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Falling in Love with a New Found Land

Kyle Spencer

Now that I was above the tree line, my only shelter became small boulders, not exactly ideal. Nevertheless, I knelt beside a boulder and began to examine my situation. My first step was tearing off the wet masses of cloth that were once my gloves. This action revealed my hands to be like a bunch of raisins, soaked in water, and stuck in a forty-degree cooler for an hour. Not my idea of a comfortable vacation trip. I moved around the rock until a diagonal force of cold rain pierced through my soaked jeans and sent shivers through my body. Whoosh-swoosh. Moving back into the previous position, the gravity of my position sunk in. The weather was driving rain so diagonally that, if I placed myself on the right side of the boulder, the rain would fly right over my head. Today, when I hear the sound of wind, whoosh, and rain, swoosh, memories pour in of that boulder and those conditions piercing through my clothes. I reached for sustenance but the rain got there first. The roast moose sandwich I had been eagerly awaiting looked and tasted like gravy, bread, and meat after a long bath. Not my idea of food. After wallowing in self-pity for fifteen minutes, the only other person as crazy as me to be out in such awful conditions staggered up to the boulder, my grandfather.

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The sea looked on us with its ever-present unblinking eye as we, my brother and my eighteen-year old self, carried its victim, driftwood, across the rocky beach. We could see our grandfather starting a fire down the beach. If the World's Most Interesting Man had a brother, my grandfather would fit the description. When a person meets him, besides his lack of hearing accompanied by the shrill shrieking of his hearing aids, they discover just how different he is from every other eighty-year old American Caucasian male. One of these quirks is a place. Instead of trekking south with the rest of his generation, he flies, to this date, probably more than fifteen

times, to a cold island in the Canadian North Atlantic, the province of Newfoundland. Of these fifteen trips, I have gone on five. This was my fifth trip and we were visiting one of our favorite spots on that island, a driftwood shelter. Driftwood is wooden debris that strong waves snatched from coastline forests, whoosh, and, during a storm thrust to shore, swoosh. While in the sea, the salt water pierces the wood hardening and bleaching it. In Newfoundland, the sea covers whole beaches with this debris. On one particular beach, fifteen years ago, my grandfather piled some of this driftwood against a cold cliff side and started a shelter. I saw this shelter during my first visit to Newfoundland in 2003. Unfortunately, in a large storm, the sea claimed it. Without hesitating my grandfather constructed another shelter in the same location only to have the sea take it as well. Not an ideal situation but he persevered and pioneered a new location for the shelter to be located.

Now, during this last trip to Newfoundland in 2015, my brother and I were carrying a large piece of driftwood towards the third shelter. The salty air scent touched my nose and I thought of all the sea had done against not only that piece of wood but also the other shelters my grandfather had erected. We stopped to look upon his creation a scattering of loose tree limbs, lobster traps, and rope. It is not, by any means, a beach resort. It does not fully keep the rain out nor does it provide great seating inside its wet, mossy interior. Nevertheless, its value, like Newfoundland itself, does not rely upon its amenities; it is about its meaning to him and the rest of my family. It is a sign of his love for that island in Canada. I climb up the face of the shelter with one part of the beam in my hand and the other in my brother's hand. The beam makes several loud clunks on the rocks below but I continue to hoist one side while my brother supports the other. It takes a while but we finally lift it above the structure and send it straight through the driftwood below. We are building a roof for the second floor of the shelter and that piece will serve as a support. As my brother and I set the beam in place, my grandfather stands back from his fire and admires our engineering feat. I also like to think that he was proudly thinking about how we will continue on his love for the shelter and, more importantly, the island of Newfoundland.

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My family began to leave as my six-year old self sat in the tall grass by a little red and white lighthouse. My love for Newfoundland began during my first trip to Newfoundland in 2003. As I sat there in the grass, my mom walked up and sat by me. We looked and waited together. The date was September 2003, my first trip to Newfoundland. As a six-year old boy my biggest obsession was whales. I remember measuring the lengths of whales in my backyard and reading every whale book and diagram in my library. "If I could only see a real, live whale," I thought. The chance came when my parents announced that we were traveling to an odd island in Canada that, apparently, someone had newly found, Newfoundland. Now here I was sitting in a location where locals, from time to time, spot whales off-shore. My mom and I knelt to pray for a sighting as the rest of my family waited to leave. Looking out again I could see a fishing boat hauling in its catch with seagulls communicating in loud shrieks above. No whale. I squeezed my eyes shut to pray again. Suddenly, my mom exclaimed, "What was that? I think I saw something!" My eyes opened as if my alarm had gone off for wedding day. "Whale! Where?" "Oh, sorry Kyle, I was just seeing things." That's when it happened. Without a doubt, a whale surfaced. That was the time a miracle happened and God clearly answered my prayer. Whoosh-swoosh, the whale surfaced and blew a blast of water out its blowhole. Thirteen years later, that moment by the little red and white lighthouse continues to penetrate my heart.

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Twelve years after the miracle by the little lighthouse, it was late may and snow had yet to release its grip from the land. The trail up the mountain was no exception. After passing the base camp, a two-mile hike, my brother and my eighteen-year-old self decided to continue our climb around the back edge of the mountain. By this time, despite the appearance of our surroundings, we were so hot that we decided to go shirtless. In hindsight, a bit more sunscreen should have accompanied our decision. Furthermore, due to constantly stepping on wet snow, swoosh-swoosh, our shoes, socks, and lower jeans were soaked. The worst part would be the occasional misguided step when my leg would crash through several feet of snow. Not pleasant.

A force of nature sits on the western edge of Newfoundland called Gros Morne Mountain. While its name, translated from French, means Lonely Mountain a better translation would be Gross Mountain since, to the casual observer, it looks like a gigantic pile of gravel. All of my past three visits have included a trip up this pile of rocks to its beautiful panoramic view. My last visit in 2015 however, involved several complications such as snow and sunburns along with a special furry surprise. “Woah! Moose!” I exclaimed. My brother and I had just run into a full-grown moose, fifteen feet away! Now, to a normal person, this would be grounds for turning around. Not for us. With our steps, despite our pace, still creating sound in the snow we cautiously walked around it. The moose calmly sat in the snow like a large, furry cow and gave no heed to our presence. Turning around, with the moose still in sight, a majestic view of snow-covered mountains and a scent of snow melting off pine trees hit me. Times like that have defined my experience in Newfoundland. My jeans and boots were soaked to the core and my skin was forming a painful sunburn but those hindrances were part of the experience. My brother and I were far away from any notable civilization with the only other human life being a few hikers. A moose lounged in the snow before us and a gravel mountain lay behind us. All the imperfections like our sunburns and wet feet only acted to make the moment more genuine. In fact, that is what makes Newfoundland special. Newfoundland is raw, beautiful and does not cover its harsh edges. None of my five trips went without wet boots and biting cold weather but it is because of those things that I have developed a genuine love for that island in the North Atlantic.

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As my grandfather staggered up to the boulder, my thoughts were not on my love for Newfoundland, probably the opposite, but it takes those hard times to develop a true relationship. Newfoundland has little to offer. There are no casinos, amusement parks, warm beaches, or large ski resorts. The weather is cold most of the year and the elements are unforgiving. However, instead of those things being a drawback, they have increased my love for the Newfoundland outdoors. Rested, I summoned my determination and continued on my way with the wind, whoosh, driving rain, swoosh, straight into my back. With a glimmer of inspiration, I

propped my umbrella behind my back. This worked to keep the elements away for a little while but I soon lost grip of my umbrella and watched it glide along the ground into a ditch. I chased it like a wild man. Luckily, no one was crazy enough to be out there to watch as I ran. Finally, after I stepped into a large, muddy puddle it was time to turn around. “Bapa!” I called back to my grandfather, the shock of our situation showing in my voice, “I think it’s time to turn around.” He resolutely nodded. To this day, I wonder whether, if I had not mentioned it, he would have continued to the end of the trail.

By the time I reached the car, I was completely soaked. Thirty-minutes later, my grandfather arrived. My grandfather proceeded to change all his clothes in a nearby porta-potty throwing the wet ones straight into the trash can! Shivering, we blasted the heat all the way back to hot soup and a warm cabin. The car smelled like soaked feet and my hands were still regaining their normal shape but my love for the land was still there. In fact, like love between humans, that hardship deepened my love for Newfoundland. During that moment it was as if when the wind and rain, whoosh-swoosh, pierced my clothes, Newfoundland was also piercing my heart, claiming a part of it.