

boy—man, mute, cheeks burning, a wave of disorientation washing over me, until you broke the stunned silence.

“You hung up on her! Why’d ya do that? Great, that’s just great. Now she’ll think you’re retarded.”

Fast-forward to the painful memories of high school. We remained friends, yet — at school — were distant. You were a reluctant student, little interested in the finer points of *Macbeth* and immune to the logic of algebra. But your hands were magnificent. Mechanical objects were disassembled and reconstructed at your command, something I was completely incapable of.

Socially, you were aloof and withdrawn, a shadow in the back-

ground of teenage posturing. You lived for your time away from school, those days passed outdoors, camping on a riverbank, waking at dawn to practise the solitary art of fly-fishing or, in winter, snowshoeing a trapline you had set. When I accompanied you, tearing myself away from the teenage world you held in contempt, I saw a self-reliant youth, a friend at ease and alive. In turn, I felt relaxed and capable.

At school, I was unable to reciprocate, incapable of drawing you into a wider circle of friends. I couldn’t demonstrate to you the attractiveness of words, the utility of talking to people, the beauty of typed words strung together in a novel. You read to learn something specific; fiction was a waste of time. Similarly, most teenage talk struck you as useless chatter. You avoided people who needed to talk, needed to impress, needed others. You seemed to need no one; I was one of your few friends.

“Geez, Doug. Why do you hang around that loser?” Susan said, dragging dramatically on a cigarette. It was after school; I’d been trying to summon the courage to ask her out.

“Look, Tom may be a hard guy to get to know, but he’s no loser.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you say.

Like, go fish, eh.” She laughed gracelessly.

“Tell you what. If I were ever lost in a snowstorm in the middle of nowhere, I’d rather be with Tom than practically anyone else. He’d figure out how to keep us alive.”

“Like I’d ever be lost in the middle of nowhere anyway.”

“Good point. You don’t need to be in the middle of nowhere. You’re lost

most of the time already,” I said, wondering why I had ever considered asking her out. Young people, I now understand, are afraid of non-conformists.

So they find reasons to ridicule. But the outsider himself is still drawn to the opposite sex, even if he can’t admit that to himself.

I am brought up short by a pungent odour. It is not the prairie smell of freshly turned earth or fragrant clover or of rain building in the distance, but the sickly perfume of hothouse flowers. I open my eyes; thirty years fall away in an instant.

Time. Time changes things. Memories fade. Emotions change colour, dry up and flutter to the ground.

I remember how we drifted apart. You stayed on the land that had revealed its character to you, honing the skill of your hands, learning a trade. I moved to the city to huddle over the

printed word and to consider the cast-off thoughts of scholars. Our lives diverged.

And now I wonder if I really understand what happened to you. I think I do, but still I feel the need to invoke excuses. What’s the buzzword? Closure. I seek closure.

I glance beside me and suddenly feel blessed to have my wife and children with me. How I wish now that you had found a partner, raised a few kids, maybe. Things might have turned out differently. Perhaps.

I look to the front of the chapel and can almost see you there, alone, a bottle of booze beside you: your friend, your crutch. And then I imagine you with a rifle to your head, sweat dripping down your forehead, your finger twitching, and I can nearly hear slurred words, your own voice, pleading, no, no, no.

But we are gathered today, Tom, to say farewell. And I am here to reflect on our time together as we ranged over rolling fields under open skies in the grand freedom of youth. We stand now to leave this place, the air redolent with mourning. I am filled with guilt that your life has ended, whereas mine seems, in its possibilities, to have just begun.

As I walk toward the door, the sun, the big radiant prairie sun, strikes my face.

I will always remember you. For all that I took. And for what I could not return.

**Brian Deady**

Emergency physician  
New Westminster, BC



Art Explosion

## R is for writing

Things cannot always go your way. Learn to accept in silence the minor aggravations.  
— Sir William Osler, 1903

Should equanimity be so widely praised for all physicians? — Howard Spiro, 1992

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