young girl watch as the water slowly washes away the heart, only the slightest indentation indicating it was ever even there.*

*“The river, like time, heals.”*

*Little Vesa nods, not fully understanding. She gazes back down at the dog collar in her hand, “But I didn’t even get to say goodbye. How will she know I loved her?”*

*“She knows Sprout. Sometimes things are left unsaid, but that’s just life. She understands.”*

*Grandpa sets the stick in the water and they both watch the stream sweep it away. Vesa bites her lip, a few tears still escaping. Grandpa sets his previously occupied hand on her head, “you know what though?” Vesa shakes her head, and he continues, “If you still want to tell her, you can whisper into the creek, and it will take the words to her.”*

*“Really?”*

*“Really.”*

*Little Vesa sniffs and leans close to the water. She whispers, “I love you Bean.”*

*Grandpa tousles her hair. Little Vesa smiles and glances at the aspen, “Do you think she heard?”*

*“Yeah, I think she heard.”*

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Back in the present, Vesa swallows and exhales shakily. Kneeling, she places both hands on the cool earth and lowers her mouth close to the water. The surface ripples slightly under her breath. Shaky at first, but then steady as she soaked in the familiarity of the sounds and smells.

The words come out in a gentle whisper.

“I love you too Grandpa.”

Inhale. Exhale. Vesa lets her sorrow swell, feeling its depth, allowing its being. The memories she had buried now flow like the stream she finds herself peering at. Across the bank, the etched tree stands as a monument of the past and a testimony to the passing of time. The crickets' chorus has overtaken the rest of the mountain's song, and the sun has finally disappeared. But the river keeps flowing. The river keeps healing.