

Coming Home

An Old Love Story



BY SUSAN IOANNOU

Wordwrights Canada

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COMING HOME

1.

Crunching toward the house through moon-bright snow,
Paul no longer heard his frozen boots
or puffed to thaw his cheeks with mittened breath
spinning off white ribbons toward the barn.

Glittering from night-blued gingerbread,
icicles had rimmed the high front porch.
He hunched his shoulders, climbed the steps. He knew
only shadows waited, emptied mugs,
contentment threadbare as the braided rugs.

Numb, he turned the key, and in the dark
cast his coat across the banister,
picked his laces free, and with a grunt
heaved each heavy boot inside the hall.

2.

Surely, home meant more than beams and brick,
each generation scratched in yellow paint,
faded into frames, or slid away
in boxes to the back of closet shelves,
musty as the cellar nesting mice.

Home? Was it the 100-acre farm
neighbours pictured when they spoke his name?
In turn, he would imagine them at meals
or reading weekly news in easy chairs
cosy as blue chintz, wallpaper vines.

But here, no woman's hand kept doilies starched
or laid out Sunday's shirt upon the bed,
no longer aired mats from a window ledge
or burnished apples for the parlour bowl.

Home? When just a boy, his evenings hummed:
grandma, aunts and uncles, brother, some
visitor or other, the week long,
warmed by the wood stove, or a fragrant pipe
and rungs that creaked as chairs tipped back in talk.

Home? He dragged a hand across his eyes,
felt the wrinkled softness round his cheek.
Empty now, without her just a house
—but he must lay the fire, fill a mug,
and sip to warm his belly and cold hands
brushing silence off like flurried snow.

3.

And so, a mountain on a wooden stool,
he sat, warming his fingers.

A cinder sputtered in the grate.
Behind him, flicking red and gold,
tongues hissed softly in the gloom.
The bears were asleep in caves.

Snow outside the parted velvet drapes
layered silence far beyond black trees.
His massive hands slid over thighs,
rubbed the bundled muscle soft.
Damn shadows! In the other room
his desk, bright light were comfort, strewn
with papers, record books as certain
as a rewind clock.

He should get up and do
this month's computations, write and sign
letters, cheques, and like precise receipts
fold night's edges into envelopes
—as if his answer would arrive at dawn.

Still, the bears slept on
deeper into firelight, thick snow
covering hard dreams of tenderness
he had loved, still loved,
but could not keep.

4.

“Dear Paul . . .” The paper crumpled in his hand.
Gone—so long—and now three scribbled lines?
What could he say? He threw the letter down.

The morning sun glanced off his soft-boiled eggs.

Why should he! After all these years alone,
for her to up and crack his world apart?
He’d tasted silence. He could swallow more.

Why should he! Jen had chosen. She had flung
past him, climbed the train, as if his love
were just a daisy pressed inside a book.

Papers, files, statements, he would turn
brisk and busy, shrug off her embrace,
show that woman he’d had things to do,
filled his rooms with signatures and dates.

Let her come. Let her long black hair
curl across his shoulder, let her eyes,
amber quick with secrets, meet his own.
He would feel nothing. Stare her into clouds.
Be granite to the soft brush of her hand.

But a sparrow through the window sang and sang.

5.

“Jen—” His greeting froze. She seemed so small.
“It’s been too long, I almost—Please, come in.”
Such creases round her eyes, that haze of grey
running through her loosely knotted hair,
black dress a trifle tight beneath the coat
plain and worn she handed him.

“I know.”

Jen tugged her boots. “Who wouldn’t see the change?
Well, nothing ever stays the same. And you?”

“Fine,” his blood rushed high, “you look just fine.”

The room was clean, she thought, although the drapes
needed mending where the sun burned through.
The braided rug, Aunt Lily’s photograph,
mantle showing off the china cat—
all the same as on the day she left.
Funny, how time disappeared like dust.

He nodded to the tray of plates and cups.
“I’ve made you tea. Weak, with lemon, dear.”
Dear! How could the word slip out! He frowned,
pulling back from the cosy’s warmth.

Store cake, she noted, but what man alone
ever baked. At least his hair was trimmed.
That blue shirt must be new. He’d never wear
one like that for work—he hated ties.
“And how’s the farm?”

“Yes, fine.” He felt the fool
stumbling after words, and masked his face.
“I do accounts, too, neighbours’ tax returns.”

How could he think of figures and percents,
Jen, three feet away, within his reach?

Still, she had left him. Pinned her hair up tight,
snapped the suitcase shut and clicked the door,
always the one who knew what to do next,
orderly as sunlight on scrubbed floors.

Except the nights. Her long black mane about
his shoulders, lips pressing into flesh,
passion's mare unbridled, galloping
secrets open on a rushing flame
licking his thighs with heat until he burst
into her, a bear freed from his cave.

6.

She sipped her tea. Across the room she felt his eyes trace every move. How to begin? Too long her shame had silenced any hope. Left unspoken, what were words but leaves dropping with the season, red to brown crumbling in the palm and lost upon winds, or mired in too-early snow.

“Jen?”

Could she not forget that precipice —his voice—and how he broke inside her ear, drew her breathless down the darkened slope, rolled her open in the moon’s full light? The old cool-glass reserve impossible after. *No* he kissed. *I can’t* he rocked brain and thighs awake to tides that she never had known, but drowned her will within.

“Jen?”

What if he touched her now? Her frown slipped against the memory of huge hands playing through her tumbled hair like wings; sunset, in the doorway, strong brown arms drawing from her waist the weariness scrubbed off pots and floors; upon his lap cat-lazy, dreaming even embers purred. Passion? Tenderness bound even more.

“Jen?”

What if he said, “I missed you, Jen,”
and pressed against her thin resolve? She glanced
across her tea.

He stared.

A sparrow fluttered.
Silence quivered to a first shell-crack.

7.

MATURE WOMAN, HARD WORKER,
SEEKS POSITION AS HOUSEKEEPER.
LIVE IN. REFERENCES SUPPLIED.
BOX 400, REDFERN.

Block letters on a yellowed page? It seemed
impossible how they'd first met—not Jen,
her hair upon his pillow, spun to grey,
shoulders slipping silk beneath his hand,
thighs, love-warm, that curved him into calm.
Her lips so easy now to kiss in sleep.
Jen, his own again. He felt the sun
filter through the curtain, spread, and flood
light into his dark and secret caves.

The bears yawned.

8.

“Nice of you to cook me scrambled eggs.”

Jen laid down the napkin by her plate.

“At noon, back to the stove. But windows first.

Spring, almost—the cupboards should be done.

The garden, too—we’ll have to plan it soon.”

She rose to stack the dishes in the sink.

“Jen—” His fingers pressed into her arm.

“This isn’t yesterday. I need to know.”

“I’m back.” She tugged free. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Enough? Walk in, as if my years alone

were nothing? Don’t you know what I went through?

The questions, then the blaming—”

“Don’t you start!”

He watched her knuckles whiten as she raised

the wobbling cups and plates as if to dash

her anger into splinters at his feet.

“Tell me! Jen, you owe me that at least.”

“I owe you nothing. I will clean your house.

Cook your meals. Now let it go at that.”

“And share my bed? Jen, who were you last night?”

“Your housekeeper. Remember?—Not your wife.”

9.

Where the back field dipped toward the lake,
in the fallow grass Jen used to sit.
He'd seen her yanking blade out after blade
as if to toss her doubts upon the wind.
Surely, he would find her there. He hoped
water lapping stone would comfort her,
help old anger ripple and dissolve.

Although snow melted in the morning sun,
she huddled in her coat and scanned the waves.
He waited. Let her sense him standing there.
He couldn't risk her leaving him once more.
Too often he had pushed his ways on her.
No wonder that they quarrelled near the end.
He would not alter; always she must bend.

She glanced his way and nodded. Down he slid,
and put his arms around her. Should he take
shivering as simply cold, or words
breaking loose at last, too full to hide?

Instead she took his hand and in the palm
pressed a crinkled photograph. "The boy,
almost six years old. That's why I came.
Now my father's dead, we have no one."

"A boy?" Paul froze. *Six years . . .*

"You have a son."

10.

In the kitchen, Paul stood by and watched,
silent, as Jen sipped at scalding tea.

Her cup splashed to the saucer. “So, what now!”
The words flew out like pebbles at his eyes.
“I love my boy. He’s all I’ve ever had.
You wouldn’t—didn’t know—and Father sick,
I had to go, and make the best of things.
What other choice was left to hide my shame?
No one knows how fast the darkness falls
before a single match is to be found.”

Paul bent by her side and laid his hand
upon her shoulder, felt its angry steel:
Now! A final chance to set things right
Choose!

“If I take him—will you have me?”

“Paul, if only—”

“Jen, just marry me.”

11.

Arms uplifted, ample breasts curved high.
In firelight, Paul watched as she unwound
greying coils, and set each loosened pin
glinting in its little dish, her eyes
shining far beyond the flames. Tonight
she was more lovely than he'd ever known,
woman ripened, shadow-mother soon
folding other flesh and blood in warmth
he once needed to be his alone.

Jen turned. The fire shivered. With a smile
she slid beside him on the bed and drew
thick eiderdown about them, curled her thighs
into his darkness, with cool cheek and palm
promised: the boy would draw them closer still.

12.

The platform shivered as the great wheels ground forward, stranding him forever now.

“Joey, say hello. This is your dad.”

Joey shoved his straggly brown hair back, fist smudged black as train dust. He had drawn empty faces on the smoke-streaked glass, traced the wires’ looping rise and fall. The ride so long. No one to ask, “How soon?”

Why did his mama make him travel here?
This rough man bending down to catch his eye,
muddy boots, plaid shirt, a bristly chin—
Grandpa, thin and smooth, had smelled like pines
when he bent to tuck him in. The dark
wasn’t scary, then . . .

“Joey, don’t be shy.” His mother said.

He felt her forward nudge against his coat.
“Your dad lives on a farm, with sheep and cows.
We can be together, have a home.”

No! An urgent whistle shook the dusk,
fading down the tracks into a speck.
He strained until the shadows swallowed hope.

Wrapping his fear around her hid Jen’s own.
“Paul, he’s barely six . . .”

The rough man frowned.

13.

Jen scraped back her chair. “More coffee, Paul?”
What was there to fear from words unsaid?

Joey hung against the table’s edge,
would not peek above those huge hands
digging mashed potatoes from the bowl,
sawing second slabs of roast. The hairs,
curled black wires shimmering with juice.

That boy, Paul frowned, was skinny as a hoe,
and had such sunken moons beneath his eyes.
Why did he have to fiddle with the beans?
Boys should stuff themselves. (Jen’s apple pie
steamed upon his fork, sweetly dissolved.)
Fresh air, work, would spark an appetite,
stretch the fidgets from those spindly legs.
“Eat up, Joe!”

The boy squirmed, hooked his heels
harder round the rungs. His stomach hurt.
The oilcloth had a little hole. He wished
he could shrink inside and hide, alone.
Grandpa would find him. “Look!” he’d say, “there’s Joe
waiting for a ladybug!” and fly
him home . . .

14.

Three above. The wood stove flushed her cheeks.
More, through frosted panes, Paul bundled brown.
“Bear in my mohair scarf.” She smiled and waved
as Joey crunched toward him down the lane.

Along thin snow, she watched them work. The fence
leaned from frozen mud to grey-massed cloud.

“Spring is late this year, but should I care?

I gave my love an apple . . . Silly girl!

Get to work now. Bake him apple pie!

—If I can bake at all, I’m tingling so.”

15.

Rosy with the dampness' sting, Paul hummed,
thick gloves twisting pliers round each knot.
“See how it's done, Joe? Here, you take a turn.”

Flaking rust, old wires taut, the fence
straightened post by post, a border clear
and yet, wide mesh, no barrier at all:
Paul could love enough, let chances in.

Joey? No, *Joe*—a boy his own.

16.

Joey yanked, and saw his wire pull
even with the one above, so smooth
a caterpillar could tiptoe along.

Big trains, too, puffed on silver rails.
Whenever he wanted, he would jump right on
and ride the wires anywhere at all.
But now, he had a farmer's job to do,
mending fences with his new dad Paul.

Joey—no, *Joe*—he'd got a home.

17.

What is a woman if she cannot step
outside the squares knit by winter days,
a pink and blue afghan on her bed
folded over passion, or the small
checks scrubbed almost off the tablecloth.

Raising her apron, Jen wiped off her hands
and gazed with Paul beyond the pane, where fields
stirred this time of year beneath warm rain.
If young geese forked the sky two days ago,
robins soon would hop across the porch.

Soothing as the distance in her eyes
where she had waited—and where they watched now—
beyond the mildewed flowerbed, the gate
anchored on new hinges as Joe swung
wide into their morning like a song.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Ioannou is a widely published Canadian writer, winner of the Okanagan Short Story Award. For many years, she served as Associate Editor of *Cross-Canada Writers' Magazine* and led creative writing workshops for the University of Toronto, Ryerson University Literary Society, and Toronto Board of Education. Her books include:

CHAPBOOKS

Spare Words, Pierian Press

Coming Home: An Old Love Story, Leaf Press

Who Would Be a God? (with Lenny Everson), Passion

Among the Cacti Press

The Merla Poems, Wordwrights Canada

POETRY

Mother Poems, Wordwrights Canada

Familiar Faces / Private Grief, Wordwrights Canada

Clarity Between Clouds, Goose Lane Editions

Where the Light Waits, Ekstasis Editions

Looking Through Stone: Poems about the Earth, Your Scrivener Press

Looking for Light, Hidden Brook Press

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A Magical Clockwork: The Art of Writing the Poem, Wordwrights Canada

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