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This Dark, Gentle Season

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The Lightkeeper



Liam McKinnon

BY LIAM MCKINNON

You raised us in art, my four brothers and me, as though it were the walls and roof of our childhood. I remember those weekends you'd line us up at the kitchen counter, a glass of water each, a brush, and watercolor pencils. The ease with which you drew escaped me, your strokes as graceful as a figure skater's lines across a vast white between your hands, transforming blank pages into pumpkins, willow trees, the face of a rabbit on Easter. You told me stories of how you taught art in an academy, a long time ago, in that life before my life. You encouraged each of us to pursue the art of our choice — illustration, animation, film, and, in my case, writing — and to quiet the chorus of doubts that rose in us at times. You were always telling us to connect with our inner world, and to pull it out of us, to hoist our dreams like ocean nets filled with magic, and to share it.

Too often, though, it felt insufficient. The TV in the living room that has sat in the same corner throughout all the years of my growing up, has spilled news about terror, tsunamis, the rise of ISIS, and the collapse of Syria, on the backdrop of our planet's crying ecosystems. Art felt fragile in the face of this world. At school I felt pulled in different directions, wanting to have an impact somewhere. I didn't understand what a poem could solve, what ink to paper could save, what you meant when you said *art can heal the world*.

I was 11 when you decided to turn the page on your career as office manager of the medical publishing company you ran with Pops. For years you had sneaked whatever part of art you could into the back door of that corporate building: the logos you created, the fonts in your reports, the colors of your pens, and the way you arranged your desk. Sometimes you admitted to me that you cried in the stairwell because this wasn't what you wanted out of life. But on your 45th birthday, it was the thought of your own mother, who hadn't lived past that age — a woman with your eyes, whose face I've only encountered in a green frame on your desk — that made you reconsider how to use the rest of your time here. *I have to live for the both of us*, now, was how you put it.

With Pops encouraging you to take the plunge, you opened a boutique on Main Street. A small space with white walls and hardwood floors that I remember visiting with you. The way you looked, then, your hands held together saying, "Let's do it," is what I imagined you looked like when you had once taught art to students. I could feel the magic stirring in your own ocean's nets.

You called it Pure Art, etching its name in the front window. You filled it with objects from around the world, all fair-trade certified and purpose-driven. You'd show me dresses handwoven by women in Afghanistan and Pakistan. New shipments would contain boxes of shining dishware from Syrian glassblowers. Women-run cooperatives in Guatemala partnered with you to bring their handmade jewelry to the Canadian market. The sale of felt dolls created by artisans in India supported a program to protect their native snow leopards. As an expression of your kinship to your own Algonquin lineage, you partnered with indigenous artists up north, who sent you exquisite mittens, hats, and broaches of beads and quills, and who came to give workshops in your space. You wanted to encourage our local artists, too, so the boutique became a place for them to share their cards, prints, and books. It was a hub for the world's dreams, and everyone who walked in your store felt it. These weren't mere products. They were someone's inner magic stitched, forged, or woven into life and given a platform among the shelves. The proceeds of this store were all funnelled toward sustainable development programs and poverty alleviation led by the Pure Art Foundation, which you had launched as the charitable arm of your vision. »

I started seeing it, the healing power you had often talked about. Your store brought into focus a collective “we,” a global “us,” exchanging expressions, visions, and cultures with one common desire to lift each other up. You transformed a small store with a “for rent” sign into all of this and with it the next foreseeable years of your life. You’d never been scared of putting your head down and charging through hard work, but now this was hard work you could dance with. You were flowing, Mom, and some force out there seemed to have you back.

Until the unexpected suddenly happened, when on a rainy day in mid-August, my brother passed away. Your son. Our Ben. Bright-eyed and visionary, a talented filmmaker. How can the entirety of a human being slip into the space between two breaths? Gone. It was the night of the Perseids meteor shower, an event I was never aware of before his death. I’ve read about it since, how every August, on the 12th, falling stars tear through the northern hemisphere. That year they took Ben with them, galloping towards uncharted freedom, leaving a great hole in their wake. We were left with a hundred unspoken questions, scattered across the sky.

I know there were times, after that, when you felt like stopping everything. It felt like the one thing that was never supposed to happen, happened. It threatened to take all the meaning out of life, the magic we had so often felt infused in everything. How could we believe in “a meant to be” after this? How could life be in our favor, yet take the one we love away? That autumn I took a break from university. We all took a leave, for a while, from our respective circles and descended into the private valleys of our souls.

But it was in that valley, in the midst of that questioning, that I recognized the inner voice you had always pushed me to connect with: the deep hum of my ocean. The artist’s work is never over, is it? There is no permanence. No arrival or safe harbor. Only transformation.

I knew it was the same for you. Only this time it wasn’t a page, or a job, or a store to transform. It was your life and the silent mountain of grief that had risen in its center. I could feel you, next to me yet a thousand miles away, sitting in its shadow. There was an impenetrable gray in front of you, but day by day, you chipped away that mountain face, carving out steps. You transformed grief into a ladder toward your own understanding of Grace.

You emerged from your valley and set to work on launching a daycare in Ben’s name — The Lightkeeper Daycare — to serve underprivileged mothers in Peru who were enrolled in your women empowerment sewing workshops. You designed the Lightkeeper bracelet — a twinkling, crystal token — to sell in your store and raise funds for the initiative. You created a whole campaign about rising above grief and tapping into inner light. Rather than being deprived of meaning, every action you took now seemed to have doubled in it.

Metal into gold. Water into wine. The pains and trials of life into beauty. Myths and religions have told us about this, the alchemical power of the human spirit. I realize, now, that this act of transformation is art: it is the art of a living, breathing human life.


The healing power of art you talked about is all of this, isn’t it? Art doesn’t heal by preventing bad things from happening but by giving us a way to respond to them when they do. To transform them. To hold them and love them into light.

Thank you for showing me that, Mom. Thank you for your courage, and for being the greatest example of grace in my life. For living and leading by action. For having taught me about lines and pigment on paper, about ladders into my soul, about the ocean inside that waits patiently for us to trust in it, and to embrace our own ability to transform.

Learn more about Liam McKinnon at pureartfoundation.org.



Liam McKinnon



We believe:
An ordinary life
can be *extraordinary*,
there is beauty in
IMPERFECTION,
and that *magic*
can be found in
the everyday.

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