A Message from the Deep

You may be gone from my sight, but you will never be gone from my heart.

~Henry van Dyke, Jr.

When I was a junior in high school, I was stunned by the beauty of a new girl named Joyce. She was striking, with long, thick blond hair and an open face. I memorized her schedule and when possible I would station myself in the high school corridors and gaze at her with longing as she passed by. This went on for months until I found out that she was quite religious, attending the after-hours Christian meetings on campus.

I joined the group and finally initiated some clumsy conversation. More conversations ensued. For me, it was almost a miracle to look at her, much less speak, yet we exchanged ideas and laughter, and I felt the warmth of her growing friendship.

Our first “date” was hiking to a nearby park to play Frisbee. A revelation: Joyce’s willowy limbs belied her sinewy strength—she could fling a Frisbee a marvelous distance, and would madly dash, long legs wheeling to catch one in extended flight. Better yet, she would laugh with mad abandon at the disc’s carry, whether she’d thrown it or caught it. She was splendidly uninhibited and natural, a sweet soul. I was in love.

I knew her first as a beautiful athlete, then discovered that she was a fine photographer, a lover of literature, a friend to animals, and an early environmentalist. My love deepened; she constantly amazed
me with her fresh outlook, her unselconscious grace, her humor. We were together for almost two years before I betrayed her with an earlier girlfriend. When I confessed, she was shocked and said, "I don't know you." I had fallen so far, for a cheap act that baffled her in its incongruity. She took me back, but there was distance between us.

Still tenuously together, we went to different colleges, separated by several hundred miles. We wrote and saw each other on long weekends, but when I got the inevitable "Dear Tom" letter, I wasn't that surprised. I remember a line from the letter: She said she had felt for the longest time that I was merely "floating on the surface," a sham of sorts, a person without depth. The acuity of that remark pierced me like an arrow.

We still saw each other occasionally over the ensuing years, uncomfortable friends, me with an unyielding longing, her somewhat removed. She had a college boyfriend for a couple of years. Later, she took up with an adventurer, a fellow photographer, with whom she deeply connected. They lived together for a bit, and then decided to go on a photographic venture down an obscure river in Colombia. They disappeared, and were never found despite repeated visits there by both sets of parents.

I was living in Seattle when a mutual friend sent me a newspaper article about her disappearance. The friend was someone I would eagerly grill when I saw her: "How's Joyce? Is she still with that guy? Does she seem happy?" Though I'd been in a few relationships since our breakup, Joyce was still the woman I loved. Reflecting on the course of our relationship had never felt like an ignorant obsession with me; I felt her to be my soulmate, and that I'd asininely squandered something precious.

More time passed, but memories of Joyce stayed. I still thought of her frequently, longingly. It seemed clear that she wouldn't be found — she was gone. And I never had the chance to tell her I still loved her.

But one night, after a day when I hadn't even thought about her, I had a dream. It was a dream unlike any I'd ever had: shockingly real in every tactile sense of sight, sound, and touch. I was underwater, and those waters were gently moving. Maybe a lake, or a river? The water
was crystal clear. I looked ahead of me, and there she was: Joyce, her long, blond hair moving with the current.

She was looking at me, and she raised her hand in greeting. Then she pointed to the water around her. "This is what happened. We both drowned in the river." But I didn't exactly hear the words; I felt them in my mind. Joyce was communicating directly to my heart. It was both terrifying and exhilarating. She told me that it was fine, that it was over, that things were okay.

We faced each other in the water, calmly, affectionately. I told her in the same way that she communicated with me that I missed her, and that I loved her. She smiled and nodded the same to me. And then I woke up — and that was as startling as waking up in the river.

I had a profound sense that indeed she had drowned in the river. That she knew how I cherished her, and that she wanted to tell me what happened, to give me a final goodbye, and to wish me well. I am not much given to otherworldly incidents, or belief in ghosts or even an afterlife, but I believe that message came from Joyce, from her sweet soul.

— Tom Bentley —