

Lookout Point

I met Patrick mid-April, shortly after I settled down in Ridge Valley. I didn't realize then how much of an effect he would have on me. After leaving Kenora in January, I spent the next three months using odd jobs to help me move up and down Highway 1 through a daily maze of coffee shops featuring rotating red vinyl barstools, matching, long arborite counters and breakfast served all day, and an evening parade of motels that all had the same Gideon Bible, faded sunset painting and remoteless TV. Fortunately the cabinet shop in Ridge Valley needed a joiner on a more permanent basis. My dog, Jackson, and I found a furnished apartment above the only thrift store in town. I was hoping for a fresh start.

The first week was busy getting familiar with the machinery at work, buying groceries and setting up house. Jackson, a Wheaton Terrier, needed a good long walk and the forklift guy at work suggested the Lookout Point trail.

The first Saturday, after thirty minutes of trekking up a low incline on a meandering hard packed dirt trail, the spruce and pines moved further apart, the air thinned and Jackson and I entered a clearing. It was the size of a football field with a gravel walking path around the edges, and at the far end, I saw a wooden structure that ended in an open sky. It was early and there was minimal activity in the park: an enthusiastic jogging couple, two other dog walkers, and a man looking my way, sitting on a commemorative bench thirty feet from the end of the trail. I walked over and tying Jackson to the bench, sat down for a rest. The man smiled and introduced himself as Patrick. Jeff, I said.

The sun shone directly on our backs and there was a light, intermittent breeze which added to the warm comfort of the park. Jackson chose to lie in the shade the

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bench provided. Patrick and I began a conversation with the usual *Hi, I'm new. Where you from? Nice day.* kinda stuff, but I noticed that as the sun approached mid-morning height and the park got fuller, Patrick's attention constantly shifted around the park and back to the path – like a beautiful women was walking behind me. Every time someone new entered the park, he gave a long concentrated look and swung his head back in my direction as he tried to pick up the small talk. Then, as if he saw someone he knew, Patrick stood up in mid-sentence and walked toward a young guy coming up the path. The newcomer looked like a college student. He was wearing camouflage cargo pants and a McMaster University t-shirt.

I was taken aback. Patrick's apparent rudeness made me wonder what I had done. Or what he was doing. My eyes followed him to his rendezvous. It was clear Patrick didn't know the fellow he was talking to. As they stood there the guy shifted back and forth on his feet like he was being interrogated. Then he relaxed and let his hands hang from the pockets by his thumbs. I wondered if Patrick was selling something.

The young man didn't back off and their conversation continued as they walked toward Lookout Point. As they passed me I heard Patrick say "My son was also a college student, but he died suddenly." He didn't acknowledge me.

My dog was restless so I untied him and continued my circuit around the park and left.

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The next Saturday, I was back at Lookout Point and so was Patrick. The sky was overcast and there was a slight chill in the air. The weather kept most people in town. Patrick seemed genuinely pleased to see me and so I sat down. I decided to forget the previous week's episode. With fewer apparent distractions, we had more of a conversation. Patrick grew up in Ridge Valley and was the town's only Notary Public. Mainly wills, affidavits and property conveyance.

Patrick then gave me the background on Lookout Point. Like most towns in the 50s, the business chamber and elected council of Ridge Valley wanted a good reason for people to turn off the highway and spend some money in their town. The solution was to highlight the top of the ridge overlooking the valley and the river that ran through it. Locals had often hiked up for the view but it was generally an all day affair and sometimes people stayed a bit too late and had trouble finding the old trail on the way down.

The council set aside some money, the road was paved, the trail widened and a two-acre spot at the top was cleared for a picnic area. To enhance the view, the rock ledge was extended using two large trees as the base. The cedars were laid flat about ten feet apart and secured on the park side with concrete block and wire rope. The far ends of the logs were cantilevered out over the edge of the ridge. A fenced platform was built across the logs that hung over the valley. This was Lookout Point.

I recalled my neighbour mention that because of the odd high school prank and the occasional suicide, some locals called it Lookout Below. I was about to comment on this when Patrick jumped up and started walking at a fast clip toward a

teenage girl who had made a long walk around the park and was approaching the lookout. I was stunned and confused. Jackson slept.

The girl had a Goth look – torn fishnet nylons, dark hair, piercings and black makeup. It was hard to tell if she had been crying or had done her makeup to look that way. In her left hand she held what looked like a cross necklace and her right hand was fist. Her gait was steady.

I openly watch Patrick's interaction. He left his seat at the bench and circled the park in a direction opposite to hers. As their paths converged, he called out a greeting, but she did not respond to it.

Stepping in her path, he confronted her. She looked away to the left. He moved around crouching slightly to catch her eye, said something and she looked right at him. From my vantage point, it seemed like Patrick was again approaching someone he didn't know and asking direct questions. There was some hesitation on the part of the girl, then a longer talk by Patrick that seemed to generate genuine interest.

My thought now was that Patrick was part of a cult, selectively choosing his prospects and I wondered if I wasn't worthy. As I continued to sit and watch, my dog especially lethargic that day, I saw the girl give him a hug and head down the path toward the trees. Patrick turned and headed up to Lookout Point. He stopped at the end of the platform, looked down over the railing for three or four seconds and then pulled out a penknife. He scanned around and then appeared to use the knife on the railing.

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My curiosity was high at this point. I got up, untied the dog and approached the point. Patrick had turned and was walking toward me before I got to the actual lookout. He barely acknowledged me as he hurried by and said, “I’ll see you next week”. Then he wiped one eye with a handkerchief he had pulled from the non-penknife pocket. I appeared to have misread the situation. I thought his interaction had gone well.

I tried to step onto the Lookout Point platform but Jackson balked and dug in his heels. I had yet to venture out on it, as my dog and I shared a sense of vertigo that was not easily quelled. I wrapped Jackson’s leash around a nearby information pole and advanced, staying dead center on the platform until I reached the far end. I grabbed the railing and making sure no one was behind me, hands firmly connected to it, I slid sideways to where I had seen Patrick use the knife.

Patrick’s incision was a straight vertical line; next to another slightly weathered one. I assumed by Patrick as well. Then I noticed there were four other lines with a diagonal stroke across them. They looked older than the original two. Above them, in a more faded script were the words *ITS OVER*. I was now more than curious.

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I arrived at the park just in time to see Patrick stepping on to Lookout Point. At the end of the platform was a man, he appeared to be Patrick’s age, slightly graying hair tied back, a small patch of skin starting to show on the crown of his skull, faded jeans and a vintage blue Hawaiian shirt with yellow pineapple slices on

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it. The man, arms resting on the railing, continued to look down to the water, sporadically shaking his head back and forth, as Patrick got nearer.

It was a bright warm day and I had brought a book along. I sat on the bench closest to the Point. They said a few words to each other that I couldn't make out. Then both of them stared into the water below. At least 5 minutes. Neither said a word.

"Let's go sit down," the pineapple man suggested. Once off the platform and in the park, they noticed the benches were all full and decided to walk the circuit. They passed me twice without noticing and eventually parted, shaking hands. I had heard Patrick mention his son and their plans on the first pass by and the other man was speaking of how tough things were for his daughter and grandson on the second. After parting with the old hippie, Patrick made his way back to where they first met. Another tally on the railing. I waited for a bit but then Jackson pulled me around to another corner of the park to relieve himself and Patrick and I just connected with a wave as he left.

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A week later I arrived just as the sun rose to give the park some light. Patrick appeared within ten minutes and sat beside me, Jackson at my feet. After a bit of small talk, I asked about the markings on the Lookout Point railing. Patrick explained.

Every Saturday he came to the park and looked for someone whom he could help. Someone who reminded him of his son. Not physically but in their walk, the look in their eyes, or whether they spent a long time looking over the edge of the Lookout. When Patrick spotted a person who fit the profile, he would approach them

and start a conversation. Find out where they were from, how they were doing and then ask if they had time for a story. He would tell them about his son by sharing some personal memories, his son's death and his own pain. Then he would thank them for listening.

Patrick realized they weren't all suicidal but he did think a number of them were depressed or contemplating their options. And he wanted something positive to come out of his son's demise. So every time someone was willing to listen Patrick made a mark on the railing.

I asked why he hadn't approached me with his story. He pointed to Jackson and said that people who were with someone or had a pet along, weren't there to jump. He looked for people alone, who seemed to either be walking with a purpose, like they had made a decision or if they dawdled without any apparent purpose or those that didn't make eye contact and kept to themselves. We all need someone to talk to, he said.

Jackson and I kept up our weekly routine and Patrick and I continued to connect at the park. Usually Patrick found someone to talk to. Sometimes before I got there, other times he would abruptly jump up and connect with someone, leaving me in instant solitude. I got used to it. Even tried to help spot people at times.

Occasionally, and more often of late, when no one came that he could talk to Patrick became restless. He would walk around the park, looking intently at people. It was obvious some found it uncomfortable. I would encourage him to come and sit and wait for the right person to show up.

"Tell me about your son," I would start.

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Patrick always had a memory. Most were new. He made notes whenever he remembered episodes with his son. Some I heard more than once. They all ended with *I miss him*. As we parted, he always made a clear point of thanking me for being there and listening.

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Then last Friday night Jackson got in a fight with a raccoon, so I took him to the vet Saturday morning. This took longer than I thought and I didn't make it to the park until nearly noon. As I entered the clearing, it seemed deserted until I noticed the crown at Lookout Point. There was a commotion and a number of people were staring at a man sitting with his legs hanging over the edge, arms around the lower railing. They were standing back about eight feet and trying to talk to him. I approached and knelt beside him.

“Patrick, are you okay? Can I help?”

Patrick just sat there, hanging on, staring down between his legs to the void below. His penknife was beside him.

“He’s been there over an hour.” someone from the crowd said. I asked for space and said the show was over and then turned back to Patrick. I should have sensed his depression returning. Our meetings were dragging out longer and longer and he was excessively thankful each time we parted.

“Patrick,” I said putting my arm around his shoulder, “let’s get to a bench and talk.”

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I managed to get him to stand, although he still hadn't said word. As we steadied ourselves I saw the place where Patrick kept track, his count was up to twenty-two. Below his reckoning was carved a large X.

Patrick noticed me looking and turned toward me.

"No one, Jeff, no one came." he said and then kicked his penknife over the edge and watched it land without a noise.

My stomach fell, then floated and my knees dissolved. It took all my resolve to get us to the bench. Patrick was still in a confused state and I sat and wept, sharing his futility and powerlessness. I realized that Patrick's sense of helping others was also his way of helping himself.

After I composed myself, I took Patrick to the hospital. All he could say on the way is *People need help, Jeff, people need help*. The staff knew Patrick and assured me they would help him work through this low point. I told him not to worry, the people would get the help they need.

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I am again at Lookout Point. A plateau park, on a ridge, overlooking a valley. There is only one way up. A rising but not heart-threatening hike through a cool pine forest. I sit in my usual spot, a ways down the open path, back to the trees, on a commemorative bench overlooking the selectively cleared acre that allows families to picnic, children to run and dogs to remain tethered to their owners.

A week has passed and I spot him as he clears the trees and enters the open field of the park. Green, baggy, multi-pocket pants, red t-shirt, no logo and a wool cap pulled tight over his ears. I watch as he takes a number of determined steps, at the

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pace of an amble, and then abruptly pauses. He turns to the side of the path and looks down at the flowers, then surveys the park and the visitors. He takes note of each person he sees. He then walks another ten feet and repeats his routine. The walk is familiar and I decide he is the one I will talk to. My guess is he's in his late twenties. I wait as he passes.

I approach him, slowly from behind. As I tap his right shoulder he stiffens up and his head turns while his body doesn't. His eyes alert, they look directly into mine. "Yes," is all he says, as he turns to face me.

"Hi, I'm Jeff. Nice view out here," I start.

He shifts on his feet. "Yes," he says looking down.

"See these markings," I say getting his attention, "They're made by a friend of mine."

We make our way back to the bench and talk. As the fellow quietly ponders my tale, he asks about my dog Jackson. I tell him that the raccoon was too tough and I had Jackson put down last week.

We both rise and shake hands. As he disappears down the path, I head to Lookout Point taking a penknife from my pocket.