

bittersweet

confessions of a twice-married man

PHILIP LEE



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Edited by Bethany Gibson.

Cover photograph Image Source/Corbis.

Cover and book design by Julie Scriver.

Printed in Canada.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Lee, Philip J., 1963-

Bittersweet: confessions of a twice-married man / Philip Lee.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-86492-463-6

1. Lee, Philip J., 1963-. 2. Divorced men — Canada — Biography.
I. Title.

PS8623.E4434B48 2008

C818'.603

C2008-903814-2

Goose Lane Editions acknowledges the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP), and the New Brunswick Department of Wellness, Culture, and Sport for its publishing activities.

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Fredericton, New Brunswick

CANADA E3B 5X4

www.gooselane.com

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On the summer afternoon I returned to the old house by the sea, I parked my car in the weeds by the back door and walked through a field of tall grasses and wildflowers to watch the incoming tide. I climbed down over the bank to the beach, where the waves splashed and rolled across polished stones and seaweed beds, where the air smelled of salt, sun, and the shore.

Here in the bay that Portuguese sailors named Rio Fundo, the “deep river,” water washes in from the Gulf of Maine and crashes against the continental shelf, creating a special soup of gravity, depth, distance, and waves that produces the highest tides in the world. The Bay of Fundy shore is a place of constant motion. The tides are forever coming and going, forever rearranging the stones and gravel on the beach. When storm waters rise and the highest tides surge on the full moon, waves pound the cliffs. Whole pieces of the shore crumble and fall, and these rocks are broken again and scattered across the beach.

The tides here are a mighty force, but up close, in slow time, their movement is so unhurried that I sometimes forget the water is rising until another crevice is filled and another rock disappears, until the seaweed beds are floating and the waves are swirling at my feet. In this way, change washed into my life.

I stood at the edge of the water, watching the rising tide, then wandered down the beach, around the rocky point, and across the next beach until I turned and retraced my steps to the old house. I sat on the front porch and had a good long cry. All this crying was a new thing for me. As a young man, I had a stiff upper lip that I figure was passed down from my ancestors, the indefatigable Confederate fighters from the southern United States. Whenever I cried as a boy, my father used to tell me, “Son, get hold of yourself.” Years later, he told me he regretted speaking those words, but he was repeating what his father had told him, and that we all, in ways great and small, bear the sins of our fathers. I took my father’s words to heart and as a young man, learned to get hold of myself. But when my marriage fell apart, I started crying.

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In the weeks before I left the farm where I had been living with my wife and our three children, I would see the kids off to school in the mornings and then moments later, collapse sobbing, asking myself over and over, What have I done? What have I done? I would force myself to move, one foot in front of the other, until I had momentum, and I would hurry about the farm, feeding and watering our two horses and putting them out to pasture, running the two dogs, and shooing the cats out the back door and filling their bowls with food and water. I would wash my face and hands, put on my suit, knot my tie, and drive to work, listening to the morning news on the radio while I ran an electric razor over my chin and tried to turn my mind toward the tasks of the day — tasks that absorbed me and offered a measure of relief.

That summer afternoon when I arrived at the old house was the day I left the farm for good. I was thirty-five years old, and while I may not yet have reached mid-life, I was fully in crisis. I sat on the porch for a long time before I felt able to walk to the car, open the trunk, and carry my bags inside.

After the sun set behind the spruce trees on the point, I went upstairs and tried to sleep in the bedroom with the window that

looks out to the sea, in the bed where my parents slept during the endless summers of my youth. I spent half the night lying awake in my parents' bed and half the night wandering through the house, smoking cigarettes and reading old paperback mystery novels.

When I came downstairs in the morning, dizzy from lack of sleep, I found three squirrels in the kitchen, one sitting on the table and two on the floor, regarding me with surprise, as if I were invading their space. I chased them out the back door, slammed it shut, and reminded myself that the old house needed a spring cleaning. Then I walked out the front door and stood on the wet grass in my bare feet and watched the ducks swim and dive in the cove. The sea was calm, the tide was rising again, and the waves were breaking softly on the beach. I dried my feet on the porch boards and climbed the stairs to dress for work.

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I became a husband and a father in my early twenties and entered the period of life that American songwriter Greg Brown describes as “the worrisome years.” My wife and I were starting careers, living in apartments and rented homes, moving at least once a year, raising children and being broke, and wondering too often, “When does the good part start?”

I was a father of two little girls by the time I graduated from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with a master's degree in the classics. I could read ancient Greek, I had spent years exploring the pages of Homer's poetry and Plato's dialogues, but I had few skills that would help to support a family that to this point had been kept afloat by my wife's nursing job and my university scholarships. One day out of desperation, I took an aptitude test with an employment counsellor in downtown Halifax. He concluded that the only thing I could do well was write, and there

wasn't much demand for writers. However, he did have an advertisement for a reporter's job at a small newspaper in a paper-mill town in central Newfoundland.

So I flew into Gander and drove an hour inland to the town of Grand Falls for a job interview at a bi-weekly newspaper called the *Advertiser*. I checked into the only hotel in town, ate my first meal of cod tongues at the hotel restaurant with the newspaper's overworked managing editor, who by the time we ordered coffee, offered me a job. I negotiated a salary of three hundred and fifty dollars a week, which was fifty dollars more than the newspaper paid most cub reporters, and then told him I needed to go home and talk it over with my wife. I returned to Halifax, and we decided to go Newfoundland. Perhaps there I would find the beginnings of a career and she would find work at the local hospital. We packed our family into our car, boarded the ferry in North Sydney, Nova Scotia, landed at Port aux Basques, and drove across the island through a blinding early fall snowstorm into a new life.

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When I reported for work at the *Advertiser*, I discovered that I had a lot to learn about the newspaper business. And with an editorial staff of just three, including me, I had to learn in a hurry. At a small-town newspaper, taking photographs of the mayor at ribbon cuttings, the guest speaker at the Chamber of Commerce luncheon, and the winners of the high school science fair contest was half the job, and when I arrived, I didn't know how to load film into a 35 mm camera. My training session, which lasted all of half an hour, included a crash course in news writing and film loading.

We worked in a small cluster of offices built into the front of an industrial printing plant. On publication day, I would turn off my computer, walk out into the plant, pick up the printouts of the columns I had written, feed them through a waxing machine, and paste them onto pages. I proofread the pages, then sent them to be photographed, plated, and hung on the press. When the press

rolled, the whole building shook, and I was back in my office planning the next edition.

Most days, I was too busy to stop and think about what I had got myself into, but I remember the day I realized I had stumbled by chance into the kind of work I really wanted to do. I had been assigned to cover the report of an inquiry into a forest fire ignited by sparks from a passing train — an event of great interest in a town whose economic survival depended on the local supply of timber that fed the mill. The report was all routine technical testimony, until I came upon a story told by the foreman of a logging crew. He and his men had been clearing a fire line near a logging camp when he realized the fire was racing toward them and they wouldn't be able to stop it or get out of its way. In moments he gathered the men in a clearing beside the camp and told them to hose down everything, including themselves. Then he instructed them to lie down on the wet ground. The fire passed over them. All survived.

In this man's account of leadership and courage, I found what I wanted to do with my life. When I wrote this kind of story for the newspaper, I was writing about the subjects that had interested me when I was reading Homer and Sophocles and Plato and contemplating what it means to live a life of virtue. Journalism, like poetry and philosophy, is an art that moves readers from particular images to universal ideas. Years later, one of my editors told me that the stories we were writing were like parables, little pictures, each in some way exploring the moral questions of our time.

I moved from the mill-town newspaper in central Newfoundland to a city newspaper in St. John's and learned the business of journalism from the inside out. Our son was born in the city, so then we were five. We bought our first home in a fishing village called Flatrock, on the outskirts of St. John's, and settled there on a wind-battered hill where we watched the waves of the North Atlantic explode against the rocks in the harbour below.

During the worrisome years, I considered myself an apprentice in a business where my value would always be judged by the last story I wrote. I set no boundaries for my work. I would spend long days at the office or on the road reporting, rush home to put dinner on the table because my wife was often working nights at the hospital, and then once the children were asleep and I had finished the household chores, I would turn on my computer and work into the late evening. I allowed my work to consume me. I never found a more balanced way of working as a journalist, although I knew my family wished I would learn to set limits. I was spending more time tending to the needs of my job than to the needs of my family. It would be many years before I learned to correct this imbalance.

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I continued to work for newspapers and magazines, changing jobs for new opportunities, one of which took us back to the mainland. There, we hoped we might find the family home we had been searching for. That search, apart from my excessive work habits, had defined our lives during the worrisome years.

The search began during my final year of university, when our eldest daughter was a toddler, and we used to drive about the Nova Scotia countryside on weekends, visiting farms that were for sale. We inspected farmhouses, explored musty barns, waded through tall pasture grasses, and traversed old apple orchards, lugging our little girl in our arms or on my shoulders, imagining how we might make a home in these places. We never found a farm that had everything we wanted. We would inspect a property and on the drive home, conclude that the land wasn't flat enough, or the barns were beyond repair, or the house didn't have a large enough kitchen. Perhaps the deficiencies we found in these properties were just an excuse we gave ourselves to keep looking.

Some evenings, when we arrived home after dark to the cottage we were renting on the shore of St. Margarets Bay, tired and hungry with a sleeping child in the back seat, I would scold myself for wasting a precious summer day on a search I knew was pointless

at this stage in our lives when instead I should have been out looking for a job. Then the next weekend we would be back at it again, real estate listings and maps spread out on the dashboard as we drove down lonely country roads, longing for something we didn't have, unable even to articulate what it was we were hoping to find.

The search carried me a long way, from the meadows of Nova Scotia's southern shore to the rocky coastline of Newfoundland to the valley of the St. John River in New Brunswick. I thought that finding the right place to live was the key to constructing a happy life, that when we arrived at our family home, wherever that might be, we would open the door and find ourselves standing there — happy.

We believed that our farm in the St. John River valley was the place we had been searching for, and we had admired it from a distance long before we liquidated everything we had to secure it. At the time, we were living a short walk down the road in an old storey-and-a-half house on a fifty-acre hillside lot, but we saw a better life on this old farm set back from the main road, with sweeping meadows and acres of mature forest. During our walks on a logging road that bordered the property, we got to know the owners of the farm, and when they decided to sell, we were able to buy it before it went on the market.

I am now convinced that when Leo Tolstoy wrote that every happy family is alike and every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, he had it only half right. Every happy family is also happy in its own way. I think Tolstoy understood this as well, because in his great novel of the family, he is most fascinated by the exquisite character of Anna Karenina and her pursuit of love and happiness after she leaves her husband, Levin. Despite the tragic nature of Anna's pursuit and the redemption of Levin late in the novel, we are left without a satisfactory resolution to the juxtaposition of what Tolstoy regards as the objective good of marriage and family and the subjective wonders of love. For many of us, the question of how