

GHOSTS OF MEN ALIVE

Jeff Fearnside

She was the woman who made love to the storms, according to the half-crazed old lighthouse keeper Icarus Yeats. Some called her the Lady of the Lakes. Most knew her simply as Lorelei. I only saw her once, twenty years ago, but I'm not sure anyone would believe it. As a journalist, or rather a former journalist, I'm not even sure I believe it, which is why I kept this story to myself all these years. I had too many questions that I couldn't answer for myself, let alone others. I thought about her a lot, though, and I can say this: it's a great irony that this strong woman—simultaneously primal and subtle in stature, heart, and intellect—was defined by the weaker men in her life, including me, perhaps especially me. I'm not up to telling her story. What man can truly tell of the high, craggy bluffs where eagles nest, of tomb-deep waters and lonely wave-torn shores on lakes great as any sea? Only dead men, or the ghosts of men alive, those souls who haunt their own lives, searching for an elusive part

of themselves, trying to remember the words, "Yes, I knew her," or some rough equivalent, perhaps something small as a gesture.

I

TOM HARRIS

Tom met Lorelei on his third visit to the beach. She was sitting cross-legged in a secluded cove, propped up by a chunk of driftwood and staring deep into the breakers. She appeared to be his age, nineteen, and was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Her hair, ruby-red and ragged, whipped about her face, save one thick braid running down the middle of her back like a ship's line, so stout a drowning man might pull himself up by it and be saved. Her arms were slender and lightly tanned; her lips, full and pink, were puckered in a whistle.

It was the late spring of 1965, when he was an undergraduate student studying English literature at the University of Michigan. Ann Arbor was a short drive to the western shore of Lake Erie, and Tom, a skinny six-footer with impeccable posture and bristly orange hair, drove there sometimes on weekends to sit on the sandy beaches and watch the mighty lake freighters steam

their way north loaded with finished steel for Detroit's automobiles or south with raw iron ore for Cleveland's mills.

This was in the time right before Erie's beaches became so befouled with chemicals and human waste that many of them were closed as public health nuisances. While the water was muddy, like light coffee or tea with a splash of milk, and the shoreline flecked with debris—bottle caps, shards of glass, rusty nails, even the occasional rubber tire or condom—the sturdy log behind him, soft sand beneath him, and the water's insistent drone all around wrapped him like clean bandages, protected him, healed him.

When he returned the next weekend she was there, and the next, and after that they made it a standing date. They would sit alone on the shore, talking for hours, holding hands, sometimes just reading the Romantics—Wordsworth, the Shelleys, Keats—silently together with only the slightest physical connection between them—the soft rubbing of elbows when turning a page, the press of thighs upon shifting positions in the sand, calf cavalierly twined with naked calf like dune grass over driftwood, a subtle surge and retreat like that between wind and water, water and shore, wind and shore. They often played a game of trying to guess the nationalities of the freighters that sailed past them on their way either to or from the newly opened locks of the

St. Lawrence Seaway. The flat silhouettes of the lakers, up to a thousand feet long, were easy to discern, with the wheelhouse fore, crew quarters aft, and expanse of three football fields in-between. But the ocean-going vessels were less uniform, their flags difficult to read from a distance.

“Where do you think this one is from?” he asked one day toward the end of the summer, lightly touching Lorelei where she lay beside him on a Hudson Bay blanket. “The Orient?” The excitement of discovery that rang in his voice spoke of more than a game about far-off places, and he allowed his hand to remain touching her skin. She looked up from the flapping notebook in her hand, and a faint smile impressed her face like a watercolor brushstroke on rice paper.

“Where do you see yourself coming from?” she asked. “And where are you going?”

Her directness made him want to answer directly back, though ordinarily he was guarded about whom he opened up to. But with her, he told of how he struggled with being in college and his choice of a major because his father didn't approve of either. He didn't feel that teaching literature was real work, and Tom had never told him of his special fondness for poetry. His father was an old-school newspaper man who had never attended anything past high

school, and he reminded Tom in every letter and phone call that there was a job waiting for him in the newsroom whenever he was ready to step up to a man's responsibility and take it—an entry level job, naturally, but with plenty of opportunity to rise in the ranks. Tom confessed to Lorelei that he was struggling to pay his bills, and thus wavering in his commitment to his schoolwork and considering taking up his father's offer, though a small conflict in Southeast Asia was beginning to worry some of his friends about the draft. He was uncertain if he saw her expression dim or if merely a cloud had passed overhead.

“Some people's memories are stronger than their eyes,” she said. She ran her fingers through the round, black pebbles on the beach and looked around her. “I thought you liked my place.”

“I like you, Lorelei,” he said. An emotion he could no longer contain swelled in him. “I love you.” From the expression on her face, he regretted his words as soon as he spoke them. He returned to the book in his lap and tried to concentrate on reading, but the stanzas swam before his sun-blached eyes, and he inwardly cursed himself for his feelings. But how could he have stopped them any more than he could have stopped the breakers from eroding the shore?

“Things are changing,” she said. “Things must always change.”

The page before him danced pink, and he rubbed his eyes to clear them of the mirage. He read a few lines more then turned his attention back to the sun and shifting water. She was already gone. It seemed impossible that she could have disappeared so quickly, but he scanned the beach as far as he could see in either direction, checked the water in front of him and the bluff behind him, but she wasn't in sight. All he could find were her footprints running in small, even steps away from their campsite before dispersing into the dune grass. In the sand lay a single page torn from her notebook that read simply, on two lines at the top of the page, one word per line, “Love, Lorelei.” If there was a letter to go with this ending, he never found it.

Within a year the beach was closed, and soon all the talk was about how Lake Erie was dying.

Tom managed to bury his feelings and hold himself together for a while. Despite his financial difficulties, he was on track to graduate cum laude, but he unexpectedly left school with a year to go and took up a job on his father's shift at the *Detroit Free Press*. He was tired of books, he said, and drawn by a sudden and ravenous desire to investigate other people's lives. He began by peering into their deaths, writing obituaries, and eventually worked his way

to metro editor before—inexplicably to everyone who knew him—quitting to take a reporter’s position at a little paper up in “the Soo”—Sault Ste. Marie.

That’s where I met him, in 1978. He was a gaunt man by then, his neatly trimmed beard already salted with grey, his eyes nearly lost in their sockets, his faded orange hair cropped short but always unkempt, as if he had just woken up, even at four in the afternoon. He told me he was tired of editing, he just wanted to get back to teaching, his first love—all he had really wanted to do—but he had forgotten it too long ago, given it up for lost. How he was going to find it by writing at that little paper, he never explained, even to me, his closest friend there after only a short time. Perhaps he was going to attend the local university and earn a teaching certificate; perhaps he just needed a break from big-city life in order to recharge himself and make some plans. He would find it again, he insisted, here in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, an expanse of thickly wooded land bordered by three Great Lakes and shaped like a running rabbit—*A running rabbit*, he laughed.

II

ICARUS YEATS

Everyone said the old lighthouse keeper had gone crazy, that too many years of isolation and the death of his family had been too much to bear. Even if he hadn't completely snapped, he had drawn so deeply within himself that he had become an eccentric, almost without means of relating to anyone in a socially acceptable manner. He was the last lighthouse keeper in all the Great Lakes, before the lights were either retired or converted to automatic. Almost to the end, when the Coast Guard sent men to his lighthouse to deliver supplies, Icarus muttered his requests in a low, guttural tongue as indecipherable as the cackle of crows, and was forced to write out a list every time, a ritual he never seemed prepared for no matter how often he went through it. They allowed him to remain in his duties only because he carried them out so apparently well. In the fifty years he had manned the light it had never gone out, even for a single moment, even in the most horrific hurricane gales the lake could stir from its witch's depths.

Such unbending longevity did not favor his family. They had burned up in fevers, and him nearly with them, victims to an outbreak of typhoid as winter came on: his wife Emily, her severe black hair always pulled back, pale and tight-lipped, although the corners of her mouth were always slightly upturned, belying her gentle humor; his young son Thomas, a tall, tow-headed adolescent and accomplished surf fisherman at the age of seventeen; and his two daughters, Sarah and Madeline Anne, aged fourteen and twelve, the eldest a fine runner and swimmer, her dark blonde hair an unkempt riot about the freckles on her ever-smiling face, the youngest a skinny, smart girl who spent long hours pretending the lighthouse was a Medieval castle when she wasn't reading or diligently doing her homework or chores. They died within a week of each other, in order by age, Madeline Anne first, on a Monday, Emily last, the following Sunday.

At first Icarus didn't have time for emotion. The frostbitten ground proved too time-consuming to dig for the dead while he still had live others to care for. But once they all lay in the cold, rocky soil he cried, then he raged—raged to the direction of every wind, raged to the waters that fed his poisoned well, the pain that flowed into it and cruelly came bubbling up. He raged until his tongue became stuck in his throat and he could rage no more; his hair turned

white all at once, and after that he was little more than a wild-haired, wild-eyed mute, and remained so for many years.

But there was a lucidity about the man when he spoke of Lorelei. His eyes would brighten and his manner become eloquent, almost elegant, his spidery fingers with their gnarled knuckles curving in front of him in gestures that spoke of tender passion. He had seen Lorelei many times, he insisted, below him on the beach making love to the storms.

His family had been dead for more than thirty years by the time he first saw her. It was during an autumn storm in 1967. He had gazed down onto the beach below his tower with its one bright eye, and in the greenish-yellow glow of the impending tumult he saw her stretch her legs in front of her and lean back on her arms. She looked sculpted, like a figure carved of whalebone, and while he was too far away to see her features, he could see her actions. As the clouds darkened and massed he saw her running her long fingers up and down her thighs, through her skirt at first, then she slowly pulled it up, first to her knees then halfway up her thighs, exposing them to the thick air, her skirt loosely piled between her legs. She stroked her legs with her fingers then slid her palms up and down them, then she pressed her palms to her breasts through her sweater. Drops of rain began to fall, and she turned her head to

the sky to accept them on her tongue, lashing it out and curling it in as if she were trying to drink the sky.

Standing at the top of the lighthouse, Icarus watched all of this with fascination, until dusk and the increasing ferocity of the storm shadowed Lorelei from his view for long moments before the light of the lighthouse swung itself around. He should not have been able to see her—his lamp was focused out to the sea—and yet each rhythmic turn was like a flash of lightning, and the next flash revealed Lorelei rocking to herself on the beach. All reason was lost. Icarus first thought the rocking was an illusion created by the sweep of light over her form, of whipping winds and heavy surf lapping at her feet, but as the gale increased, he realized that her hips were rising up to meet it and easing back down, rising up and easing back down. He felt a warmth rise in him that he hadn't felt in years, and this warmth was quickly followed by the heat of shame. He leaned against the wall behind him, the rain beating upon him, cooling him. And yet he couldn't take his eyes from her. Looking through the railing, he watched Lorelei, bright for an instant then gone, and in the darkness he imagined her near him, then she was on the beach, her neck a sea arch, her mouth a round waterspout, and he was no longer sure if she was accepting the squall or issuing it forth; then blackness, and she was beside him, then she

was on the beach with her skirt torn behind her by the gale, body pitching. Icarus gasped in the tumult—surely she was with him; he could feel her breath—but no, she was on the beach, her mouth the shape of ecstasy—was she howling or was that the storm? In the darkness again he was certain he heard his name—*Icarus! Icarus, my love!*—but the light swinging back around illuminated no sound, only revealed her crumpled on the beach, head to one side, facing him, the surf surging over her, the wind slowing, dying; and Icarus remained half-slumped against the wall, his racing heart slowing, trying to match the steady beat of the light still sweeping the near shore and distant waves, a beacon of hope and life.

Feeling that the heat had finally drained from his body, he hurriedly went inside. He didn't look to see what had become of Lorelei but busied himself with some trivial work that had been waiting for days and could have waited days more. He stayed in his workroom for hours, falling asleep while slumped over the table, unable to bear the thought of walking upstairs to the main living area or even his bedroom, where pictures of his dead family hung on the walls and stood on his plain oak dresser.

He didn't see Lorelei again for weeks, tried not to even think of her, though he occasionally glanced down to the beach hoping to see her walking

or picnicking there. He didn't even know who she was then, only came to find out when the young Coast Guardsman delivered his next shipment of rations.

"The sign on her van says, 'Lorelei's Lilies,'" the man said, amazed at Icarus' sudden affability. "Everyone calls her 'Lady of the Lakes,' though, kind of as a joke. Nobody knows where she lives."

Yes, she is the Lady of the Lakes, Icarus thought, this woman who rides the seas like a mermaid on a seahorse.

When the next storm blew in she was back on the beach, with all the passion the storm had fury, and again thoughts of passion came to Icarus, and he pounded his fists against the rough lighthouse walls until his knuckles bled in an attempt to clear his mind, maintain control, remember what he had once been and could now feel was slipping away. This continued intermittently for several weeks, each time Icarus losing and then reclaiming himself after the storm, remaining in a revolving stasis not unlike the beacon under his keep.

He never talked to her face to face, never talked to her at all, although more than once he was certain she was staring directly at him where he stood in the shadows on his high balcony, standing tall in her bare feet, completely immobile, not even blinking when the light swung around and burned her in the glare of many thousands of candles, and he thought he heard her whisper,

Icarus! although that was impossible; it must have been the wind. So he stood still and listened to the wind, churning surf, and the fragile echoes of his own heart, unable to move, unable to look away from her. *Icarus, come to me.* Yes, he had heard it even though she hadn't moved her lips, and it took all of what was left of his strength not to cast himself over the railing and down to the beach where she was waiting for him on the rocks below.

In the clear, grey light of the next morning he looked out and saw she had left a message for him in the sand of the lower beach, right at the water's edge. He quickly struggled into his clothing and ran as fast as his old body would take him down the winding spiral staircase and out the door, but by the time he had reached the spot where she had scrawled her message, the breakers had obliterated it. All he could make out—he had to decipher it quickly before the next set of waves crashed ashore—was a pictograph of overlapping, two-headed arrows, aligned so that they pointed directly to sea, behind to the impenetrable coast, and up and down either side of the long, lonely beach.

III

CAPT. GLENN MOODY

Capt. Glenn Moody had skippered a Great Lakes fishing trawler for twenty-six years, ever since being mustered out of the Navy at age twenty-four in 1946 after more than four years in the Pacific theater, yet he had never netted a catch like he did on August 17, 1972, in the rheumy waters of Lake Huron. It had started out a typical summer day, humid as a hothouse by nine o'clock, shimmers of heat hanging on the waters that rose and fell in deep, rhythmic swells. Captain Moody was out among the rest of the fleet, with the great skein nets trolling for perch, whitefish, and mackerel, when one of the men called him from his position in the wheelhouse.

“Cap’n Moody, come quick!”

Captain Moody clumped down the skinny metal stepladder as fast as his one smashed foot and both rubber boots would carry him, a large man with enormous red hands, a thick black beard, and blue eyes underlined in purple folds. When he reached the aft section where the winches had pulled in the nets and dumped their contents on the deck, there he saw smack in the middle of a squirming pile of black, white, grey, yellow, and blue scaly bodies, strings

of green seaweed, and pieces of clear plastic waste—from a shredded garbage bag to a six-pack container securely noosed around a dead gull’s neck—there he saw, sitting atop it all as if she commanded it, a naked woman. Her hair was a red mass of waves spilling over her shoulders and breasts, lapping about her back and waist and the slight, enticing bulge of her stomach. Water streamed over her body, giving her skin the semblance of being slick, nearly oily, which combined with the tautness of her muscles made her appear seal-like—a sea creature with the finely sculpted body of a woman. The fishermen stared at her in a dumbstruck circle, their hands moving at their sides, unsure of where they should go or what they should do, their mouths similarly moving, their eyes on her, each other, the captain. Finally, he spoke.

“Are you—” He stopped. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she said precisely, her eyes bright with intelligence and full upon him. He stepped forward with an enormous outstretched paw to help her up, clumsy and slipping even in his rubber soles; while barefoot, she stood as easily as if rising from a parlor chair to a steady floor and not the fish-slick deck of a pitching ship. She didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed by her nudity but instead smiled so warmly—not overly so, but with her teeth barely showing, her full lips an amazing dawn-pink despite the cold waters in which she had just

been immersed—that all the men around her smiled back just as easily, taking off their hats if they wore them and crisply nodding at her, two running ahead to open the hatch leading to the galley, where Captain Moody gently led her with one arm around a shoulder, the other resting lightly in the crook of an arm. He told his men to take care of their catch while he disappeared into the bowels of the ship.

Standing a whole foot taller than her five feet five, and at two hundred and thirty pounds outweighing her by more than a hundred, none of Captain Moody's pants fit her, even when he attempted to cinch them up with rope and several quixotic sailor's knots, but the barrel-chested man's T-shirt covered her all the way to her knees. She insisted that was fine, despite Captain Moody's own insistence on rummaging for something to shoe her feet with. She finally relented to slipping on a pair of his ragg wool socks, so large they hung loosely around the bottom of her calves and, when she folded the tops of them down, looked like a pair of swashbuckling pirate's boots. By then the men had stowed their catch and had excitedly gathered below to question her. It was clear she was comfortable and alert despite her apparent hardship, so they immediately asked her what she was doing so far from land.

“Navigating,” she said.

You mean you weren't lost?

“Yes, but that was part of the challenge.”

How did you get so far out?

“I swam.”

Where is your boat?

“No, no boat. On my own.”

The American triumph in swimming at the Munich Olympics was still fresh on everyone's minds, and when they looked at her well-muscled biceps, her strong, supple shoulders and long, powerful thighs, they almost believed she could swim the St. Lawrence Seaway to the Atlantic if she wanted to. They also knew well the waters that had frozen many a strong sailor's heart before their limbs gave out and wondered how she could have endured them without a thermal wetsuit on. Yet there she was, pink and fresh as if she had just stepped out of a bath. They asked, *Who are you?*

“Lorelei,” was all she said. No matter what else they asked her, she repeated she was Lorelei, just Lorelei, a swimmer by nature and a risk-taker, and that she was in training.

When they pulled into port that evening she resisted their attempts to take her to a hospital for a checkup, insisting she felt fine, but she did take up

Captain Moody's offer to sleep on his couch. Being a strong, successful, self-employed businessman and a war hero had made Captain Moody desirable at one time, but two divorces, bouts of depression mixed with long nights of drinking, and his smashed foot all contributed to feelings of inadequacy that led to a long bachelorhood. He was not an unattractive man, but his blue eyes often appeared faded to a grey sadness, and he was highly self-conscious of a crimson scar that ran from one high cheekbone before disappearing into the brambles of his beard and burrowing to his chin, and of one large, crooked tooth. As a result, he rarely smiled.

But Lorelei must have sensed something in him deeper than this, sensed that every day he went down with his nets and swam with his catch. When the old cook, who had faithfully flipped flapjacks and scoured grills for twenty-three years, left suddenly in order to help nurse an ailing relative, Lorelei seamlessly stepped in to take her place. None of the other sailors ever saw or heard anything extraordinarily personal pass between the captain and cook, save for what at times seemed an almost paternal affection he had for her, and it was clear that he enjoyed talking with her more than anyone else on board, or on shore, for that matter.

All appeared well, at least for a while. Sportsmen were still pulling in catches of perch and a new species of small, herring-like fish—smelt—but years of overfishing the top predator species, the ones worth money, such as sturgeon, lake trout, and whitefish, had decimated those ranks and altered the balance of the food chain. The sea lampreys and alewives that had invaded as a result of mechanically-aided monkeyshines were now more than a nuisance; they were becoming a serious problem.

This time there were no complimentary closings on paper, no lines drawn in the sand. “I’m going for a swim,” Lorelei said one morning, and she said it so naturally that Captain Moody simply nodded and patted her arm before the utter strangeness of the comment hit him. He turned to ask her about it, but she was already gone. Without issuing any orders to his first mate, he raced from the wheelhouse and scanned the decks, peered into the unusually placid lake, but she was nowhere to be seen, and there were no telltale ripples in the water, no bubbles of air rising to the surface.

The fishery collapsed shortly after that, and Captain Moody became an even more broken man. He was forced to retire his trawler in 1974. For a time he worked as a welder in the shipyards of Toledo, but within a year, two days

shy of his sixty-third birthday, he fell from a scaffold while welding rivets on the 961-foot Argonaut and landed on the dock three stories below.

Above him loomed the mighty grain silos proclaiming, “Toledo—Your Link to World Markets,” and all around him ocean-going freighters from Singapore and Turkey and a half-dozen European countries plowed through the mud-heavy waters of Maumee Bay on their way home. He remained flat on his back, far from his home, unable to move a single muscle, his eyes, though dilated, unable to see the water, the sky. He was paralyzed from the neck down.

Afterward, he could be seen sitting for hours by the water in a high-backed wheelchair, his bear’s body wasted to regular human proportions, his large bones marking his former stature by nearly poking through his skin and clothing, his thick, dark hair grown long in curls about his shoulders, his brambly beard dark upon his lap, his eyes ever looking outward past the freighters to that vast fluid expanse from which they came.

IV

ED KERN

With an angular face, bushy brown mustache, and a Detroit Tigers baseball cap seemingly sewn to his scalp, Ed would have been invisible in Cheboygan had he not stood a lanky six-foot-four. He was a resourceful man in the depressed economy of Northern Michigan in the 1970s, doing whatever he could to get by. He owned his own rig, a flat-nosed Peterbilt in which he often contracted himself out for day runs, and a garage outfitted as a two-bay automotive repair shop. During winters he augmented his income by selling cords of firewood he cut himself from a twenty-acre stand of second-growth white pine he had inherited from his father, last in the line of Kern lumbermen that ran all the way back to the Big Cut, the nineteenth-century timber spree that had stripped Michigan completely bare.

Ed's wife Lydia was a dour woman who ran a daycare center out of their home; they didn't have children of their own, and he sensed that she blamed him for this. Exceedingly white and with dull eyes, she wore too much rouge, though little other makeup, and rarely smiled. Ed had been deeply in love with her during high school and in the first years of their marriage, but eighteen

years of it had worn thin for both of them. Ed was unhappy, and in recent years had even occasionally caught himself daydreaming about divorce, but Lydia's stability always kept him from acting on his fantasies or even speaking about them to anyone; she may have been dour and blaming, but she was consistently so, and he was comfortable with such familiarity. Still, Ed couldn't help giving Lorelei an extra-long stare when he passed her roadside stand on the highway. Although she never waved, Ed eventually felt comfortable enough to do so, eliciting a regular smile and nod from her. They came to talk often, usually by the road, sometimes over a coffee and doughnut at the gas station around the corner, though no one ever saw anything physically consummated between them.

Lorelei was now selling smoked whitefish and Petoskey stones to tourists heading up Route 23 to Mackinaw City. She was often seen combing the beaches of both of the big lakes that meet at the Straits of Mackinac, Michigan and Huron, and even as far north as Lake Superior, her head covered with a barn-red scarf, a woolen shawl wrapped about her shoulders, eyes turned to the pebbly ground, keen to the particular look of those stones that, when taken home and buffed in her gemstone tumbler, showed off the striking geometric pattern tourists couldn't resist, the skeletons of ancient animals that once

roamed the sweetwater seas. She set some of these fossils within wire cages or fitted them into pendants, her most popular product.

The locals liked her silence—she was like them in that way, sturdy and stable, not all a-twitter like the whitefish-hungry interlopers—but that silence never melted into familiarity even after she had been among them several seasons. The tourists liked her because she sold the best Petoskey stones, the largest, most unblemished, and highly polished fossils, and they liked her silver craftwork and fair prices. But they, too, could rarely elicit more from her than perfunctory business talk and a genuine but mysterious smile, and often left her stand feeling simultaneously perplexed and exhilarated, as if they had just mingled presences with a ghost and enjoyed the somber interaction with the grave. She could be seen by all, locals and tourists alike, at odd hours of the day and night combing the beaches—sometimes at four in the morning, sometimes at midnight; it seemed she never slept—scanning, stooping, reaching, plucking up, casting away, and occasionally grasping some prize, her long red hair a flame licking out from under her scarf and at the wild sky about her face, her eyes sea-green foam, all that's left of a breaker after crashing ashore. She was more than a woman searching; she was a woman who had lost something very particular and was searching for *that*.

“You can see it in her eyes,” people said. “There’s a sadness there.”

“No, it’s a longing,” others said. “Her eyes are still bright with remembrance.”

I suppose the difference between those two schools of thought lay in hope—the hope each school thought Lorelei had left in her. Those who saw sadness saw no hope. They believed whatever it was she had lost was lost forever, like the skeletons of ships that lay with bleached ribs exposed in the icy shoals of Superior, their rudders unnavigable in sand, steadily steering them nowhere. Those who saw longing—like Ed—saw hope, lingering in clear pools like salmon eggs, nourishment to predators but gel-bright with the knowledge it only takes one to replace the mother, two to replace the father too and perpetuate the species. One day she will stoop her body low over the shore and find her lost treasure under a stone and be gone, to a place where the gulls would crowd her no more, would cease to dive and shriek around her like hungry orphans haranguing milk from her milkless breasts. So ran the second school of thought.

Neither was right; that is to say, neither came to pass exactly as each saw it. Lorelei simply disappeared one day. No one saw her leave; they only knew she was gone when a tourist couple asked Ed about Lorelei’s closed stand when

he was gassing up his Dodge pickup and, out of curiosity, he drove behind their Lincoln Town Car around the corner to the stand and found it closed, as they had said, but unlocked. Stepping inside, he felt as if he had entered the aquarium building at the Toledo Zoo. There was what appeared to be a crude mattress made of seaweed and kelp, and when Ed touched it, it still felt warm and damp. And there were many shells scattered all around, in buckets and over the floor, of mussels, clams, and oysters, and somewhat more neatly arrayed the bones of fish in a dry sink in the northeast corner with a recent catch of whitefish glassy-eyed in a large plastic tub under the sink. All of Lorelei's silver-working equipment was there, along with her hand-cranked gem tumbler and scores of Petoskey stones packed into old peach and apple crates. No electricity or water ran to this shack. Ed couldn't even imagine how many hours it must have taken to produce her work. Out back, a well-worn path cut through the sandy soil and a rough stand of hemlocks to the rocky beach where he found all human traces were scoured from the shore save those carried in by wind or wave.

When Ed returned, he found the couple holding a small, hand-lettered sign they had found while walking around the stand and which had evidently been blown down. It read, "Will be back at 3." Ed felt foolish then for having

intruded into Lorelei's place of business and somewhat testily ran off the tourists when they asked if it would be okay if they gave him the money for two lovely Petoskey stone pendants that had caught their eyes. They were so insistent that even after he firmly sent them on their way, he felt it best to stay and watch over her stand, so he climbed into his pickup, tuned his AM radio to CKLW, and listened to the sounds of Marvin Gaye's cover of "Heard It Through the Grapevine" pumped all the way from their big station down in Detroit. Several carloads of people stopped by, to which he politely explained the situation, but Lorelei didn't return by 3:00 p.m. Nor did she return the next day, nor the next. Ed dumped the fish and shells into the hemlocks behind her stand after the third day, then moved her smoker inside and nailed the door and window shut.

Feeling he should try to do *something*, he contacted the sheriff's office, but they had a difficult time finding information on her. Worried for her business, Ed tried tracking down her operating permit, but he couldn't find one. Her business wasn't on the Cheboygan County tax rolls, nor was the plot of land she had been on even zoned commercial. It was owned by an absentee landlord in Texas who wasn't aware someone had built a shanty on his property and was so incensed at the notion that he flew up from Amarillo over

Labor Day weekend to oversee the razing of the structure and raising of an aluminum chain link fence around three sides of his seven-and-a-half-acre lot, feeling the rocky beach of Lake Huron sufficiently deterred entry from the north. The IRS confiscated Lorelei's meager possessions and auctioned them off for \$912.58, the largest chunk of that—\$300.00—bid by Ed himself for her custom set of knives with hand-tempered steel blades and mother-of-pearl inlaid handles carved from seasoned white oak, the wood of ship's timbers. It was uncertain if she had crafted them herself, though from the ochre stain of dried guts it was clear she had used them often to clean fish. *Right nice*, the bidders all agreed.

His wife threw the set away. *Disgusting*, she said the next day, after the trash had been picked up and Ed had found his mementos missing. Ed had been certain she would never know where they had come from, but she had not only heard about the auction, she had heard other rumors as well. Still, she was content to leave it at that until Ed spent a fruitless afternoon wandering about the landfill, returning home only with the stench and stained clothing that left no doubt as to what he had been doing. The next day she gathered her daycare charges together for a field trip to a lawyer's office and filed for a divorce. On the way back she bought them all ice-cream cones.

V

ALBERT GOODENOUGH

Why did it fall on me to tell their stories, which is really her story? Because it's also my story. I fell in love with her, too, just like the rest, each in his own way. I fell in love with her image, just like the rest, and the only thing that made it less painful to me was that I hadn't actually met her in person. Ironically, I could have told her story more easily if it had remained that way; it wasn't until I actually talked with her that I realized losing her was far more complicated than her simply walking away, and I understood why the others had had so much trouble with the tongues in their mouths—to speak of her made them vulnerable, but it also made her real.

Unlike my old friend Tom Harris, who had always wanted to teach, I always wanted to be a journalist. And I was a good one. Until I learned of Lorelei.

Normally articulate, sometimes eloquent, Tom's words failed him in trying to describe his love of long past. *You're a journalist, for God's sake*, I said. *Just give it to me straight: the who, what, where, when, and why.* The where he could detail—I've already told of the beach where they met, the driftwood-

filled cove—and the when was clear enough. But the who, what, and why left him silently spinning his hands. This was enough to awaken my instinct for a story, and initially she was nothing more to me than that. Though I was writing few features at the time, concentrating primarily on hard news, word came to me that she was now living in the area. When I told Tom this, his eyes grew wide and dark as the pebbles he had once described to me.

A friend told me she was selling baskets out of her car in a vacant corner lot along the highway, but when I arrived there, she was gone. Then I heard she had entered some homemade jams in the county fair, only to find the jars of jam and a ribbon by her name—Lorelei Lakes; I could imagine her smile when she wrote that on her entry form. Neither her goods nor her prize were ever claimed. At first it was a game, then it became a puzzle, and finally I took it as a challenge: to give this corporeality posing as incorporeal a who, what, and why, and even a where and when, since I was having trouble nailing down those details as well.

When our editor left the paper for a higher-paying gig on the Canadian side of the waters, Tom was asked if he would step into the position. Instead, he left, too, and moved away from the area not long afterward, to where, I never knew. Our staff was small, and by then I had seniority. Frankly, I had

never envisioned myself remaining there; I always saw it as a stepping stone to a job at a much larger paper in Detroit or Cleveland, maybe even Chicago. I was still young and highly ambitious. And yet it seems now in looking back on those days that already something else was stirring in me, directing me, lining up the events of my future in an inexplicable way. I took over as editor in Tom's place, working many long hours in the evenings and on weekends, and while that was always the excuse I made for not marrying and starting a family, it wasn't the real reason. The real reason was that I used every scrap of free time that befell me to find out more about Lorelei.

At first, I carefully recorded every conversation I had with those who had known her, assiduously detailing names, dates, and places for a planned series of articles. But I knew early on that I would never publish these. How could I justify taking up space in our little local for even one small feature on a woman nobody really knew, who had only the most tenuous connection to the area? I now smoked almost continually and rarely slept, the price of keeping the paper going and tracking Lorelei, but it never occurred to me to quit either. I piled up more than two hundred thousand miles on my Datsun pickup with the camper shell on back, traveling from Minnesota on Superior's northern shore to New York on Ontario's southern shore, roaming hilly Canadian

woods and driving along flat Midwestern plains, always, of course, within a gull's range of the great inland seas.

Obsession is so close to love—too close, genetically alike as first cousins, and to marry them is unhealthy, incestuous. They may meet and be friends but should never have children together. I walked between obsession and love every day, one of their hands in each of mine, never allowing them to touch. Or so I thought. In reality, they were passing secret signals between themselves through me.

What had happened to me? I had always been so grounded and reliable. Now I was untethered and lost. Facts were no longer solid and irrefutable. While I remained committed to discovering and writing about the truth, the more events I covered—business dealings and government meetings and protests and murders and accidents—and the more people I interviewed, and the more carefully I checked and double-checked names and dates and places, the more I felt truth slipping away from me. I became jaded. I continued to do my job and do it well, well enough to receive a few accolades and a general consensus of high standing in the community, but that outer approval never quieted an inner sense that something in my life was amiss, something was missing.

On a whim one astonishingly clear December day in 1995, I decided to drive down to the beach where Tom had first met Lorelei. I had been thinking of him a lot, wondering where he might have gone and what he might have been doing, and by then Lorelei always burned on my mind, so it probably wasn't unusual that I felt a desire to go there. But I was entirely unprepared for what I saw.

Lorelei was standing on the beach, looking into the waves. Though going by Tom's estimation she would have been about fifty, she appeared even older, with deep creases in her face, her body, while apparently still strong, heavily wrinkled from continuous exposure to the elements. But in many ways she was ageless, her form and carriage essentially unbowed, her hair only slightly faded. I recognized her instantly, but a sudden schoolboy shyness kept me away for long minutes before I hesitantly approached her and introduced myself. She turned her head sideways and subtly smiled but didn't uncross her arms in front of her, returning her gaze back to the sea. She didn't offer her name, but I had the sense she knew it wasn't necessary.

"I know some of the people you know," I said. "Knew."

This time she spoke, but without turning her head. "They're good men—little boys really, but good. They just couldn't understand what they had."

“Is that why you moved about so much?”

She laughed.

“Movement? You mean desire.”

Now I realize she never said whose desire, hers or theirs, but at the time I just assumed the answer.

“And the others?”

She looked at me with her head cocked sympathetically to one side, her brow knitted and her eyelids heavy and sad, except that her eyes sparkled, and she almost appeared to be laughing.

“Do you really think things can always stay the same?”

She looked back out to the water, and I joined her gaze. A power boat skimmed past a hundred yards from the shore; several hundred yards more distant the triangular shapes of sails mingled like an impressionist painting. Several gulls flew overhead, moving toward another cluster hovering over the water, fluttering and diving as if struggling for the guts of a great catch, though I saw no fishing boat around that might have left such remains.

I looked away and rubbed my eyes then turned back and strained to see what she saw so intently. A black bud grew and stretched, bloomed above the flat plain of the lake. It was a mast, with a sail full upon it.

Lorelei started running up the crest of the beach.

“Where are you going?” I called, but she didn’t respond. I followed her as she ran quickly up the beach, past the beachhead and over a clump of dune grass. She disappeared for a moment, and then I saw her scrambling along the boulders behind the dunes; she hopscotched along the rocks like a spider on water, until she reached the bluff’s summit. She pulled herself over the top then turned and faced the sea, right at the edge of the steep precipice she had just climbed, immobile except for her hair, a thick, red flag behind her. For a moment, I was afraid that she might leap.

Instead she waved, a signal to what I now could see was a yawl boat. As it approached, I could hardly believe my eyes. It appeared as if a man were seated in a throne in the aft, with two minions diligently working the sails and a fourth man scanning the waters ahead. I strained to look closer and saw that it wasn’t a throne but a high-backed wheelchair, and seated upon it was the thin but still unmistakable figure of Capt. Glenn Moody. While the wind snapped his thick mane behind him and the rocking waves sent his head lolling to one side, then the other, he made no motion under his own power except to move his lips. The two men nearby apparently following the orders he was giving were Ed Kern and Tom Harris. I marveled at their impossible skill; they never

took in the sails, bringing the yawl right up to the base of the bluff without any seeming danger of it being swamped, overturned, or smashed to bits. The breakers still churned offshore, the waves splashed and foamed about the rocks, and yet the boat maintained its position as if mounted on a sheet of glass.

That's when I saw the man in the forward compartment was Icarus Yeats. He must have been a hundred years old, if indeed it truly was him, but who else could it have been? I recognized his profile in an instant, his hawk nose, his red-chapped cheeks, his fierce silvery eyes and ruffled white hair like a crown of feathers about his head.

Without turning to me, Lorelei said, "Do you want to come with me?"

Much as I had wanted this, I had never allowed myself to consider it possible before, and now that it was here, I realized I didn't know how to act or what to say. My first instinct was to say, "Yes!"—to take her hands in mine—to man the sails together. My mouth involuntarily opened, my lips stretched, but then just as quickly—involuntarily—my mind began reeling off the list of obligations I had to fulfill after the end of this brief holiday vacation. People were depending on me. My savings were small, my investments modest; they could hardly support me for more than a few months, perhaps a year, even on a severely restricted budget, half that time for the two of us together unless

Lorelei had some money stashed somewhere, which seemed unlikely from what I knew of her. My mouth slowly closed. I sadly shook my head. I was ashamed to tell her this, but I was afraid. Nothing in my life of constant planning had prepared me for the journey she proposed.

“Will I ever see you again?” I asked.

She suddenly smiled again, brightly, brightly as I had ever seen her smile, and crawled back down the rocks to where they met the water. Ed held out his hands and she leaped into them, hovering for a moment in his large, chapped embrace, before landing delicately on board.

Ed and Tom then swung the sails about, sending the craft back out over Erie’s cold grey depths. Tacking back and forth into the wind, the yawl repeatedly crossed in front of the setting sun, fat and distorted on the horizon, and was swallowed in the dusky orange glare. This gave the illusion of the yawl circling around the sun, in ever-widening gyres that pushed the waves toward the shore.

“Lorelei!” I suddenly shouted, as if released from a trance. My heart was in my throat—I was choking, gasping for air—and though I wanted to shout again, I couldn’t. I wanted to yell at the men on board to turn the boat around, to bring her back, but they were no longer there. I hadn’t seen them go below

decks or fall into the water or anything else. They had simply disappeared. Even Captain Moody's wheelchair was gone.

After that, I stood for a long time on the beach. The sun melted into a haze over the water. I watched the yawl move ever farther away until it was just a black dot on the horizon, then a grey dot in the mist, then only mist.

What had I really seen that day? It could have been an illusion, but if I had gone mad, then many others had also gone mad before me. Could we all have been hallucinating? Sometimes I've wondered if I saw what I did just because I wished it to be so, a psychological trick, a metaphysical manifestation. After all, didn't she always come to us because we desired her so? I believe that. Yet I'm haunted at why she always left, always returned to the sea. Was it because that was her first and only true love? Perhaps our belief in her wasn't strong enough. Or perhaps *she* was never as strong as she seemed; perhaps she couldn't live up to demands of life, of a real human relationship.

No. She came to us of her own freewill, and if we floundered in our relationships, it was because we never learned how to swim. We were too busy trying to hold our skeletons upright in our skins even while our skins ached for gravity.

Is that the answer I had so long been searching for? I don't know. So much has changed since she left. We now have the Internet, cell phones, GPS, instant feeds. None of it has helped me find her again, not even a trace. I remain updated every second about my own emptiness. After all my years of searching out facts and attempting to relate them as directly as possible, to be a good journalist, to stay faithful to the truth, I'm no longer sure I understand anything. All I have anymore are vague feelings, strange inspirations, and fragmentary dreams that break the surface of my mind like a sudden summer squall and then just as quickly are gone.

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