

# No Regrets

By David Alan Armstrong

He walked beside her along the darkened path between bushes and trees, free at last from the lights and faces around the cozy campfire. They followed the trail beyond the confines of the compound ringed by family cabins. Crickets chirped in the cool evening air. The scent of pine filled his head. Their shoes crunched in unison on the gravel. He looked up through the limbs and boughs to gaze at the stars. Their sparkling brilliance appeared so much brighter here in the mountains than in the city. In the fading light, he could just make out her profile, her face also turned upward to the sky.

He slowed as the last sounds of campfire laughter died away. She slowed to match his pace. He let out a contented sigh. With her at his side, he wanted this night to last forever. He could walk to the edge of the earth with her. He revelled in the sweet, innocent pleasure of the love that filled him. These past three months had been a glorious revelation of the intense and exquisite joy he could feel in her presence.

They came together quite by accident on the evening of their high school graduation. A last-minute change in the order of the procession into the stadium made them walking partners. As they sat together in their red gowns and mortar caps, he was captivated by this girl he had never noticed before. It was a big school, and people tended to run in cliques. The valedictorian spoke of new chapters. He felt like he was opening the cover of an entirely new book as he looked at the girl next to him.

After the ceremony, they ditched the graduation party and sat on her front porch and talked until midnight about their dreams for the future. The next day they enjoyed a long bike ride on a trail west of the city. They double-dated several times with Tom's best friend Scott and Shanda—a movie, dinner at a nice restaurant, and a day at the amusement park. For three months, Tom saw Jenny nearly every day. On the days when they couldn't meet in person, he called her or she called him. They talked about everything and nothing. He simply wanted to hear her voice. It didn't matter what they did as long as they were together. His happiness flowed from her like a stream of clear water.

And now, here they were camping together with her family, the culmination of a blissful summer. A week in the mountains was a new experience for him. On the other hand, camping was an annual event for Jenny's family. When she asked him to go, he thought camping meant tents and sleeping bags and charred hot dogs. He would have slept on prickly pine needles and eaten bark in a bear-infested tundra if it meant spending more time with her. "Camp" turned out to be a catered stay at a resort with heated cabins and comfortable beds, but the amenities did not dampen his excitement.

He had met Jenny's parents many times. The first time, she had invited him to her family's Fourth-of-July barbecue. She sat him directly across from her parents at the picnic table. Mrs. Franklin began the inquisition. She asked him about his parents, his favorite subjects in school, plans for college, thoughts about a career, and on and on. Her father tossed in a few questions of his own. What were his favorite sports? Did he think the LA Dodgers would go to the World Series? Had he thought about trying golf? He parried their inquiries adroitly—he was very good with adults. Nevertheless, when her parents ran out of topics, he breathed a sigh of relief.

How she had talked her parents into letting him go with them to camp was a mystery. When he asked her, she had said simply that they loved him.

Jenny's little brother claimed the entire back seat of their minivan on the ride from the city, so Tom and Jenny shared the snug middle row. He watched the urban landscape melt into farms and ranches, gradually giving way to meadows, streams, and stands of trees. The road inclined steadily, and the trees grew taller and denser. Air freshened with the scent of living, growing things augmented the change in the scenery.

For the sake of propriety, Mr. Franklin arranged a spare bedroom in the Jackson's cabin. They were an older couple. These families had camped together for years. When her father put out the word that an extra bedroom was needed, the Jacksons happily volunteered.

Tom and Jenny were now three days into their adventure in the woods, and those days had been marvelous. She was seldom out of his sight except to sleep. Such a delicious time! The air in his lungs felt rich and vibrant. New sounds landed constantly on his ear—bird calls, the rattle of beetle wings, the babble of a nearby stream playing over the rocks. New things to do—hiking, rock climbing, the chairlift at a nearby ski resort, water skiing in the too-cold lake. New people—kids from high school, from other cities, and even from other states. He enjoyed the activities and liked meeting people, but mostly he loved simply being with Jenny.

Mrs. Jackson surprised him with a question on the second night. Just before lights-out—Mr. Jackson was a retired sergeant in the Marine Corps and a stickler for lights-out at 2200 (10 PM) sharp—Mrs. Jackson asked Tom if he was planning on marrying the sweet Franklin girl. He could not mask his surprise. Marriage had never entered his mind. They just barely graduated from high school, and both had plans for college and careers—they wanted to be teachers. Her goal was high school PE, and he was headed for elementary education. He assured them a wedding was not on the horizon. “Don't worry, dear. When the right one comes along, you'll know it,” the woman said.

He drifted off to sleep, wondering if Jenny was the “right one.”

On this third evening, Jenny asked if they could take a stroll after dinner. Fifty yards up the trail, his hand brushed lightly against hers as they walked. Electric fire jolted up his arm. His pulse quickened, and his chest thumped. Her palm pressed firmly and decidedly into his open hand. She intertwined her fingers with his.

They strolled hand-in-hand among the tall pines, the path barely visible in the dim light of a crescent moon in the eastern sky. At a junction in the trail, Jenny halted. She tugged on his

hand, pulled him to her. She released his hand and put her arms around his neck, lifted on her toes, and pulled his face toward hers. Her warm breath filled his head and burned into his brain.

He recoiled as if he had been shot in the chest. Instead of enfolding her in an embrace and meeting her lips, he pushed her away. He had promised himself all summer he would not kiss her, would not let a physical relationship overtake and drown out the spiritual connection they had. After the way his previous relationship had ended, full of recriminations and regrets, he refused to make the same mistakes again. This time, he would keep his physical feelings separate from his emotions. He had to be certain before he could totally commit.

Momentarily blinded by the press of her body against his, he stumbled backward. He recovered his balance and shoved his hands in his pockets. Thoughts, however, tumbled over each other in his mind. They had talked through the summer about every detail of their lives except this. Should he say something? Should he explain? Could he even find the words to describe what he felt, what he feared?

She puffed out an angry grunt. He looked at her outline but could make out no expression. He reached timidly for her hand. She bolted down the bend that led back to the cabins. He wanted to speak, but she moved too fast. He doubled his step until he caught her. No longer in rhythm, their shoes pounded noisily on the loose gravel.

The change of pace and direction bewildered him. Why was she leading them back to camp? And why in such a hurry? She sniffed several times and put the back of her hand to her face. He detected nothing unusual in the air, simply the smell of pines overhead and the junipers at their knees. Perhaps an errant mosquito had touched her cheek.

They reached the point where the path emerged from the trees and spread out into a large circle enclosed by a half-dozen cabins. Smoke from the dying campfire tinged the air. He opened his mouth to comment on the brilliance of the glowing embers in the deserted fire pit. She turned away abruptly and marched to her family's cabin. The bright light of the opening door silhouetted her slim figure and short hair. The door closed, extinguishing the light and erasing her apparition.

He stared at the blank door, replaying every step of their walk—the softness of her hand in his, the insistent tug at his arm, the warmth of her fingers stroking the back of his neck, the closeness of her lips, the flinch, the push, the quick retreat to the cabins, the sudden chill in the air between them, the stony silence. An icy wall, transparent but impenetrable, had dropped out of the night sky. He could see her through it but not reach her. With a befuddled shake of his head, he turned to his cabin.

Lying on his bed in the inky darkness, with only the slow breathing of the elderly couple in the next room and the chirrup-chirrup of the crickets in his ears, he pondered. He should have said something. He wanted to explain, but he had no words to describe his feelings or his worries. He turned over and closed his eyes, expecting to wake up in the morning to the next day of his perfect eternity.

He slept late. He threw on some clothes and padded into the kitchenette. The Jacksons sat at the table drinking coffee. "There you are."

He wiped sleep from his eyes. “Good morning.”

The woman smiled. “We’re going up to the lodge for breakfast in a few minutes. Are you coming with us?”

“Thanks. I’ll get breakfast on my own.”

The woman’s eyes twinkled. “You mean, you and your girl.”

A grin spread across his face.

Outside, he saw Mr. Franklin sitting at the picnic table with a book in his hand. He wandered over and sat down. The father raised his eyebrows in surprise. “I didn’t expect to see you this morning.”

“Where is everyone?”

“If by ‘everyone’ you mean Jenny, she left early with the Thompsons to go water skiing. I thought you would be with them.”

“I guess I wasn’t invited.”

“Hmm. Well, I’m taking my wife and son on a hike to Bear Peak in a little while. You’re welcome to come along.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll hang around camp today.”

Sharp pain wrapped itself around his heart. He crossed the clearing and tramped along the trail by the creek—not nearly so romantic in the stark morning light. He sat on a stump. It was hard and uncomfortable. The squawking of a jay in a nearby tree grated on his nerves. The relentless babbling of the stream was like nails on a chalkboard. Weren’t the great outdoors supposed to be quiet and peaceful? He needed to think, but only one thought played itself over and over—he was miserably alone, and she was off having fun.

He skipped breakfast and moped around camp until lunchtime. When she didn’t return, his stomach interrupted his pity party long enough to force himself to the lodge dining room for a hamburger. The Jacksons were away, so he had the cabin to himself for the afternoon. He sat on the sofa near the big window so he could watch the trail from the parking lot. He paged through a paperback novel he found on the table, but he couldn’t focus his eyes.

In the late afternoon, a group of people traipsed across the clearing from the parking lot. The Thompson parents led the way, followed by a pack of teenagers, with a couple of little kids bringing up the rear. Jenny’s short blond hair stood out among the boys surrounding her. She waved her arms, tossed her head back, and laughed, clapping the tallest of the boys on the shoulder. The troop made a beeline past the cabins towards the lodge.

Probably headed straight for dinner. Maybe he should follow. But then what? Watch her sit with the guys, laugh at their jokes, and talk about their day on the lake? He wanted to talk to her, but not with others around. And what would he say? “It looks like you had fun. Why didn’t you tell me you were going skiing?” He saw only embarrassment and humiliation from such a scene. No, it was better to stay in the cabin, let her have her fun, avoid the sneers and snickers of the guys.

He slept poorly, tossing and turning, the pillow too hot and flat, his thoughts playing an infinite loop of anger and jealousy.

He dragged himself out of bed at eight o'clock, the smell of coffee filling the air.

Mrs. Jackson turned in her chair and smiled. "You must have turned in early last night. Your room was dark when we got back from our drive."

"Yeah, I was tired."

"Ah, busy day?"

He ran his fingers through tousled hair. "Not really."

"Well, I'm sure you'll find plenty to do today. It's our last day, you know. Are you headed out for breakfast?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Say hi to that cute young girl for us." She winked. Her husband gave a knowing smile.

In the dining hall, he spotted Mr. and Mrs. Franklin. The little brother sat next to them, but no Jenny. He loaded a plate at the buffet and scanned the room for a head of short blond hair. Mrs. Franklin caught his eye and waved him over. He set his plate down across the table from the family.

Mrs. Franklin smiled. "So, are you enjoying your week in the mountains?"

"Sure." Tom's eyes focused on the plate as he unwrapped the utensils.

"I heard you missed water skiing with the kids yesterday."

"Yeah, I guess it slipped my mind. I overslept." He dug his fork into the mound of scrambled eggs.

"That's too bad. Jenny said they had a great time. And it looks like you missed the hike this morning, too."

He looked up and swallowed quickly. "The hike?"

Mrs. Franklin raised her eyebrows. "Yes, the kids are hiking around the lake. They packed snacks and sandwiches and left a half hour ago. I thought you would be with them."

Heat rose into Tom's cheeks. "I guess it must have slipped Jenny's mind to tell me."

Mrs. Franklin frowned. "I'm sorry, Tom. I don't know what's gotten into her."

"Don't sweat it, Tom." Mr. Franklin gave him a sly wink. "We'll head home tomorrow, and things will go back to normal. Camp's a crazy time."

"Yeah, I guess so." Tom shoveled a load of hashbrowns into his mouth. His stomach said, "Chew," but his head said, "Forget it." His stomach won. He slouched over the plate and pushed the bacon around with the fork.

"Well, it looks like we've done all the damage we can do to breakfast. Time to head out." Mr. Franklin's voice was chipper. "Tom, we're going horseback riding. You're welcome to come with us."

Being around the Franklins without Jenny felt awkward. "Nah, I'll just find something to do around here."

"Suit yourself."

"Find something fun to do, and have a nice day." Mrs. Franklin's voice sported the same upbeat tone.

The Franklins left Tom sitting by himself with a plate of food in front of him growing cold. He dropped it in the garbage pail on the way out.

Tom wandered around the compound, kicked rocks off the trail, and tossed pebbles into the stream. All the while, his heart ached and his head spun with useless recriminations. Why had she changed so quickly? One moment they were as close as he thought two people could be, and the next she was MIA. Maybe he was crazy. Had he imagined it all, made it all up? Was this relationship totally one-sided? No, she had *asked* him to come to camp with her family. She wanted him there, wanted to be with him. But if he wasn't crazy, then what? Stupid? Probably.

Would a kiss really have mattered? Apparently it mattered—to her differently than to him. She knew how much he loved her. He hadn't said it in so many words, but she had to know. His feelings couldn't be more obvious, at least not to him, and surely not to her. One awkward moment tripped him up, and now she had turned her back on him. What was wrong with her? What was wrong with *him*? It was like a giant hand had thrown a cosmic circuit breaker and turned off all the lights in his universe. She went from being his best friend to a total stranger in the blink of an eye.

Jenny and a group of kids straggled into camp as the sun touched the western peaks. Tom crouched at the edge of the trail as they made directly for the dining hall. He waited in the growing twilight until they emerged. Jenny and Ed Thompson strolled to the blazing fire ring and helped themselves to marshmallows and sticks. Tom tiptoed around the backside of the cabins until he reached the Jacksons'. Jenny and Ed ate s'mores by the campfire and laughed while Tom sat in the cabin and stewed in jealousy, anger, and self-pity.

The next morning, Jenny hugged Ed before he climbed into the Thompson station wagon to head back to the city. She jerked open the sliding door to her family's minivan and waited, eyes searching the ground. Her little brother slid into the middle row seat. Tom climbed into the back seat. Jenny jumped into the middle seat, squeezing her brother against the side panel. Her brother started to protest, but she poked a finger in his face and gave him a look that said, "Open your mouth and I'll shove my fist in it."

The long ride home passed in silence. He sulked in the back seat, completely closed off from Jenny and her family. He might as well have been riding on the roof. In fact, he might have preferred the roof to the icy atmosphere inside.

They dropped him off at his house at dusk. He crawled out of the backseat, and Jenny leaned away from him as he eased out the door. Mr. Franklin pushed the button that released the back hatch. He pulled his suitcase out and closed the hatch, then stepped onto the curb. Mrs. Franklin rolled down the passenger side window. "Thanks for coming with us. I hope you enjoyed your week." Then she frowned and mouthed, "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I appreciate the ride. I had a great time." He couldn't force a smile. The window rolled up, and the van drove away.

Tom laid awake for a long time that night. There was no denying it was over. In a moment of surprise and confusion, his perfect love had crashed down around him like the

Hindenburg. The carnage left him hollow, burnt out, a slag heap of soggy ash and smoldering flesh.

They never spoke again.

He caught random glimpses of her around the community college campus during the fall semester. She never looked his way. He tried to talk to her once, lying in wait for her by the library entrance. She strolled through the double glass doors on the arm of a young man he had never seen before, her beaming smile as intoxicating as ever. He choked down an unspoken greeting and turned away. He transferred to the university in the spring and lost track of her for several years.

He tried to put her out of his mind, got pretty good at it, except when he'd hear an accidental song on the radio or see photos of mountains and forests. She popped up as a friend recommendation on Facebook. He hesitated, clicked, wished he hadn't. He didn't get any response. From the social media feed of mutual friends, he pieced together snippets of a life story—married, divorced, dropped off the grid for a few years, quit teaching, went back to college, became a CPA, moved back to their hometown, and took up rescuing stray dogs. He lurked in the digital shadows but never reached out. From time to time, a spark would stir in his heart, but he became adept at smothering it before it could do any real damage.

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Was that summer really fifty years ago? He ran bony fingers through the wisp of gray hair above his ears. The obituary had caught his eye as he scrolled through his Facebook feed. The evening of no regret he had so carefully packed away, flooded out of his heaped-up heart and spilled onto his wizened cheeks.

"Dad, are you all right?" His daughter placed her hands on his shoulder as she looked over his shoulder at the image of a beautiful young girl with short blond hair and a radiant smile next to a photo of an elderly version of the same person.

"I'm fine, sweetheart." His hand trembled slightly on the mouse, his heart torn between scrolling past the pictures and wanting to drink in every detail of the older face. His brain melded the two photos together until they merged into a single image—the girl he knew so well and the woman he had never met.

"Someone you knew?"

He nodded. "A friend from a long time ago."

She lightly rubbed his bony shoulders. "A high school sweetheart, I'll bet."

He shrugged beneath his daughter's soothing caress. "Perhaps."

"Well, Paul will be home from work any minute, and the kids are starving, so dinner will be on the table shortly. Don't be too long." She gave his shoulders an affectionate squeeze.

"I'll be done here in a minute." His thoughts filled with the version of the memory he had played over and over in his mind.

He might have said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push you away."

And she might have said, “I’m sorry I startled you. I couldn’t resist the moment, feeling you next to me, just a breath away. Don’t you just love the stars in the mountains?”

And he might have said, “Oh, well, yes, the stars are awesome. But I’m afraid to kiss you.”

“Why?”

“Because I want us to stay just the way we are.”

“And a kiss will change that?”

“Absolutely! I’ll put my arms around you, and you’ll look at me with your beautiful eyes, and I’ll touch your cheek, and then I’ll want to kiss you, and I’ll want to go on kissing you.”

“And that’s so bad?”

“Yes! It changes everything, and I don’t want anything to change.”

“But everything changes when it grows.”

“No, not this...this *thing* that’s happened to us. This summer has been magical. I’ve never felt like this before. About anyone. We are friends—the best kind of friends. You’re wonderful. You’re perfect. I’m perfect with you. I don’t want it to change. I don’t want *us* to change. I want this crazy love to stay, right here, right now, forever.”

“Don’t you want to move on? Don’t you think it can get better?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know. I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what? Afraid of me?”

“No, I’m afraid of *me*. Do you know Shelly Smith?”

“No.”

“Well, she was an eleventh grader this year, and I started dating her at the beginning of school. She was cool and fun, and I liked hanging out with her. A simple goodnight kiss at her door became a long kiss on the porch. After a month, she wanted to, you know, like make out. And I thought, okay, that’s cool. We set boundaries, like we would only do it in her house when at least one of her parents was home, so we couldn’t get into any real trouble.”

“Are you sure you want to tell me all this?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to gross you out. But now that I’ve started, I have to finish. So, after a while, we stopped going out on dates, and we didn’t hang out with other friends. We were exclusive, and all we did was sit on the sofa in her family room and watch TV, and make out. We didn’t even talk to each other much. The person I thought I liked got lost somewhere in all the physicality. And then stuff she did started bugging me, like her goofy laugh, the boring soap operas she watched all the time. She would talk about General Hospital like they were real people with real problems. I got tired of it. I got tired of *her*. But I liked the hugging and the kissing, so I kept going to her house.”

“Couldn’t she tell you weren’t into her anymore?”

“I guess not. Anyway, I finally had had enough. I figured out I was just using her. That’s not who I want to be. So, I told her we needed to cool it, maybe take some time off. She was totally surprised, had no idea it was coming.”

“Wow, you must have hurt her badly.”



“Yeah, she didn’t take it well. She wouldn’t talk to me or even look at me when I saw her at school. We had started out being friends and ended up making a mess out of it.”

“Sounds par for the course.”

“Maybe, but that’s not the course I want to take again. So, you see, I don’t want *us* to end. I don’t want you to walk away. I don’t want you to avoid me. I don’t want to lose you. I love you. I’ll always love you—just like this, just the way we are.”

“I love you, too, and I love what we have. But I’m not Shelly. We’re not high school kids anymore. What if just being near you isn’t enough for me... I mean, not forever. What if there’s more to being a couple than simply being close?”

“But it *is* enough for me. I could never feel closer to you than I do right this minute. I could spend eternity simply being in your presence, hearing your voice, seeing you smile. I would love you every moment.”

“Eternity is a long time to just *look* at a person.”

“But don’t you see? If we change it, I’m going to screw it up. I don’t know how to control it, manage it, keep it contained and innocent. I don’t know how to walk the narrow edge of the cliff without falling off, so I need to stay away from the cliff altogether. If I get too close, the physical side will take over and crush the delicate purity of this feeling. And then I’ll regret it—we’ll regret it. I don’t trust myself.”

“Do you trust *me*?”

“Of course I trust you.”

“You trust me with your heart. Won’t you at least trust me with this moment? We’ll worry about all the other stuff later. But right now, on this perfect evening, will you just kiss me?”

His heart might have brimmed with love for the beautiful girl beside him. He might have reached out a trembling hand, slipped it around her waist, pulled her close, pressed his lips lightly, tenderly against hers, breathed in the intoxication, and captured that first pure kiss in his memory forever. He might have felt the warmth of her hand in his, her arm brushing gently against his skin, as they followed the perfect trail beside the perfect creek beneath the perfect stars in a perfect love—a love that stayed pure, deep, and intense on the inside without getting messy and out of control on the outside.

He might have... but he didn’t. He didn’t think on that fateful night to say or do any of those things.

He had learned to live with many regrets, except for the one he feared the most. The one regret he refused to acknowledge—didn’t even know he had—swirled like the acrid smoke of a dying campfire in his chest. He told himself he was grateful he had not sullied their brief love with lust. Their brilliant supernova remained in his memory untarnished, as pure as the snow on the peaks he could see from his window. What had burst into blinding light on graduation night and winked out just as quickly by the little stream in the mountains had collapsed into a black cinder with hard edges, sharp and sterling.

No, he had no regrets about her, but one regret about himself—that his idea of perfection was impractical, unattainable, and totally self-defeating. A little presence of mind, a murmured

apology, just a single word on the trail beneath the stars might have been enough to change two lives forever. The one regret he promised himself he would never suffer was the thing he regretted most.