

## By the Light of a Hurricane Lantern

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Climbing silently out of her bedroom window, Annie ran quietly across the dew-covered grass. With only a sliver of the new moon in the sky, God's thumbnail, they called it, the dark night allowed her to escape without detection. Within minutes, she slipped stealthily through the gate and turned toward the shimmering lake. Suddenly a hand covered her mouth and another arm encircled her waist. A muffled shriek broke the stillness of the night. "Hush," came a voice, "It's me."

As the tension left her body, Annie's arms wrapped around Hayden's neck. "Oooh, you scared me! I was afraid someone had caught me."

With that, Hayden, grabbed her hand. "Come on, I've fixed a place for us. God willing, it will be our home for the rest of our lives." Laughing quietly, Hayden and Annie ran through the woods down to the lake. Stepping carefully onto the hand drawn ferry, Hayden quickly pulled them across the expanse of water, then gallantly helped Annie ashore. Leading her down a short path, he pulled her through the doorway. "Next time we cross this threshold, Love, I'll be carrying you in my arms as my bride. Releasing her hand, he quickly lit the hurricane lamp on the table then proudly showed her the cabin he had painstakingly built and furnished with a table,

chairs, and blankets. She had known he'd been busy on a project, but until now he'd kept it a secret, a surprise for his bride-to-be.

Exclaiming in joy, Annie covered his face in kisses. Their dream of setting up a household now became a reality.

For the next few hours, they sat and talked and made their plans. Finally, Hayden said, "We'll be married, then nobody will be able to part us. As long as this is what you want, my Annie. Are you sure that you are willing to give up your life, your family, to marry me? Before I became a soldier, I was only a blacksmith's apprentice. I'm a simple man. Is a simple life going to be enough for you? With her heartfelt smile and kiss of acceptance, Annie committed herself to the man she would love for all eternity. "Very well then, meet me here a week from today. I'll bring a carriage and have a minister waiting for us. We'll leave his church as man and wife."

The week passed quickly. Annie filled her days doing her regular chores, then at night, she sewed furiously on her gown. She may not have a wedding with her family and friends watching, but she would have a new gown. Finally, the night before their planned rendezvous, Annie slipped the silvery blue gown over her head. As it slid down her body, she was thrilled to see that it fit her perfectly other than the fact that it was a little bit long. No mind, she thought to herself, I'll just have to remember to hold it up when I walk. With that she hid the gown and went to sleep.

The next morning, Annie was up bright and early and spent the day with her mother. It was washing day, so she patiently helped her mom wash and hang all the family's clothes. It was a bittersweet day for Annie, knowing this might be the last time she spent with her mother. She wished desperately things could be different. It took no effort to remember her father's anger

the one time he had seen her talking to Hayden. The uniform that defined the man she loved only infuriated her father. "I'll not have you marrying a soldier," he'd raged. Seeing the desire to argue with him, he'd continued. "No. Just no, Annie. I lost my son in this blasted war. That uniform he wore with so much pride cost him his life. I will not lose you too." Annie understood his anguish; she felt it too. Thomas had been a good man, and the family had mourned his death. But true love is more powerful than the restraints of life, and she wanted Hayden enough to defy her father. She hoped, in time, he would forgive her and accept her marriage.

That night, tired from the long day of hard work, Annie bid her parents good night and went upstairs to the loft. Not blessed with any siblings, other than Thomas, Annie had the place to herself. When all was quiet downstairs and her parents fast asleep, Annie repeated the process of last week, this time donning her new gown and packing a small bag. She slipped out through her window, climbed to the ground, and headed to the lake. It had rained a great deal that week, so the water was high as she stepped carefully onto the ferry. Pulling herself across, hand over hand, all went well until she prepared to step off onto the dock on the island. Forgetting about the long hem of her gown, she tripped, hit her head on the pier, and fell into the rain-swollen lake. Her heavy gown did the rest of the work, pulling her quickly under the water, only a few bubbles marking her descent to the bottom of the murky lake.

An hour later, Hayden discovered her body. Delayed by the need to correct the behavior of one of the soldiers under his command, Hayden was only a few minutes, but a lifetime of grief late. He had been thrilled to see that the ferry was on the island shore, for he knew that Annie was there waiting for him. But when he hauled the ferry back, then pulled himself across the water and ran to the cabin, he realized that the cabin was dark and empty. Running back to the

shore, he saw the golden glimmer of Annie's hair under the water, and, with a cry of anguish, he dove down and pulled her lifeless body from the depths.

After the funeral, to which he could only observe from a distance, Hayden carried on, because that's what soldiers do, but his heart was never the same. He rose in rank and respect, and he treated others of all ages, ranks and status with equal courtesy, but the smile that came across his face never quite reached his eyes.

A year later, still devastated by his loss, Hayden returned to the cabin for the first time since that tragic night. With grief filled limbs, he slowly pulled himself across the ferry and entered the cabin, empty since the night he and Annie had so joyfully made their plans.

Lighting the hurricane lantern, Hayden sank to the floor, overcome with the memories of their time together. Smiling nostalgically, he remembered their first encounter when he had seen the waif try to steal one of Annie's tomatoes. Clearly, he hadn't learned the art of stealth yet, so when his grubby hand reached into her basket, he'd ended up spilling the contents.

That was the moment he'd fallen in love with her, Hayden was sure. Instead of chastising the boy or calling for the local sheriff, Annie had looked at the terror-stricken boy with compassion. "Here," she'd said, "If you'll help me pick up all of this produce, I'll let you have the tomato." Seeing his look of shock, she'd added, "but I also want a promise."

The young boy had looked at her with hopeless eyes, expecting some type of punishment, but he'd bravely nodded.

Smiling gently, Annie finished. "Promise me you'll come to me and ask for food the next time you're hungry. Don't steal from me, just ask. I'll give you what I can."

A big smile ran across the boy's face as he nodded in agreement. Hayden knew Annie had made two conquests that day, the child's and his. She'd be within her rights to have the boy chastised in public disgrace, but instead she'd chosen compassion.

Helping the two gather the tomatoes and return them to her basket, Hayden had looked into eyes the color of a summer evening and had known that she would be his. His pursuit of her began that day. Then, the one time her father had seen them together sealed their fate. They would never get his blessing. Weeks of secret courtship had followed until Annie agreed that they belonged together. Then months of finding places to meet and trying, to no avail, to find a way to receive her parents' acceptance passed. Stolen moments made poignant with the realization that they might be caught and separated at any time. Then finally the plan to marry. Hayden allowed himself to remember the joy of that night.

Closing his eyes, he could almost feel her lips, warm against his. Pulling her closer into his arms, they danced to music that only they could hear. Breathing her in, he could almost smell her scent, a combination of lilac, vanilla and Annie. Still with his eyes closed, he stroked the silky softness of her hair and allowed her essence to surround him. For a few minutes only, he promised himself, he would allow himself to remember, then he knew, for his own sanity, that he must put her memories away, like housewives packed their winter garments into cedar trunks when spring arrived.

Her arms wrapped around him, winding around his neck and into his hair, just like she used to do. Disbelieving, he slowly opened his eyes, and found himself gazing into deep blue pools of love.

Dreaming. He had to be dreaming. That's it. There was no way... of course. Unless he'd lost his sanity. "Annie," he said softly, tentatively, afraid that he was asleep; more afraid he would wake up. "Baby, I've missed you so much," Hayden said with tears coursing down his face.

"Shhh," was her reply. "I'm here now."

Cradling her in his arms, Hayden sighed, more than willing to suspend reality for a few minutes, or the night, or the rest of his life, as long as she was willing, or able, to stay. Throughout the night they talked, they laughed, they loved. He learned that she was able to return once a year on the anniversary of her death.

As dawn began to break through the darkness of the moonless night, they embraced, saying their farewells. "Promise me," Annie cried, "that you will move on with your life. Find someone to love and marry. Raise a family. Live your life for both of us. But if you are still single, one year from tonight, come back here and we will have another night together."

"Ah, sweetheart," he sighed. "All I can promise is to try. My love for you is too strong; my heartache at your loss too great. Maybe someday..."

"I'll be here every year until the year you don't come. If you don't show up, I'll know, and I'll understand. And most importantly, I'll rejoice for you that you have found someone to love, someone to give you joy." With that, the lovers embraced once more, and Annie slowly faded away.

Year after year passed, and each anniversary, Hayden, standing straight and tall in his uniform, was at the cabin at dark waiting for his Annie. Every year was like no time had passed

and the two joyously spent the night talking the talk of young lovers. And every year Annie asked for the same promise and every year Hayden promised to try.

Then the year arrived that Hayden wasn't at the cabin when Annie appeared, and she knew. But even as tears ran down her face, she was happy to know that Hayden had found another to love. After she lit the hurricane lantern, she stood silently reminiscing. Then, touching her fingers to her lips, she silently sent him a kiss of farewell. Letting him go, she turned to leave, when she felt a strong presence behind her, then his strong arms came around her. "Oh Hayden," she cried, "I thought you had finally allowed yourself to move on, to live a full life."

"I tried, Annie, I really did, but I just couldn't let you go. I'm sorry I'm late, Love," came Hayden's voice, but when Annie turned, at first all she could see was the hurricane lantern flickering in the night. She could hear him, feel his strong arms, but she couldn't see him.

"Are you..." she started.

"Yes, Love, a musket shot. Direct hit."

"Then you're..."

"Yes, I'm a spirit, too. But happy one. We can be together now."

"But Hayden," Annie sobbed, "I wanted a life for you – full of love and children, and grandchildren, and rocking chairs here on our porch."

"Annie my love, I just wanted you." With that Hayden grasped her hand and they gently moved off into the night, slowly fading into the starlit sky.

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*Young children dare each other to draw themselves across the old hand pulled ferry, but although some have made it to the edge of the lake, none have been able to disrupt the silence of the lake waters or enter the cabin. Only the occasional lovers have entered the old dusty cabin and therein escaped the vagrancies of life that threatened to pull them apart.*

*If you seek personal knowledge, they say, only those whose love is true may enter the sacred space of the old cabin on the island in the lake, and once inside, those whose hearts are pure may find their own paths to a lifetime of love.*