



Deathbed Promise

RICK GRAF

I stood by my friend R.J. “Mac” Macauley as he lay dying and gave up his last few breaths. I wished I could give him a more fitting passing than a hospice bed. Mac deserved a funeral pyre so his spirit could rise from his body on the enveloping flames and vanish in the ether. A combat veteran who survived hellish-fire fights, dumb-ass orders, and what lurked in the jungles of South Vietnam, Mac earned a pyre over cremation in an inorganic furnace that disintegrates human corpses.

I kissed his forehead before the staff came in to turn off the monitors and remove the IV drip. After that, I waited in the room holding Mac’s hand as I tried to suppress the pain in my heart and wiped my tears before someone arrived to take Mac’s body.

As I left the hospice, I wondered now what? Mac had no relatives. His only friends had been men he served with in Vietnam. They were all dead. So it’ll be you, Reece Adler, and an honor guard at the national cemetery burial site. Taps played. A soldier placed a folded American flag near the urn with Mac’s ashes. Before leaving, he gave me the flag.

I cried again and hoped Mac didn't see me. Ah, for Pete's sake, I'm thirty. To settle myself, I pictured how I met Mac at a resort on Cross Lake, part of the White Fish Chain of Lakes in Minnesota.

It was a pleasant summer day. My mother stood at an outdoor grill cooking hamburgers near a picnic table where she had set her bowls of homemade potato salad and coleslaw, buns, and condiments. As we got ready to eat, a 6-foot lean-looking man who looked like an outdoorsman approached us. He wore rumpled khaki cargo shorts, hiking boots, a beat-up hat, and a summer tan. Except for the beer in one hand and a hot dog in a bun in the other, he looked like he had returned from maneuvers in the boonies. He asked if he could take a bit of mustard from the bottle he saw.

My mother laughed. "Mister," she said, "it looks like you could use more than mustard. Are you alone?" He smiled, nodded politely, and introduced himself as R.J. "Mac" Macauley. He said everyone called him Mac.

She said, "Please join us for lunch because I made plenty of food."

He accepted.

That day was the first of many I would spend with Mac. He became more than my BFF. With my mother's blessing, he also became my proxy father. Mac was gone now, and I couldn't do anything about it. So, the only thing left for me to do for Mac was to fulfill a promise he made me make before he lost consciousness.

Like many Vietnam veterans, Mac had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But with help and his diligence, he learned to manage it. Even so, he said many veterans weren't as fortunate as him. They became homeless, unable to cope with PTSD, and committed suicide. He also let me in on something he never told anyone else.

He said the war changed him. In Vietnam, he observed Buddhists using sound bowls for meditation and spirituality. It awakened his spirit.

I returned home to the refuge I shared with Mac after my mother died. When Mac's health began to fail, I was there for him. I knew he left me everything he owned—his house, savings, investments, and personal belongings. He had me read his will and showed me a sealed envelope addressed to me that said, "Open after my death."

As much as I wanted to retrieve that letter from Mac's safe and read it, I waited until morning. Instead, I crashed on the couch with an afghan and pillow, flicked on the tube, and streamed digital photos from my iPhone to the TV screen. They captured moments of my adventures with Mac. As the images advanced across the screen, memories and feelings overwhelmed me. I fell asleep and awoke in the morning to birds chirping.

After showering and shaving, I read Mac's letter as I sipped coffee. And to my surprise, when I opened the envelope, I saw six five-hundred-dollar bills. I smiled. That Mac! He loved to surprise me.

Reece,

If you're reading my letter, I'm dead. That's blunt but a fact I can't change. I'll pretend I saw the look on your face when you saw the cash. Use it to fulfill your promise to me.

I want you to return to Cross Lake, where we met, and partake in a sound bowl therapy and meditation session at the resort on the peninsula. It's the only one there. It helped me. It's why I was at Cross Lake. I attended the session the night before I joined you and your mother for lunch.

I didn't want to leave you. Grief overcame me when I knew I would, but I had no choice. If true love

never dies, then neither does grief. Like PTSD, you learn how to manage it.

*Love Always,
Mac*

I cried before, but I now sobbed. I'm not sure how long. Damn you, Mac! I phoned the resort on Cross Lake to reserve a spot. Today was Tuesday. The next session was on Sunday.

I left for Cross Lake on Friday afternoon. Because the drive from St. Paul takes almost three hours, I'd stay two nights and spend Saturday canoeing on Cross Lake, one of the lakes in the White Fish Chain. The peacefulness of nature and the motion of water soothed me, and the outdoors linked me to Mac.

Morning light filled the horizon on Cross Lake and brushed away the last veil of darkness as I pushed off the shore in my rental canoe. I set Mac's military backpack near me. I had filled it with enough food, water, and essentials for the day. After a few dozen paddle strokes, I moved comfortably through the still water. I hugged the shoreline to watch for wildlife, inhale the fresh scent of pine needles, and listen to bird songs that resonated in the forest of white pine, paper birch, and white cedar trees.

I thought the serenity I felt climaxed my senses until I heard the tremolo and wail calls of the common loon, unlike any other sound in the wild. It raptured me. My spine tingled when I listened to its haunting sound break the stillness. It felt mystical and ancient; time seemed to suspend itself. My wristwatch said noon. I had been out for four hours.

I pulled ashore and beached the canoe in a clearing. I sat with my backpack, took out an energy bar, sandwich, and apple, and ate them as I relaxed in the warm sun. I fell asleep. It was two-thirty when I awoke. I tossed the backpack in the canoe, pushed it offshore, and paddled at a good clip. My canoe had no lights, so I had to return before darkness.

I was bushed when I reached my cabin. I removed my boots, thinking I'd lie on the sofa for a while. Instead, I fell fast asleep in my clothes. I figured the stress of Mac's death and yesterday's activity drained me. I'd spend Sunday afternoon re-reading a book I found in the cabin. It was by Sigurd Olson, an author and wilderness advocate.

Since this would be my last night here, I ate a late dinner at the resort restaurant. I couldn't pass up the featured entrée: baked walleye, wild rice, and mixed vegetables. After dinner, I walked to the outdoor arena with a spectacular evening view of the lake. I saw seven white-frosted crystal bowls arranged in a semi-circle and a woman in a loose-fitting cream-colored gown sitting in the Lotus position. I introduced myself.

Kayla introduced herself as a sound bowl therapist. Her Vietnamese father had brought the practice from his homeland when he immigrated to the US after the war. She learned the technique from him. She said each bowl emitted a subtle tone at a different pitch to engage the body's seven chakras. The sound massaged them and administered relief from pain and stress. She said soldiers with PTSD discovered its benefits.

I sat momentarily on my mat, absorbing my surroundings. The moon cast its light across the lake like a shimmering road. I imagined myself walking down it. I could hear water washing on the beach. Moments before Kayla tapped the first bowl, I laid down and breathed through my diaphragm.

The subtle tone and pitch changed as she tapped another bowl in a spiritual cadence. Then came a call-and-response I didn't expect from the loons. Their tremolo and wail harmonized with the sound of the bowls. The stress I carried lifted from my shoulders. I felt a new awareness. Was this the spirituality Mac had spoken of—the chi—energy that connects all living things? I felt Mac's presence.