

love lost

“I remember the day I moved back home with Murray and Mary Beth. It was a nice warm spring day at the end of March in the year 1916. I felt that I had long since overstayed my welcome at my folks’ farm. I know they didn’t really feel that way, but it was time to get back to my own house and do for myself. It was a teary good-bye. Ma and Pa and Jane all kissed the twins good-bye. They would miss having the little ones around.

I had been over to my house several times to clean and tidy up after my long absence. I was feeling melancholy about being away so long. It was time to bring my babies to live in their own home, the one their father had spent so much time building for us. It would be nice to sleep in my own bed, the one that Jed and I had shared. I had missed our home.

It proved to be a busy and tiring day getting unpacked and settling in the twins. I had only expected one baby when I had set up the baby’s room, not two. Anyway, everything worked out, and Jed’s mother and sisters had all come by to help. Jed’s family was excited to have me and the babies home. Now they could spend more time with the twins. They had stocked my cupboards with groceries and the supplies I needed. Of course, Ma sent me home with lots of things, too. I didn’t know how I’d repay everyone for all their help and kindness. I figured when Jed got home we’d have to find a way.

After a few weeks, we settled into a routine. Most of my time was spent caring for Murray and Mary Beth. They sure kept my mind occupied. They helped fill the void I’d felt when Jed had left. I was still really lonesome at night after the babies were in bed, but during the daylight hours the twins didn’t leave me much time to think.

I was outside hanging out the laundry one morning about a month later when I saw Ma and Pa’s carriage coming up the drive. I was excited to see them and ran out to meet them. I knew the minute that I saw their faces that something was terribly wrong. They had come with bad news.

As Ma climbed down off the carriage, I could see tears well up in her eyes. She came straight to me and embraced me so tight that I could hardly breathe. I could feel her lip quivering on my cheek, and I knew even before she uttered a single word that she was about to tell me really bad news. News that would change my life forever.

Ma took a deep breath as she released her embrace. Then she quickly took a step back from where I was standing, put her hands on my shoulders, and started to talk. “Savannah, we got word yesterday that Dalton has been killed. He died in battle at St. Eloi in France. They are unable to bring him home for burial. His remains will be buried in Europe.” Tears were running down her cheeks as she hugged me again. She choked back a sob, trying not to cry.

I was devastated. I could hardly comprehend what all Ma was saying. Tears stung my eyes as I started to sob. A stabbing pain gripped my heart so tightly that I felt that I couldn’t breathe. What a terrible shock! My brother Dalton was dead. “Oh, Ma, how can this be? How can Dalt be dead? I feel so sorry for us all. There is nothing any of us can do. We’ll never see him again. We can’t even say our final good-byes! What an injustice.”

One of my greatest fears had come to pass. How could fate be so cruel? My last letter from Jed had been only a few weeks before. He had said that he, Dalt, and Newt were still together and doing okay. Why? That’s all I could think. Why Dalt?

I looked over at Pa and realized he was still sitting in the carriage. Tears were running down his cheeks. He didn’t utter a word, but was sitting there shaking his head. I was stunned. I

had never seen Pa cry before. He had always been such a strong man. To see those tears run down his face and drip from his chin, one by one, broke my heart even more. I pitied him so. His heart was broken. It made me feel helpless seeing him that way. There were no words that I could say to take away the pain he was feeling. There was nothing I could do for any of us. What a huge blow!

My poor folks were stricken with grief. Their son, Dalton Chase Hayes, was dead. He was only twenty-five. Dalt had made the ultimate sacrifice. He had given his life. He was a casualty of war. It was a huge burden for all of us to bear. He was buried in France. His body could not be sent home to Canada. This was our family's first loss.

The news of Dalton's death only reinforced my worry for Jed and Newt. I had managed to put these worries aside these last months after the birth of the twins. They had occupied most of my time and kept my thoughts at an optimistic level. I had only allowed myself to think about Jed, Newt, and Dalt's return, hoping it would be soon. I kept thinking how happy we all would be when they came home.

Jed had been gone now for sixteen months. My life had moved forward without him. It wasn't out of wanting to, but out of having to. I had endured my pregnancy and child birth without him. Now I had to rear our two children alone until he returned. He had missed a lot since his departure. I prayed each night for the war to end so all our men could return home to us safely.

Finally a letter from Jed came. He and Newt were safe, for now. He spoke about Dalt's death. Dalt had died in Newt's arms. They had been together when heavy gunfire broke out. Dalt had been hit twice and died a short time later. His last words to Newt were, "Tell Ma and Pa I love them. I'm coming home."

The months passed, and life moved on here at home. Summer came and went. Seeding, haying, and harvest was all behind us once again. On Thanksgiving weekend, Murray and Mary Beth celebrated their first birthday. I made a cake for them and we went to Ma and Pa's for Thanksgiving dinner.

Rose, Dawn, Eva, Colt, Milt, Malcy, and myself, with our families, all showed up. What a houseful for Ma and Pa. And what a wonderful time we all shared. Everyone had brought food to contribute to the wonderful meal. We had to eat in shifts since there were so many of us. We all reminisced about the fun we had shared growing up and laughed about the crazy things we did. Pa remembered the good catch of fish I'd caught when I was sent to dig potatoes. Milton and Malcolm talked about that old raft we'd made with Newt, and all the fun we had on it. We talked about Dalt and all the antics he had gotten into and the fun times we'd shared with him. Some of those stories made us laugh and others made us cry. It was good for us all. I think that we needed the release to put some closure to his death.

Of course, Murray and Mary Beth were the life of the party. They were walking by this time. All the other children had fun entertaining them, and everyone got a hoot out of watching them eat their birthday cake with their little hands. They made quite a sticky mess, but Ma didn't seem to mind. She said it did her heart good to see everyone have such a good time after the past months of deep sadness.

Winter settled in after that. It turned out to be a very cold blustery winter. There was lots of snow by Christmas. I didn't go too far from home. Mostly the twins and I would just visit with Jed's folks. It was too cold to take the twins into town by horse and cutter. Jed's folks picked up anything I needed. Some days seemed pretty long.

I do remember one particular day, I was looking out my back window and spotted a deer digging where my garden had been the past summer. I was pretty low on meat and had depended on Jed's family for most of my food supplies. I decided to give hunting a try. I got Jed's rifle out and loaded it. Then I snuck out the front door and peeked around the corner. The deer hadn't heard me. My heart raced with excitement as I pulled the trigger. I put that deer down right there with one shot.

Jed's father came running up the driveway. He had heard the shot and wondered what all the ruckus was about. He couldn't believe his eyes. Well, he laughed and then hugged me. He helped me drag it into the shed to gut it and skin it. I had never told him my hunting stories with Pa. As he was leaving, he gave me another hug and said, 'Savannah Faye Harmon, you are quite the gal. I couldn't be prouder.' Well, I shared that deer with Jed's family, and it helped us all get through a long tough winter. Of course, Pa just smirked when I told him the story a few weeks later. And Ma, well, she just couldn't get over the fact that I'd shot a gun and killed a deer.

We were all grateful when the first signs of spring came along. It was nice to be able to take Murray and Mary Beth outside to get some fresh air. We visited Jed's folks pretty much daily. They were busy in the sugar bush making maple syrup. Jed's youngest sister watched the twins so I could give a hand. It brought back childhood memories of helping Pa make syrup. I had always loved doing that. Maple syrup was our first taste of springtime and provided us with a new sugar supply.

This was the spring of 1917. Jed had been gone now for over two years. I received a letter from him in May. He had written it in March. He and Newt were still together. He never ever said very much about the goings on over there. He mostly commented on the news I sent him. He always asked about the twins and me and sent his love. He often spoke of the things he planned to do once he got home.

The news we heard by April's end sounded promising. The Germans had been pushed back at Vimy Ridge. Finally some progress. Maybe Jed and Newt would be home soon. I just kept thinking, if only they'd come home.

Summer came and went once again. I hadn't received a letter from Jed since May. Ma and Pa had gotten a letter from Newt back in July. He had been wounded at the battle of Vimy Ridge. When he was well enough to travel, he was being discharged and sent home. We were all excited about his letter. Finally, Newton would be coming home. But what about Jed? Why had there been no mention of Jed? Maybe they had gotten separated? I had to be hopeful. I kept writing Jed. I just hoped my letters got through.

One Sunday evening in September, just after I had put the twins to bed, I saw Ma and Pa's carriage coming up the drive. I saw a third person with them. At first I didn't recognize him. Then I knew. It was Newt. My heart skipped a beat as I ran out to greet them. I could hardly contain my excitement. Newt was home.

When the carriage pulled up to my house and stopped, my heart sank. Newt was crying. The look on Ma and Pa's faces was that of pain, not excitement. I knew in that instant something was terribly wrong again. Newt climbed down off the wagon first. I could see that he had a letter in his hand. He walked to where I was standing and handed it to me. He said, 'I'm sorry, Anna. I'm so terribly sorry. I surely didn't want it to be this way.'

I looked at the letter. It wasn't from Jed, though, as I had hoped it would be. It was from the army. I just stood there for a minute, and looked at it. I was so afraid to open it. Part of me knew. I knew what it would say, and I didn't want to read those words.

I started to tremble. My hands were shaking so bad that it was a chore for me to open the envelope. I hesitated a minute, then I took the letter out and began to read it. It said,

“Dear Mrs. Harmon,

We are sorry to inform you that your husband, Mr. Jedidiah Harmon, has been killed in action. He died on April 9, 1917, in battle at Vimy Ridge.”

My eyes were so full of tears that my vision was obscured. I couldn't bear to read another word. I started shouting, “No. No. I can't bear to hear those words. It can't be so. This can't be true. I won't let it be. I love him. I can't live without him. Jed can't be dead. He just can't be.” I dropped the letter and sank to my knees. I was sobbing uncontrollably. Newt picked me up in his arms and tried to console me, but there was just no way he could have. I was so stricken by grief. I was inconsolable!

I was thinking in my head about the letter that I had received way back in May. It had been Jed's last letter. He was already dead by the time I was reading those last words. He was dead. Never coming home. He would never see our babies. Our love was lost. Lost in battle, in a faraway land. My heart was broken. I felt like a knife had been stabbed right through my chest. It wouldn't have hurt any more if that had been the case.

My dream of Jed coming home was shattered. We would never be a happy family. His children would grow up without even having the chance to meet their father. They would never be able to know the wonderful man that he was. Jed would never hold his children. He would never even see their faces. He would never hold me again. He was gone. Why did fate deal us all such a terrible hand? Why? Why was the man I loved, so desperately, gone? Why Jed? Why?

Those first weeks after I was informed of Jed's death, I walked around almost in a daze. I could barely manage to care for Murray and Mary Beth. I felt like I was a ship lost in a storm at sea. I felt so disconnected. Everything that I had hoped for, longed for, prayed for, and dreamed of over the last two and a half years was over, gone, lost. Jed was dead. He would never return to me or our children. Part of me died, too.

I wasn't sure if I could bear to go on without him. I wasn't sure if I even wanted to. I had no idea how I would exist or carry on without him. I had no idea how I would ever provide for myself and our two beautiful children, all on my own, with no husband to help. How would I ever manage? What was to become of us?”

I looked over at Beth and saw that she was crying. Our eyes met and she said, “Oh, Gran, that's so very sad. My heart aches for you. I had no idea what all you went through. I knew that Jed had been killed in action in World War I, but I had no idea how harsh all the details were. You poor lady.” She comes over to me and gives me a hug. I'm not sure who was consoling who.

I started to speak again, but my throat was dry and I choke. I clear my throat, and in a soft voice, almost a whisper, I said, “You know, Beth, I remember that day as if it were yesterday, even though it was such a long time ago. That pain has never really healed. Jedidiah Harmon was the love of my life. I can't stop the tears from welling up in my eyes every time I think about it. The love we shared was so pure. He was so much a part of me. It was as if we completed each other.”

Beth releases her embrace. “I'm okay, dear,” I reassure her,” It was a long time ago.” Beth sits back down. I take a deep breath, then continue, “I was such a young woman back then. I really didn't have much life experience. I really didn't have much at all, other than the house that Jed had built for us. I had no income to speak of, and those were tough times. I was left with two young children to rear on my own, and I had no idea how to do it.

In time, though, I did learn to accept Jed's death. I came to terms with it, anyways. I was eventually able to move forward. I had to make a life for our children. Even to this day, though, I have always felt Murray and Mary Beth's loss was far greater than mine. You see, I had had the privilege of knowing Jed. They lived their whole life without ever being able to share one minute with him.

Jed died for a great cause; he was a fallen hero, but I think freedom's cost is too high. Jed and Dalt were buried in Europe. They never came back to us. They didn't make it home. Newt came home, but he was a broken man. The loss of Dalt and Jed, his injuries, and the perils of war were too big a burden for him to surpass. He may have survived, but he no longer knew how to live."