

## Life from a Distance

By Sperry Hunt

Luther and I spent nearly an hour talking about half a dozen things that didn't matter just to avoid the one that did.

It was a sunny morning last July. We sat in our rockers on the deck behind the Menagerie with our feet on the rails. That's the rickety lodge he and I built on top of the White Cliffs. The grain silos, the schools and the houses of Beeville spilled out across the prairie a thousand feet below. The old drive-in movie screen listed toward the rim of the world where nearly every evening the sun sets into a pot of gold.

The first half-hour we peeped around town through Luther's telescope speculating on what we observed: Sam Black was late to work for the third day in a row. Coach Jacobs and Father Dupree drove under the willow grove out where the river bends. And, judging from the consistent vacancy in her driveway, Lucy Malloy hadn't taken up with anyone a year after Roy took off on her.

When Luther was too sore to put his eye to the telescope anymore, he leaned back and spoke in short breaths for a while about the virtues of tying flies and coffee can stew. In the middle of his stew story, he turned away and said something I didn't catch. When I asked him to repeat it, he wiped his eyes with the crook of his arm and turned toward a silver drape of rain sweeping across the highway east. "Back when this state was a territory, know what its motto was?"

"Can't say I do," I said though he'd often told me.

"I long to see what is beyond."

"Is that so?" I said.

"Yep, and that's just the way I feel today."

I squeezed his shoulder. The bones slid around like they were in one of those over-roasted chickens you get late in the day at the market.

Luther grabbed the shot glass of smoky, green juice he'd set beside him. He raised the glass once toward me and again toward the horizon before downing the contents.

A shiver of disgust roiled through him. Then he grabbed my hand, hauled himself to his feet and threw the jigger with all he had into a long arc. The glass sparkled past a wheeling hawk then tumbled down into the hay waving like the ocean on Karl Schuster's back forty.

Luther fell back into the rocker and winked at me.

"See you, Jake."

I stared into his eyes a moment, feeling that low voltage, bilious sensation you get when your car spins on the ice.

"See you, Luther," I said.

He groaned once then slumped against the slats peacefully, like he'd done a hundred times listening to the ball game.

Though I fully understood Luther's intentions, I made no effort to stop him, a matter Sheriff Taylor took some interest in. After all, he did leave me the Menagerie, such as it was. But the sheriff let his suspicions go after I showed him Luther's x-ray he'd taped to the bathroom mirror which made him look like he'd swallowed a dead cat whole.

Truth was, I thought I was going with him that day, for as soon as he had passed, the house shuddered and rolled from bow to stern. That likely had nothing to do with Luther's passing, though I couldn't help but wonder as I reached back and latched on to Flathead, the ten-foot stuffed Kodiak towering behind me in his rigid fury.

Behind Flathead, Luther's living room exploded in howls and shrieks and wails. The parrot flapped into the rafters. The monkey tore around the cargo netting like he was afire. And Mugs, the zebra, dropped his head and kicked his hooves as high as Flathead's chin.

From that moment on I believed the place could go at any minute, and therefore I grew increasingly uneasy about leaving it.

Even for the funeral.

I felt bad about that, but by then I was wicked weak - like even a hard sailor gets when a big blow stops wringing his guts. I just sat on the deck in my open robe that day and didn't even glass the burial through the telescope.

It was a week or so before I thought about anything but myself. To be precise, it was when I came upon Mugs as he and a huge tortoise named Toulouse snuffled along the pantry shelves which were bare but for a dozen stew cans.

About the animals.

Luther was a helpful person. He drove his own tow truck for forty years, helping people out of no end of difficulties, money or no. We got to know each other, in fact, over a cup of coffee after he pulled me out of a ditch my junior year in high school.

Back then he lived behind the reservoir in a line shack filled to the rafters with highway flotsam he'd found along his way. Hubcaps, Burma Shave signs, mason jars, that sort of thing. He'd had a string of dogs, one of which had been such a good friend that when the dog died, he vowed to never own another. He was a man of his word, but keeping it left him alone.

Then one day Luther happened on a horse trailer on the side of the road. Inside, standing in her own feces with her head ducked low, stood a near-starved camel. Just then a fella drove up in a new truck saying he'd won her in a poker game from a circus owner. He went on to say he had to drive back to Bozeman for something and wanted to save gas by not taking the trailer. Once there, his buddy had called him about sticking around to go on a double date. One thing led to another, and so on.

Luther chased the guy off with a tire iron, smacking the truck as he fled. The old man took the camel to the vet who told him she was too far gone to save. Luther held the poor thing's head as she died.

"Camels are beasts of burden and therefore sad by nature," he told me later. "But starving, they're the most piteous creatures on earth with them huge brown eyes."

Luther decided then and there to save animals from people, but he had no place to keep them. What he did have was a crumbling parcel of land on the bluff above town and a shed full of windows and lumber salvaged from fallen-down barns and shacks. I had just finished a shop class. So I offered to help.

Built with little forethought, the Menagerie became a lopsided, shed-roof affair. Nothing was square or plumb. But it was spacious and sunny inside with a two-story wall of windows facing south to catch the winter sun.

Over the years Luther stole animals from the sideshows and exotic animal ranches that he deemed unfit for their care. Everybody knew he did it – even the sheriff. But nobody said anything since he pampered the creatures so handsomely.

Some years later, after my stint with the Navy and my difficulties readjusting to town life, Luther asked me to move in with him. He said I could operate my machine shop out of his garage. He'd be glad, he said, to tote the parts for me so I wouldn't ever have to go to town, which I had grown averse to. He gave me the larger bedroom which seemed tight to me even by Navy standards. But I liked Luther and thought he could use somebody to talk to, so I moved in.

The animals were the problem. I felt bad for them alright, but I wasn't as attuned to the beasts as the old man was. As with Luther's starving camel, it took Toulouse's damp eyes that day in the pantry to nudge me into my obligation.

After urging Mugs and Toulouse out of the pantry, I phoned in an order for feed. Several hours later young Todd bounced up the stony road in the Ranchers' Feed and Grocery van.

Todd and I spoke as he tossed bags of oats, lettuce and bananas across the jagged rent left in front of the house by the quake.

"Luther would have liked his funeral," he said.

I had reason to doubt Todd that.

"Read your Tom Sawyer," Luther told me once. "Everybody in town bellyached about Tom and Huck when they thought they was alive, then blubbered hysterically over their supposed demise. I'll have none of it. Just chuck me off the porch and ask Karl to plow me under."

I respected Luther's feelings, but even the Navy doesn't pitch people over the rail anymore. And I felt there was a principal at stake: The dead just cannot be allowed to rule the living.

Just after Todd left, my friends Walter, Tom, David, David and Eric called. They passed the phone around trying to get me to abandon the Menagerie. Eric, the electrical engineer, gave me a lesson on geology which he knows even less about than I do. Both Davids said I could stay in their basements, though we all knew their wives wouldn't stand for that. I knew they meant well. But when Walter said Lucy asked him to lure me to town for my own good, I'd had enough. That was outright deception and so, to answer in kind, I began flinging stew cans around the kitchen to make them think the cliff was giving way.

“Here she goes!” I shouted before ripping the cord out of the wall.

Maybe playing this landslide charade would impress the boys with how serious I was about separating myself from the town. And honestly, I felt that when things did slip, I'd just as soon plunge down to Karl's with Flathead. He actually might make the drop in pretty good shape, being that Luther cared enough to fit him with a parachute after the first big shake.

Hard to say.

He'd have to take his chances.

But there's no place in town for a muser like me who takes life in from a distance. How can you judge a situation when you're caught up in it?

Like the Minnesota Territory, I've got a motto:

“Understanding requires perspective.”

Thanks to Luther's telescope, I have it, so the clockworks of my town are wide open to me.

I guess perspective is my treasure. A paltry measure to be sure, but I find considerable comfort in it.

And so, after ripping the phone cord out, I shouldered the deck door open and set foot on the deck. I creaked along the gray timbers past the mucus-smearred menagerie window where Huckles, the prune-faced chimp, stood motionless with eyes wide and ears pricked. When I reached the tripod, I swung the telescope around town, hoping pitifully that I'd catch somebody looking up to see what had happened to me.

Sure enough, when the Seeger Street Bar swam into view, there stood Eric, Walter, Tom, and the Davids squinting up at me with their mouths hung open. I glassed the wider neighborhood, hoping Lucy would appear. After a moment I turned away, embarrassed to realize that, of course she wouldn't be there, having no knowledge of my landslide ruse.

The flats, as we call the prairie, seemed fine when I returned from the Navy some years before. I had gained a trade and a love of storytelling from the old salts. I missed the sea, but I had to admit it felt good to drive around town waving to people I'd known all my life.

It didn't take long to settle in. I got a job at a stamping plant. I found a passable apartment with Walter. I wrote a story down every so often and dropped it into a desk drawer. Life felt okay, like a low stuffed chair you could while in for a good long time.

Still I didn't really feel like I belonged in town. I guess whatever makes a guy join the Navy is still with him when he comes home.

Then one afternoon life shifted a bit.

I was walking home from work. The White Cliffs which rose above Karl's pasture like the Walls of Jericho. It felt like the first real day of summer. Not scorching yet, but warm enough to give me that feeling of pressure that comes of mugginess. I took the route that passes by the bakery as I often did just to smell the bread baking. I heard thunderheads crackle on the prairie behind the high school. A breeze flapped through my shirt, filling it with that thrilling coolness that leads a rainstorm.

As I skirted the ball field, I saw Lucy standing in the batter's box, watching me, as still as a statue. Being at the point of the diamond and framed by the backstop, she seemed smaller than I'd ever seen her before. But as small and distant as she was, I saw her clearly as though through a telescope, with what appeared to be a winsome expression.

I had known Lucy since middle school. She was a cheerful girl with a quiet nature and an air of sadness about her. We danced a few times after basketball games. I'd have asked her out, but she seemed too precious somehow - like china your aunt had best not

hand you. Having the same friends, we were often together at parties and gym dances. But we were hardly ever alone. And when we were, we shuffled our feet and talked about what just happened, our likes and dislikes or some such trivia. But she always had a smile for me, and when my life was hard that smile helped me get by.

Anyway, that afternoon on the ball field, after we looked at one another for a few seconds, I walked in the nearly four hundred feet from center field as I did between innings on the warmer days of my youth. As I walked, a story came to me the way a story does when one sees something familiar in a different light. In this little tale of mine, I came upon a pool at the base of a waterfall. I had happened upon it years before but put it out of my mind thinking I would never find it again. But having stumbled upon it once more, I stared into its depths when something flashed there - something that hinted of such uncommon beauty that I was lost for a moment in trying to piece together what I had so briefly seen.

As I returned from my little reverie, I found myself stopped in front of Lucy. I couldn't think of a thing to say. There seemed nothing else to do but tell her my story.

Darned if it didn't make her weep.

I put my arms around her in a comforting way. As the heavy clouds rolled overhead, I felt like we were slow dancing again in the dark gym. Our breaths fell in with one another, and for the first time since my return I felt glad to be home.

A moment later another breeze washed over us. I felt sure it would rain right then. I was going to say something about the rain. But when it didn't fall, I was at a loss for words. I considered asking her why she had cried, but that seemed too forward. She'd tell me if she wanted me to know.

Lucy and I eventually let go of one another. I stuttered something about how hard it was to hit a homer against the southeasterly winds that come in the summers. Just then some friends came our way and pulled us along in their goings-on. We laughed it up for a while, talking about one thing or another, and how we'd all get soaked through if it stormed. Then unexpectedly, Lucy hugged everyone and said her goodbyes. Before turning away, she swept that sad smile into my eyes. I think we all watched her as she walked across the commons and into that big house of hers.

It never did rain.

Over the coming week, I left Lucy a couple of messages but never did hear back. In time I came to speculate that she stopped in the batter's box to think hard on some mistake. Or perhaps to plumb a loss she'd experienced. Maybe I just happened to pass by with a few words that left her able to let go of her sorrow for a minute. And that was all.

As the summer went its way, I avoided Lucy, though I did nod in her direction from under the bower at the Labor Day soirée. She waved to me once. It was in the fall as I walked out of the lumber yard with my arms full of studs. I was clinching the receipt between my teeth, and the first snow was in my eyes.

In time I realized Lucy had slipped me of my bond to the flats entirely. It's hard to get back into the Navy, so that's when I took Luther up on his offer to move up top with him.

Lucy did climb the bluff once to see me. It was a fine spring morning the year after Luther died. There had been a spate of short temblors. I was crowded in the front hall struggling to get Mugs out the door for a scrub. He smelled like bilge and had started chewing the furniture. I should have found a home for him like I did the rest of the critters but he seemed so much like me, I had figured it was fate that we should go together.

So, there we were in the hall. Mugs had set himself perversely with his hooves planted and his head tossed back. He bared his teeth and brayed on about some damn thing when suddenly he stopped and raised an ear toward the door. I thought at first he had sensed a flutter underfoot, the way animals do.

"Hello," I heard Lucy say from the doorway.

The sun poured in so strong around her all I could make out was her dark curve against the white door jamb. There was no mistaking her voice, though, which is so light you nearly fall into her straining to make out what she says.

"Hi," I said dropping Mugs'reins. We kissed one another on the corners of our mouths. I breathed her in as she scraped her cheek against my stubble.

"Good to see you."

"It's been a while."

I hauled myself back and tied Mugs to a baluster. As Lucy slipped inside past me, I caught my unease reflected in the wetness of her eye. As she turned back toward me, she slid her fingers absently down Mugs' neck causing him to drop his head and sigh like a man acquitted.

“You shouldn't be here,” I said glancing at the ever-widening trench across the threshold.

“I won't stay long.”

“Why'd you come?”

“I'm worried about you, Jake.”

Her words cut me. I'd heard her say them to Maggie who sometimes wakes up at the bus stop.

“You'd best go back now.”

“Will you walk me down?”

A picture flashed before me of the boys gathered at the end of the trail holding lengths of rope to bind me until I agreed to move back to town. “I've got some joist hangers to splice,” I stammered out, hoping she wouldn't know that's not something anybody would do.

“I understand.” Lucy started to turn away then asked, “Can I take Mugs with me? I'll find him a good home.”

She should have just come out and told me I had no right to get the dumb thing killed just so I wouldn't have to be alone. But she wouldn't of course.

I nodded.

The last I saw of Mugs he was flouncing his hooves gaily down the trail beside Lucy.

I set about gouging epithets like “Live Free or Die” and “Hell for Leather” into the beams. As I sliced into the timbers, I steeled my resolve by thinking of Harry Truman - not the president, but the old man who chose to be vaporized rather than leave his cabin on Mt. St. Helens when its top blew off. I figured if the Billings newspaper got wind of my gougings piled beneath the bluff, I'd be the Harry Truman of Montana, bestowed with whatever honors and ridicule that merited.

But time makes fools of us all.

Two weeks later I was in the middle of sealing some chimney cracks with rope and fire cement when the beam I was standing on started shaking like a bowsprit in a gale. And did I think of Harry and the newspaper? No. I pictured Lucy watching me from the batter's box. As the timbers sheared and the stones popped out of the foundation, what I feared most was not death, but not knowing what the woman was thinking in the arms of that moment.

I fell forward, grabbed the next beam and dove feet-first through the front window in a shower of glass. I landed hard on my back with a bang on the back of my skull. Then, as the earth slid away behind me, I lurched to my feet and vaulted in a full panic over the ditch and onto the firm earth.

An hour later I stepped from the stony trail onto Karl's field much of which lay flattened beneath sixty tons of Luther's menagerie. Bent over the wreckage, waving their arms slowly in front of them like zombies, Karl, Walter, the Davids and Eric staggered around the rubble calling my name. I had to laugh a little when Walter looked for me under Flathead who lay on his back in fine shape half-covered by his parachute.

Lucy sat still on the hood of Walter's old Lincoln with her arms folded in her lap and her boots on the bumper.

"Hey, Lucy" I shouted at her.

She looked up and stared for a second before leaping off the car and running headlong toward me.

I just stood there sore, dusty, embarrassed and a bit hopeful, having had my fill of life from a distance.