A JOURNEY TO LOVE

How far would you go for love? It was the fall of 1922 and Evelyn Thorpe had just returned to Winnipeg, Canada, from a year in Scotland. Because of her trip abroad, she was invited to perform the Highland fling for her classmates at Isaac Brock Elementary School. One of those classmates, Frank Young, took special notice of her, and the two became childhood friends. One can only imagine what constitutes a friendship between a girl and a boy at the age of 10. Frank had a toboggan that his dad had made for him that he shared with Evelyn because she didn’t have one. They went ice skating together. But mostly they just played like any other 10 year olds would do at that age. Nevertheless, even then it seemed that they were more than just playmates.

Unfortunately, when you are that age, your life follows your parents. And so, just a year later Evelyn’s family decided to move to Los Angeles, California – primarily so Evelyn’s dad could pursue a business opportunity.

But Evelyn and Frank’s friendship was not to be denied by a 2,000-mile separation, and they became pen pals over the next 10 years. After 10 years, Evelyn had graduated from high school and had already begun working as a bookkeeper. Frank had already completed his first year as an architecture student at the University of Manitoba. Both wondered about their relationship. Can you really feel that there is a basis for love that comes from a 5th grade friendship and 10 years as pen pals? Still, there had to be something there to maintain this writing over such a long time, and the content of the letters had matured as both of them grew older. For now, the thought of love was simply a big question mark – both exciting in an intriguing sense but odd in that they didn’t know about anyone else forming a relationship in this manner, except maybe in a novel. It was even awkward to suggest it, but Evelyn was being pursued by other men and she didn’t want to spend her life wondering about the possibility of Frank. Evelyn wanted resolution, and in 1932 she talked her mother into returning to Winnipeg to visit friends in Winnipeg so that she could have an excuse to spend time with Frank and determine what was real and what was fantasy in their relationship. They spent one week together (a plutonic version of the 1930s) and felt it was real, at least to the extent of agreeing to wait for another four years until Frank graduated from college.

Even after their brief visit, this relationship seemed unreal to their friends. Love based on being friends in the 5th grade, 10 years of letters and one week of seeing each other as adults only happened in the movies. Just to honor their agreement meant that for four more years their only contact would be by letters. Love is so hard to define or to know when friendship transcends into something more that it seems unimaginable to make lifetime commitments on such a fragile basis. But in the spring of 1936, it was time for fantasy to face reality. Frank graduated with his degree in architecture and action replaced words.

On June 8, 1936, Frank began his train trip to Los Angeles so that finally the two could be together. Frank’s father and brother took him to the train station in Winnipeg to begin his five-day train journey. He would travel through Saskatoon, Edmonton, and the Canadian Rockies before heading to Seattle. From there he would head down the coast
to Los Angeles, arriving on the morning of June 13, where he was met by Evelyn and her parents.

Frank was a newly graduated architecture student and he wanted to start working. The problem was that he was in the United States as a Canadian citizen on a visitor’s visa, which did not allow him to work in the United States. After all, this was the Depression and the U.S. was protective of its scarce jobs. And so, after a few months in Los Angeles and with Evelyn, Frank had to return to Canada to obtain a new visa.

This time, Frank took his first airplane trip. On Monday, March 15, 1937, Evelyn took Frank to the United Airlines terminal in Burbank for his 1:15 afternoon departure. In 1937, flying was still a bit of an adventure. His plane was a Boeing twin engine aircraft that seated ten, but Frank had only one other passenger on board with him. The first stop was Las Vegas and then on to Salt Lake City. He had dinner in Salt Lake City and sent telegrams to both Evelyn and his parents in Winnipeg. Around 7:00 in the evening his plane took off but had to land in Pocatello because of the weather where they were grounded for the night. They were unable to take off again until early the following afternoon. After two more stops (one of them in Butte), they set down in Helena, Montana for dinner. They were forced to spend most of the night in Helena, but they eventually moved on to Billings, Montana, where they were grounded until daybreak. From there they went on to Bismarck, North Dakota, and Frank had to decide whether to take a train from there to Winnipeg or still try to go on to Fargo. The airlines were doubtful if they would be able to land in Fargo, in which case he would need to go all the way to Minneapolis. That is what he decided to do and so Frank ended up briefly in Minneapolis but then took off for St. Paul where he barely caught a plane to Winnipeg. He ended his last leg with three other passengers and arrived in Winnipeg late in the day on March 17. It had taken over two full days to fly there, and this was the quick route. Despite all the landings and some rough weather, Frank loved the experience of flying. He felt a little bedraggled because he had been wearing the same clothes for two days, and of course he had not shaved in two days. Nevertheless, that was all part of the experience of flying in 1937.

Now he had to turn his attention to the purpose for the trip – a new visa. While not easy, Frank was successful in obtaining a new visa, but there were conditions. If he wanted to stay in the United States longer than six months, he must be married to a U.S. citizen or a fully registered alien. Fortunately, he and Evelyn had talked of marrying, and she qualified in the latter category. Having accomplished his purpose, Frank now started his journey flying back to California and to his love, Evelyn.

While flying in 1937 was never easy, this trip was less eventful. It still took two days and stops in Pembina, Minnesota (customs and immigration), Minneapolis, Billings, Helena, Salt Lake City, and Las Vegas. But Frank arrived in Burbank, California, to a waiting Evelyn on April 14. Finally, it looked as if they could start to plan their life together.

Evelyn and her parents planned a wedding quickly, and the two were married in Los Angeles on April 30, 1937. Their marriage was a true love story, beginning in the 5th
grade, followed by 14 years of letter writing. And while those letters were lost, their marriage lasted 61 years until Frank’s passing in 1998.

Do you believe that love can be found at the age of 10? Would you believe that love could survive 14 years of letters? A brief encounter in Canada before making the decision to marry? Would you have made the five-day trip by train? A harrowing two-day airplane ride? How far would you go for love?

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