

Sombrio Beach

By David Reichheld

Would she could make of me a saint, or I of her a sinner. William Congreve

I met Allman for the last time in the Coastal Kitchen Cafe, before he left to hike the West Coast Trail.

He gave me a tiny silver Celtic Knot on a braided chain. “Seeger wanted Lonnie to have this.”

I hadn’t seen Lonnie in two years; rumor had him on a crab boat in Alaska.

Allman shrugged. “Maybe if you connect up sometime...?” I nodded. He’d cut his dreadlocks and wasn’t so angular now: Still hippy-ish, but a young man in transition. His eyes were older than I remembered.

We shook hands and he quietly turned away. What do you say to someone whose connection was a reminder of loss and empty ghosts of what might-have-been?

Seeger would have known....

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The North Pacific rolled onto Sombrio Beach like Neptune’s hammer. Concussion from the smashed waves thumped with the shock of a tanker exploding in the Juan de Fuca Strait.

A pale drift-wood hut hunkered like a jumbled ribcage under the forested heights sheltering the inlet. As Lonnie and I approached, a naked girl appeared from behind it, long-legged, with close-cropped yellow hair and unlaced hiking boots. I recognized Seeger as she squeaked and scuttled for the low doorway and we laughed as her bum disappeared inside. Lonnie glanced at me with quick eyes that went flat as rain-slicked shale when he looked back.

Seeger dressed while Allman made nervous conversation. Lonnie had that effect: big, a face that had been rearranged but originally could've been chain-sawed from a stump of Sitka Spruce. He'd played Junior B hockey as a tune-up defenseman until a knee injury sent him to the roofing trade. We had hockey in common, and sports pubs, but if you wanted to skip the ER you never partied past drunk with Lonnie.

Seeger and Allman we knew from the hiking circuit. Next generation hippies from Seattle, they were tripping Vancouver Island in an ancient VW van. It was early in the season, blustery, and they looked worn; Allman's sandy dreadlocks needed rebraiding. He was prepping breakfast on a small fire in a shallow sandpit.

Lonnie said he'd accept a cup of coffee and we sat on two logs. A guitar leaned against the hut and he asked, "You doing the Kumbaya thing?"

"Seeger's playing new stuff," said Allman, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his Vietnam-era army jacket. "She can't sleep, so she gets up and composes. You know she was named after Pete Seeger."

Lonnie considered that. "No kidding. Who's Pete Seeger?"

Seeger re-appeared wearing a slim tie-dyed dress and hiking boots. Tall and lissom and gorgeous, brown-eyed with level brows and a dusting of freckles over a cute nose. My ex once called this "nippy weather" and Seeger's poked two perky thimbles into the thin fabric. Her breasts jiggled in the clingy rig and Lonnie didn't notice anything else.

"I can play it for you," she said. Her voice was soft but clear, like words that might come out of a sea shell and for a moment I forgot the tombstone gray ocean and the seagulls crying as they reefed the wind. Lonnie blinked.

“Play what?”

She lifted the guitar and sang “Kumbaya”. Her perfect voice wove magic into the 1960s anthem; Allman added harmony and I never heard better. Lonnie cheered, “Fuckin’ A!” Seeger smiled and sang “Where have all the Flowers Gone?” and a spellbound Lonnie looked as if he’d taken a high stick to the head. Allman grinned sympathetically.

“Nobody sings like Seeger.” He reached over a tin cup of coffee to Lonnie.

I dug into my pack for packaged camp meals to add to the communal larder and Lonnie supplied beef jerky and sausage. Seeger protested, “You’re our guests.”

“No fuckin’ way,” said Lonnie, “We’re just people.”

She gave me an amused look and I nodded.

Lonnie pulled out his whisky flask. “Something to stiffen the coffee.” He grinned, narrowed eyes aiming two pinpoints of light at Seeger. “This’ll loosen your gears!”

“Put it away,” I said. Lonnie glanced at me then at our hosts.

“My Crown Royal ain’t good enough?”

“We don’t drink anymore,” said Allman.

Lonnie rolled his eyes with a look that once froze enemy forwards into icicles. Plying girls with drinky was one of his tricks. Seeger carefully set the guitar against the hut, resting a slender hand on one of the weathered uprights.

Allman said, “Seeger gets a bad reaction. It makes her sick.”

Lonnie cocked an eyebrow that said “bullshit”. He took a tilt and pocketed the flask, glancing with stony disbelief at Allman.

The breeze shifted a point, carrying a whiff of rotteness. “What the hell is *that*?”

Allman said, “I think it’s a whale calf, maybe a Humpback.” It explained the flocks of seagulls. He shrugged narrow shoulders. “Death is part of life, so we think of it as the smell of life.”

“Say what?”

Lonnie’s philosophy ended at the Canucks’ chances of winning the Stanley Cup; he was dangerously suspicious of ‘wingnuts’. Seeger’s looks might earn her immunity; Allman had a strike against him as a rival for the girl.

“Death reminds us that time is a gift,” said Seeger. “It tells us we’re lucky.”

“I’ve never seen a dead whale,” I said. Lonnie frowned, then realized he hadn’t either. The prospect was grossly fascinating.

“It makes me sad,” said Seeger. “The smell is awful, but Allie says it helps us face what life deals us. Nature shows us her dead to say she’s sick. A whale is an important message.”

“Did Allie check it with a stethoscope? Stick a thermometer up its bum?”

Allman stiffened, eyeing Lonnie with reluctant missionary zeal. “It’s global warming, man. Toxic algal blooms poison the food chain. If whale calves die, so can our children.”

I imagined wingnut alarms going off and got ready to intervene; Allman was built like the 97-pounder in the muscle ads. Seeger went inside and brought out several driftwood carvings.

“Allie made these.” She handed Lonnie a raven, me an orca. The craftsmanship was impressive, painstakingly detailed with inlays of shell and mother-of-pearl to echo First Nations patterns. A bigger piece, a Spirit bear in creamy wood, she set beside Lonnie, puffing slightly.

“I imagine you as a Spirit bear,” she smiled.

“Beauty!” Lonnie ran sausage fingers over it with kindred reverence. “Are they albinos?”

“Not albino. A subspecies of black bear called the Kermode bear,” said Allman.

“Their color makes them special,” said Seeger.

“Africans used albinos for sacrifices,” said Lonnie, grinning. “Virgins too.”

“If you want results you have to use your best.” Her eyes twinkled.

She leaned to collect the raven from him and a silver charm dangled from her slender neck.

It was too good an opportunity to miss. He reached for it, just brushing her breasts.

“What’s this?”

“My Celtic Knot. I bought it in the hospital gift shop. It seemed a nice thing to wear in a sad place.”

“Nice,” agreed Lonnie. He released the charm and his hand bussed her thigh.

Allman watched Lonnie and I saw his eyes were blue. There were plenty of Lonnies and Allman must be used to them. Seeger seemed unconscious of her looks. I handed her the orca and she winked. I laughed.

We enjoyed our shared breakfast, politely declining quinoa and Chana Masala or beef jerky and sausage without giving offense, savoring steaming coffee. The clouds began to tatter in the sky like arctic ice breaking up in the blue ocean. Across the Strait the Olympic Peninsula conjured startling ice cream mountains, and overhead crows mixed salt and pepper with seagulls, adding raucous *caws* to the cacophony of shore life.

I called for another song and Allman brought out his fiddle. As he tuned up Lonnie offered his flask to Seeger. Allman said, “No.”

Lonnie's black eyebrows rose. He stood and a pale Seeger quietly shook her head. He stared back and forth between them, then something like comprehension washed over his face.

"When you get a bad reaction—is it pain in your lymph nodes?" She nodded. "You can't sleep because of night sweats?" Seeger and Allman exchanged glances; Allman's eyes fell.

Lonnie poured the whisky into the sand. It was as if the light emptied out of his face.

Seeger laid her slight hand on his arm. "It's alright sweetheart, really. But how did you guess?"

Lonnie replied, "My sister" and Seeger crooned softly, "I'm so sorry." I drew a blank. Lonnie never talked family.

He sat down stiffly, old suddenly.

They played Seeger's version of "The Women of Ireland", Allman leading on violin, Seeger on guitar and singing in Gaelic. The lovely haunting music soared in the bracing air—the most beautiful song I've ever heard. When it ended Lonnie wiped at flooding tears with the back of his hand. Seeger leaned and touched her forehead to his and kissed him and smoothed back his dark hair. Allman silently put away his fiddle.

We spent the rest of that day exploring, joining local beachcombers among barnacle-crusting rocks, dodging the wild foaming surf that spilled over the encroaching land and tried to pull it back into the Salish Sea. Seeger proudly showed us her name carved on a giant drift log jammed against the cliffs, cursive letters beautifully cut in deep relief. And we mourned the sad, bloated carcass at water's edge rocked by waves and pecked by birds. At day's end Lonnie and I left, promising to stay in touch and it was dark when we reached the parking lot.

“What was that all about?” I asked as we drove away.

He said, “Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.” I was surprised he’d ever heard of it.

“My sister had it. She couldn’t drink either, because of the pain.”

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Lonnie travelled down to Seattle in the months that followed as Seeger underwent her second round of treatment. I visited as often as I could, but I learned later she lost her fight in the late autumn, as the last leaves blanketed the wet earth and they solemnly entrusted her ashes to Mother Pacific. Lonnie dropped off the radar and Allman moved to Georgia, silent until he came to hike the West Coast Trail.

The intervening seasons reshaped Sombrio, restacking the driftwood and drawing new patterns among rocks and sand, but Seeger’s name was still there; etched inexpertly beneath it was Lonnie’s.

I slid Seeger’s chain into a cylinder match case and prepared to tie it to the massive log. If Lonnie was still out there, he’d come back here. Otherwise, one day a great storm would tear the ancient drifter off the beach and set it free in Seeger’s ocean.

A little girl stopped to watch. “Like a message in a bottle,” she said. She looked five, blond hair curling under a sailor’s cap, in shorts and rubber boots, lugging a tiny bucket and shovel.

I slid out the Celtic Knot and dangled it sparkling in the sunlight. She gasped.

“*Oh*, it’s *so* pretty! It twinkles because it’s happy!”

An older couple paused on the beach; the woman smiled and called, “Come on Jay.”

I cocked an eyebrow at Jay. “Do you think if you wore this it would make people happy?” Her eyes widened and she nodded. A second girl, taller, came to stand beside her.

We asked grandmamma's permission and Jay hopped joyfully when she said yes.

I spent a few minutes watching distant ships ply the Strait. Jay and her sister Crystal waved from down the beach, and the sea, calm now, shattered the sunlight into a million shards.

I heard echoes of Seeger's voice singing the lovely Irish Gaelic, her three lines I'd learned in English.

There's a girl in fair Erin who waits singing

Her music lays spring o'er the days

And a big clumsy bear steals her heart away ...

And the brilliant gentled surf smiled across the empty years, *farewell*.

End

David Reichheld lives in Sooke, BC, with his wife Nancy. He is a member of the Sooke Writers' Collective and his story settings tend to feature beautiful locations on the west coast of Vancouver Island— the Sooke Basin, beaches along the Juan de Fuca Marine Trail, the hills and forests overlooking the glittering Salish Sea.

Kierkegaard wrote, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." David believes there couldn't be a better place to weave narratives of our discovery and re-discovery of love, companionship, and sometimes inconsolable loss, and his goal is to craft stories worthy of the incomparable settings and the philosopher's timeless insight.