

FLOYD WICKMAN'S

LETTERS
to
LINDA

A NOVEL OF LIFE'S GREATEST LESSONS

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Chapter 1



*M*y life, my journey, is the tale of a winding and jagged course. It fades to the horizon behind me, and I am left with what remains of my memory to comprehend its purpose and judge its merit. Here, there is no audience to applaud me, no friends to assure me of my virtue. I am left alone to ponder the questions echoing in my mind.

What is my story? And what does it all mean?

Those who know me best would call it a love story.

Perhaps you will think it a tragedy.

It is early morning now, and through the bathroom window I hear nothing from the slumbering streets of this quaint little neighborhood. The air feels fresh and pure, listless with the soft serenity of a new beginning. The only sound is the steady trickle of water down the drain and the dying gurgle of the toilet. As I dry my hands on the towel, I am once again amazed at how youth and strength have so quickly given way to wrinkles and a maze of swollen veins.

My own reflection stares from the medicine cabinet through eyes that have no answer to the question passed between them.

Why?

This is how it begins for me.

Try as I may, I cannot change the face in the mirror or imagine it stripped of the years since its youth. The images in the far recesses of my mind are few and pale, like yellowed photographs faded with age. Life and the sands of time have had their way without bothering to ask for my permission. I wasn't supposed to grow old. Not like this. Not this quickly.

Why?

It's the simplest of questions, I know. I can remember my children asking me why the grass is green, why the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening. Now I have grandchildren, and they, too, are curious as to *why*?

Yet, here I stand on the threshold of another day, in a lifetime of countless mornings, with no answer to my only remaining question.

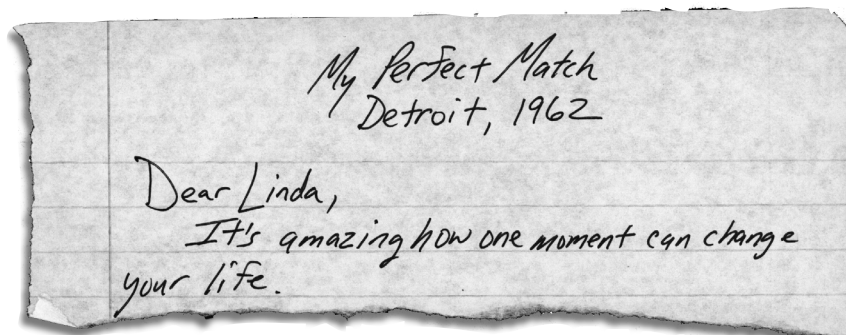
I make my way down the hall from the bathroom. As I do every morning, I pause at the door to the den where Linda insisted I hang my awards. Over the years, I've picked up so many that they clad the room like garish wallpaper.

There are dozens of plaques, framed certificates and pictures of me shaking hands with celebrities. On the far wall hangs an oak shelf crafted by my grandson in his industrial arts class. It, too, is littered with various trophies and souvenirs, all the tangible trappings of my success.

I've done well for myself, I suppose. Although it's been far from easy, the ups have been higher than the downs. If life were a rodeo, then I can honestly say I grabbed the bull by the horns and rode it for all I could. But even cowboys grow old, and just when I'm beginning to understand how to stay in the stirrups, I find that the rest of me can't quite keep up anymore. I guess that's just the nature of a lifetime.

My gaze comes to rest on the large plaque given at my induction into the National Speakers Association Hall of Fame. I don't often admit it, but it is my favorite, my most prized accomplishment.

I approach the plaque, close my eyes and gently trace across



I don't understand it, but something happened tonight. I can feel it. It's fluttering around in my heart. I've never felt this way in my whole life. I close my eyes, and your face is etched on the back of my eyelids.

I can still smell the air. You know, the way Wood's Drive-In and Restaurant smells: hot dogs, hamburgers and fries. Bill and I were cruising for girls. I'm not sure what we were expecting, as if a couple of chicks were just going to fall in front of the car or something. Anyway, we decided to get something to eat at Wood's. It's funny, because I didn't even want to go. I was beat from working the milk route all day. But Bill insisted, so I went along. I never imagined just how much that decision would change me.

I'm scared to tell you this, but I've done some stuff I'm not proud of. I only finished ninth grade. I've "borrowed" a lot of cars. I even got sent to the detention center for awhile. I used to hang out with the east side gangs. I guess I think that if you find out who I really am, you'll realize that you're too good for me. You're a nice girl, and I'm just a loser.

After we gave our order, I went to light up a Pall Mall, but I didn't have any matches and the cigarette lighter in the Impala doesn't work. I figured somebody in the car next to us would have a light. I suppose I would've come up with a more romantic approach if I'd known it was going to be you inside that car, but I just blew my horn and rolled down my window.

That's when I saw your face for the first time. And my heart's been beating double time ever since.

I can still remember your window sliding down as if it was a movie in slow motion. I see your dark, soft hair coming into view; then those large, brown eyes that remind me of brown olives. It was like you cast a spell on me. You looked so fine in that white blouse with ruffles. You just smiled, like you were wondering why this guy was honking his horn at you.

I asked your name. Linda Tiracchia. I'd never heard a name that sounded so wonderful.

When I rolled up the window, Bill was grinning from ear to ear. "That girl is fine," I told him. "Fine!"

Four cigarettes later, I finally got up the nerve to ask you if you wanted to drive down to Chandler Park. I'd never been more nervous in my life, but when you said yes, it was the Fourth of July in my mind. I can still feel how hard my heart was beating the whole way there. When you said you like R and B, I couldn't believe it. Right then, "There's a Moon Out Tonight" by the Capris started playing. It was perfect.

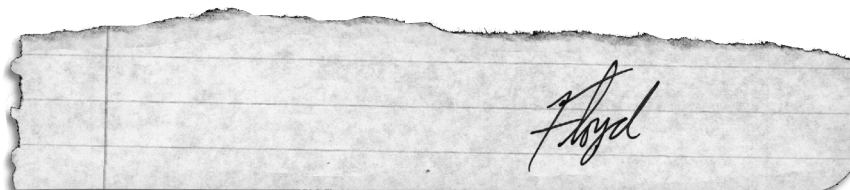
I'm not sure if I understand love at 22 years old, but I know that I've never felt this way about anyone. When we sat there in the park talking and laughing, it was like I just knew that I never wanted to live without you.

I felt complete, like I'd finally found that missing piece of me. I kept thinking, this is a nice girl. A nice girl.

It was perfect tonight, Linda. I can't wait to be with you again. I can still smell you. I can still see the way your hair fell softly to your shoulders, the way it waved as you laughed.

And those brown olive eyes, I just want to see them again. I want to stare into them and feel that warmth spreading throughout my entire body. Right now, there's a rope tied around my heart, tightening around it, squeezing. I miss you already.

I'll never forget meeting you. I asked for a light and got my perfect match.

A piece of torn, lined paper with the signature "Floyd" written in cursive.