

Unremembered Loss

For all the news and information from the world of Hathrac, and for the story Unremembered Loss.

Issue 38

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Happy October everyone. This month I'm going to try something else a little different. Previously I wrote about the town of Maple Grove through the senses and thoughts of Annay. I want to take you back to Maple Grove and give you a different view of the town that is at the heart of my story. Let me know if you enjoy the start of this trip.

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Douglas G Clarke

A Block in Town

A collection of short stories

You can tell a lot about a town by looking at the people that live there. Take for instance the row of buildings that line the North side of the Promenade immediately before the Duke Rangefield's tower.

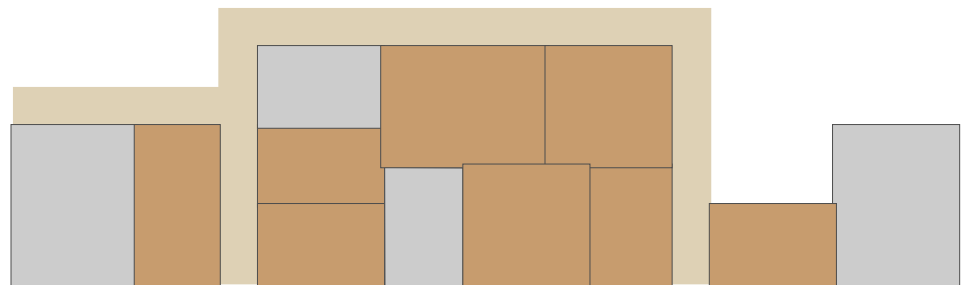
Anchored on each end by stone buildings that date back to the founding of the city, the block represents one of the more expensive areas in the town of Maple Grove. These eight buildings highlight the diversity in the town. Not just the business that occupy them, but also the types of people who run them and frequent them.

From the inn on the West end of the block to the jewelry store at the East end, all of these businesses have been here for hundreds of years and scores of generations.

Each has a proud owner and a loyal clientele. Most have owners who are happy to call Maple Grove home and are friends to the other shopkeepers.

If you ever drop by one of these establishments and find yourself the only customer, there is also no doubt that all of these owners can spin a good tale to keep you in their stores and looking at their goods.

On particularly slow days you may find it hard to escape with your life - or at least with your coin purse still full of silver.



Our first stop is the east end of the block - The Elven Way Fine Jewelry. No one knows how long it has been the closest store to the Duke's castle, just that they have been selling jewelry to royals and the commoners alike for longer than there are records.

"Welcome. Welcome. I'm so glad you decided to drop by," said the young woman behind the counter to the man who had just entered. She flipped the hair that hung across the left side of her face over her shoulder and walked to greet the man.

The man watched her walk around the counter, her blue dress twisting and trailing behind her. To his eyes she looked to be only 19 years of age, a young age to be alone in a jewelry store, but the point of her left ear, now visible, spoke of her true age - likely twice his own sixty-five years.

When she reached him, she reached up on her tiptoes and grasp his forearm in a traditional hunters greeting. The man returned the greeting, wondering how she knew that he was a hunter, since he was wearing his city cloths.

"My name is Balinda. Now that we are greeted, what can I do for you on this beautiful morning"

The man paused, the touch of Balinda's hand still present on his arm even now that she had withdrawn it. He looked around the shop, eyes darting from shelf to shelf.

"My name. It is Herbert, and I ..."

Herbert turned to leave.

"Herbert, that is a wonderful name. Are you here for the Mrs.?" Balinda said in a sing song voice.

Herbert stopped and turned around, his hands shaking a little and with a cracking voice he said, "Yes. It is soon to be our fiftieth anniversary. I thought to buy her a present with the money I have saved, but I can tell already that

I should not be shopping on the high street." He stated to turn again towards the door.

"Fifty years. That is a long time to be with one other, even for an elf. You must love this woman to be drawn into my store."

Herbert paused again. "Aye, I have loved her since I first saw her and waited five years so that I could marry her."

"I am sure that you have given her many fine gifts over the years."

"I am but a hunter."

"You have given her meat to eat and furs to keep her warm."

"True enough, but those are common gifts. I wanted to give her something truly valuable and rare. Something to let her know the depths of my heart."

Balinda spun and walked behind the counter, then stooped and disappeared. Herbert opened the door.

"Here it is," Balinda called. "I knew I had the perfect gift for you love."

Herbert let go of the handle and the door swung shut. He could hear her gentle foot steps approaching him, like those of a hare. He turned around and found her standing there with something in her hand, but her other hand was covering it.

"Before I show you this gift I need to tell you about it and ask you a few questions."

Herbert looked at her, trying to figure out what her game was. He knew that whatever she had in her hand, tho small, would cast more than he could hope to ever have.

"What color are your wife's eyes?"

"Blue."

"Like the sky or a lake?"

"The sky"

"What color is her hair?"

"Twas once red, but tis now white."

"Has she given you children?"

"Yes, three and three grandchildren."

"Then I believe I have the perfect gift for her."

Balinda removed her hand, revealing a silver broach. It's detail was fine, being made from pulled silver and in its center as a blue topaz stone. Around the stone ran forest animals: a fox in copper, another fox opposed it in silver, three bear cubs of gold appeared to be standing on the topaz, and below it were three bobcats.

Herbert stared at it. "It. It is beautiful. But I'll never afford it."

"There you are wrong good sir. For you see the reason this broach is so beautiful and rare to you is because it reminds you of you wife. In truth, but for the bit of gold in it, it is made from common materials, tho expertly combined. No, what is rare is the love you have for your wife."

"How much is it?"

"Your word that in the next year you will bring me the furs of a red fox, a white fox, and a bear, for those are important to you"

A tear rolled down Herbert's face as Balinda put the broach in his hand.

In the middle of the block is a small stone building that houses tables to sit at and a number of fires for cooking, but what the people come for is the company of Chef Nine Fingers, which, despite apocryphal tales to the contrary, was the name he was given at birth.

I knew that The Stag's Leg was a favorite of both the city's elite and the humble hunters. From the moment I open the front door and the aroma of seven different roasting meats greeted me, there was no doubt that I had entered paradise. I soon found myself sitting at a long bar that border the kitchen - I had know to ask for this prized location so that I could watch chef Braze work his magic - waiting to be acknowledged.

It only took a few moments before Chef looked up and caught my eye and then he gave me a little nod.

"Welcome kind sir. I'm honored that you decided to join us this afternoon. Relax now and let me tell you about the roast."

With that he turned around quickly and dashed out of the room. Before he could return with a chunk of meat, a server placed a small bowl with a towel in it in front of me, a small plate and a glass of ale.

"I try to always start with a lean piece of meat," Chef said as he placed the meat on the counter, "but as you can see, there is always a bit of fat that needs to be trimmed away. So, first, I have to evaluate what I've got and make a plan. You see, while I want to get rid of the extra fat, I don't want to damage the meat. I'd rather leave a little fat than damage what's important."

With skilled hands, Chef slid his knife along the edges of the roast, bits of fat falling to the side - with nary a sliver of red among them. When he was done he smiled at his work. "A good start."

Chef then set down his knife and picked up another further down the counter. With it he cut a few strips of meat from an already cooked roast and then placed a few strips on each of our plates. "We will start off your meal with a little roast of beef with rosemary and mustard."

After serving us, he returned to preparing the roast. "This roast is going to be filled. To do that I must flay it. This is much like in life when you want to add something new. You must find a way to separate the pieces of your life so there will be room without having your life fall apart." Chef then took his knife again to the meat and sliced it down the middle, folding the meat apart, until he had almost cut it in to. But, he stopped short of cutting it in two. Instead the meat now lay of the counter, half as thick and twice as wide as before.

Before continuing, chef cut meat from another roast. This time it was slices from the breast of a turkey - gently glazed with lemon and honey.

"Once you are prepared, you must decided what you are going to add. Here is a critical time. If you pick something that is unexciting, bland, what is the point of going to all the work of adding it. If you pick something that is over powering, you will loose the essence of what you started with. However, if you pick something that will complement what you already have the result will be better that if you had left well enough alone."

Chef retrieved a handful of mushrooms, sliced them thin, and then

sautéd them in butter until they started to wilt. Then he added some salt and pepper, and shallot, garlic, and thyme that he had minced. He stirred them until the mushrooms had started to brown - the aroma filled the room and caused my mouth to water. When browned he added a splash of chicken broth to the pan and swirled it around deglazing the pan. When the liquid was almost gone he set the pan aside to cool.

"Do I spend too much time making the filling? When you decide to learn a new skill, archery for example, how much time to you spend learning this new skill? You could spend a couple of hours learning it, and then if you had to use your new skill in battle you would die. On the other hand you could spend ten hours a day shooting and perfecting your new skill until you were the best archer in the land, but then who would you be? You with a new skill, or would your neglect of the rest of your life have left you as an archer who use to be someone else. It is a balance then. I must spend the time to make my filling good, but not neglect the meat still sitting on the counter."

Chef then took the sauce pan of mushrooms and poured its contents onto the meat. He then rolled the meat up in a roll, making sure that the filling stayed inside.

"Putting the roast back together without letting the filling squeeze out, this is the trickiest part. Like when a skill has been learned and the practicing has stopped, as you go back to your regular routine, the new skill wants to slip away.

Somehow you have to find a way to make the new skills part of your everyday life. For my roast I push things back together with my fingers and bind it all together with twine. What twine do you use to bind up your life? Desire. Love. Duty.”

Chef finished tying up the meat and then asked us a question. “Is this piece of meat ready to cook now?”

None of us spoke. I guessed that the answer was no, but I also guessed that the next question would be ‘Why not’ and I didn’t have an answer for that questions. Instead we all looked uncomfortably at each other and waited. Thankful the wait was short. Chef answered his own question.

“Of course not. This piece of meat is like a man who has eaten breakfast but has not gotten dressed. Before it is ready to meet it’s pan it needs to be dressed up - for that we use spices.”

With a flourish of his hands, chef grabbed a half dozen jars from the table and sprinkled some of their contents across the meat.

“Paprika, chile, pepper, salt, and thyme. Some for flavor, some for heat. Not too much of any, but more than just a hint - for in time their favors will mingle and weaken - rubbed in well so it becomes part of the meat. That is how you dress up a roast.

Chef worked in the spice with his hands, the top, the bottom, and even the ends. Then he set the meat on the counter.

“I have another question for you. Do you suppose that roasting is

simply putting a piece of meat in an oven? Of course you don’t. For what would love be if it was only at one pace.”

“No, like when love starts, there must be a flurry of action. To start this roast we must make to burn it to a crisp - we must get its attention - but like love we must be careful to not actually burn it.”

Chef picked up the roast and carried it to a griddle resting over a raging fire. He set the roast onto the griddle and the room was filled with steam and a hissing and popping sound - our senses were also filled with joy. After a few moments he flipped the meat, setting off a new wave of senses.

“I’ve now seared the meat, sealing in its flavors. If I don’t stop now I will soon have a tough or burnt piece of meat. And so like with a lover, once I have her attention, I turn down the heat. It is time to build a relationship - which is not a fast processes, but one forged slowly over time.”

Chef took the roast and put it in a dutch oven. To the oven he add some onions, potatoes and several cups of broth. He then set the oven on the stove and plucked coals from the fire and placed them on top of the ovens lid.

“When I seared I applied heat to one side at a time, but now that I am building the whole, I want to pay attention to the whole - and I want to go slower, building up the complex flavors.”

Chef cut some slice of meat from another roast and placed them on our plates - this one of pork with garlic and rosemary.

“And alas it is this slowness and delicateness that is now our enemy. This roast will not be ready to remove from the oven for another four hours. Even then it will not be ready. For like in courting love, you do not follow the months of building a relationship with the stress of a wedding ceremony - the stress of which might tear you apart from your lover.”

“No, you must let your love rest for a bit, no longer building, but just being. For the roast, the resting allows the meat to set so that when it is cut it hold it flavors. So when I remove the roast from the oven I will let it rest a quarter of an hour before the ceremony.”

Chef retrieved another roast - the twin of the one he just put in the oven.

“And this one is ready. Ready for the knife and the serving. For the serving and the enjoying.”

He cut us each pieces of the roast, some potato and onion - placing them on our plates.

“And so I give you the product of my love and wish for you your own love.”

Chef busied himself with other work as he looked forward to the evening’s dinners. I and my fellow afternoon diners enjoyed our meals and in silence I thought of how I will approach life - eyes opened by a man’s love of food and life.