**FALLEN TIMBERS**

I saw Lisa in the check-out line at the grocery store last week. It had been some years, but she looked the same as the July we stood in line opening night to see “Grease” at the Beach Colony Theater. It was the summer I tried cigarettes, for the first and last time, and chipped my front tooth jumping a bicycle over our picnic table.

Lisa could never change, even packaged in a high style, knee length, black raincoat secured by three inch belt, fashionably looped. Her barrettes were gone, but her hair still parted in the middle falling halfway down her back. Perennial flip flops had morphed into high heels. The make-up was more sophisticated than the glitter eye shadow and strawberry lip gloss of our youth, but it was still Lisa.

She placed the plastic bar with grocery store logo behind her purchase marking the customary boundary. Her fare included four yogurts, two pints of cottage cheese, a melon, whole grain bread, and a package of pinwheel cookies – the kind with a graham cracker base and marshmallow innards coated with dark chocolate. I tendered an adolescent’s smile. Lisa’s grandmother, Mrs. O’Halloran to me, served us pinwheels on the porch of their beach front home the summer night we watched the fireworks celebrating our nation’s bicentennial.

My cart overloaded, I selected the biggest item, a bulbous pack of diapers and placed it with intent on the conveyor. She turned in response.

“Hey Lise.”

A moment’s hesitation followed by an effervescence of recognition, “Oh my God, I wondered if I would bump into you. It’s so strange being back. The last time I was here, this was Altman’s Department Store.” We kissed cheek to cheek. She touched the hair around my temples. “You’ve got grays coming in.”

Yeah, and about twenty extra pounds I thought to myself. “Where are you living these days?” I asked.

“Boston. The last time I saw you, and what’s her name, Chris, right? You guys had a little girl, Elizabeth. I was working in New York then. How’s she doing?”

I knew she meant my daughter and not my wife. “She’s eleven now.”

“You’re kidding me. Has it been that long? Any more little ones?”

“Three. Rachael, Molly, and Tommy’s thirteen months,” I said patting the blue bag of Huggies.

“You’ve been busy.” She pushed back her hair on one side behind her ear revealing a cultured pearl above a small diamond stud. It was a long distance from the silver hoops I gave her the summer she got braces.

The large boned, green aproned, Celtic woman piloting the cash register interrupted our reunion. There was irritation in her brogue as if we should have been paying attention to her button that bore the query for coupons, “Ma’am. That will be $17.88 if you please.”

I observed Lisa as she opened her purse with DKNY monogram and removed her leather gloves. I held an exhale as she tugged at the tips on her left hand. I found myself fumbling my wedding band with my thumb.

“You’re so obvious,” she said laughing.

“What?” I said feeling my face flush.

She pinched my cheeks. “You’ve still got dimples, and no, I’m not married.”

Lisa helped unload my cart teasing me about the multiple boxes of Fruit Loops, Count Chocula, and Golden Grahams. I explained the children had their favorites, and life was easier when they had their own boxes. She was working as fact checker for a publishing house, and her only sister Debbie, was in advertising living in Chicago. To me, she was Debra, and I was the only one who called her that since the summer we built a bicycle out of parts naming it the Debra Stutz cycle. I told Lisa about my only brother, and his drug problems and self-seclusion after his failed marriage.

We sat in the front seat of my car exchanging postscripts on our childhood friends. She surveyed my interior with glances as we spoke, taking in the car seat, children’s toys, and the occasional French fry. The glove box bore several small footprints; the windows smudged with face, palm, and food marks.

We both knew she wouldn’t be coming to visit. The last time she called on my wife and me, Lisa hung up her coat and placed her gloves on a shelf in the hall closet. Built in 1937, our house had been my grandparent’s home, and Lisa knew it from our youth. My wife found Lisa’s familiarity with our residence offensive, and when Lisa left, her gloves remained in the closet as if she was claiming her own space. The next time she was in town, my wife took the call, and Lisa did not visit.

When we tired of the names of our youth, an awkward silence remained, a caesura in the prose of our verse. She had avoided discussing the reasons for coming back, and I wished to know more. “So what brings you home?”

The Lisa smile faded like a wilting fern. “Nana died.”

“I’m sorry.”

I looked at the pinwheels in the sole bag beneath her feet. Her gaze followed. I noticed her eyes pool as she opened the seal. We toasted cookies the way one resonates fine crystal. “To Nana,” she said.

Within minutes we consumed the package of twelve, and I found myself contemplating opening one of the gallons of milk among the bags in the back seat.

“There’s more,” she said. I noticed little lines radiating from the corner of her eyes, a vertical furrow between her eyebrows, and creases from the base of her nose to the corners of her mouth. She seemed to age in seconds. “Mom and Dad split up.”

I released an audible sigh, “I didn’t see that coming.” She gave me the same look when I said I wanted an Alice Cooper album for my thirteenth birthday. It really wasn’t a surprise. Her parents seemed incapable of love. They never smiled at each other, never kissed, and never held hands. “When,” I asked.

“About two years ago. Mom took up yoga three nights a week, and Dad started tutoring grad students in the evening. Who did they think they were kidding?”

I nodded feigning understanding. My parents had divorced when I was three, and my memories of their married years could be counted on one hand.

She continued, a tremor rising, “Now Dad lives in California, and Mom’s in Vermont. They’re selling the house long distance. I packed up what little was left of my things over the weekend. Debbie was down the week before. It’s so horrible, each of us taking what we want. I think the worst was seeing what my parents left behind. It was as if they wanted to deny the memories.”

I leaned across the seat, embraced her and let her cry on my shoulder feeling the rise and fall of her chest. People walked by pushing carts and staring. I didn’t care. I held her in silence for several minutes until the outgoing tide of emotions slowed. She pulled back, mascara streaking black down her cheeks. I wondered what had transferred to my shirt.

“Our home, my childhood home, the safest place in the world to me, had become a house. It felt like one of those discarded cicada shells we used to find. It was just awful. The water and electricity were off. I had to use a flashlight to go through my closet. I found a bunch of your old albums, Beach Boys, Chicago, Genesis, James Taylor.”

More tears, and I held her longer this time. Her hair smelled like a spring bouquet.

She continued, her face smothered in my shoulder, “Do you remember where I lived?”

Five Brown’s Lane I thought to myself, the last house on the left at the end of the cul-de-sac, a brown and white split level with turquoise shutters. “I think so. It was off Radnor-Chester Road.”

“That’s right, third street on your left after the light.”

“Brown’s Lane,” I said as if it had just come to me.

She gave me a gentle nudge, “So you do remember.”

“Yeah, I do.” Embarrassment filled my cheeks again and another poke in the shoulder.

“Middle aged and you still blush.”

“I guess some things never change.” I looked into her eyes focusing a thousand miles away.

It started to rain, beads forming on the windshield and drops dancing on the hood. The shoppers traversing the parking lot picked up their pace to escape the coming downpour.

“When are you headed back to Boston?” I asked.

“First thing in the morning. I’ve got a 5:50 am flight on a puddle jumper.”

“I wish I could ask you over for dinner.”

“I know.” She reached out briefly consoling my hand. “Do you have pictures of your children?”

I had several on my cell phone taken the week before at my eldest’s piano recital.

“I can’t believe how big Elizabeth is. She looks just like you, even the dimples. Your other children are gorgeous too. Chris’s hair is different, shorter.” She alternated her gaze between me and the small screen on the phone. “You’re very lucky.”

I pondered her left hand, “How come you aren’t married by now?”

“I haven’t found the right guy. When I was little, I wanted one just like my Dad, then there was the Crawman remember?” She turned away looking out her window. “Look how that turned out.”

Our sophomore year I moved from my mother’s house to my father’s switching schools, and Lisa’s grandparents sold the house at the shore. She dated a friend of mine named John Crawford. They were hot and heavy through high school. During winter break our senior year, Lisa went skiing with her parents in Vermont. John Crawford and a girl named Emily were killed in a one car accident. Drugs were involved, but nothing could soothe the betrayal and loss Lisa felt. She postponed college a year touring hostels in Europe.

The rain came down harder. You could hear its melody on the roof, and the windows began to fog. The growing curtain of humidity made me feel sixteen and guilty. Lisa reached out again taking my hand in the warmth of hers. “I have a huge favor to ask. I was just going to let it go, but you’re the only person I could ask this of and know you’d understand.” The age lines were back, and her lips quivering and thinning.

“Try me.”

She squeezed my hand, “I can’t go back there. I can never go home. It was my responsibility to pick up the place a little, get the grass cut, and make it look semi-presentable for the realtors next week. I don’t think I can go down my street again. It hurts too much.” The tears came harder this time, her chest heaving in swells.

“I’ll take care of it,” I said. “Don’t worry.”

“I’m so embarrassed, but I can’t do it. I went to Laurel Hill yesterday to visit John’s grave. Seeing home was worse. I felt like a witness to two murders.”

“Relax Lise. I’ll take care of it.”

She gave me her cell phone number and suggested not to program it in my phone. “I would like us to stay in touch this time. Maybe Messenger on Facebook or Instagram?”

We had exhausted words, and she still held and contemplated my hand. We kissed, on the lips, and a little longer than we should have. Lisa opened the car door and shielded her head from the rain with her hand. “Thanks. You were always someone I could count on. I miss that.”

The door closed hard, and I felt the startle in my spine. I watched her briskly walk several aisles through the parking lot to a nondescript rental. I waited until she exited the lot and turned on Lancaster Avenue before starting my car.

I told my wife what happened upon arriving home and busied myself putting away the groceries while she attempted to make eye contact and gauge the level of threat. I spent several minutes with my head buried in the pantry arranging soup cans so they were organized by type and the labels facing out.

“How’d she look?” asked Chris.

“Older. She’s getting wrinkles. Maybe a little heavier.”

A weak smile. “Is she married?”

“Nope.”

“Engaged?”

“Nope. Didn’t see a ring.”

“Seeing someone?”

“I didn’t think to ask. It wasn’t that kind of conversation.”

My wife stood behind me waiting for me to turn around. “How long is this chore going to take? We have a lot going on this weekend.”

I knew what the cost would be. I knocked out a heavy honey-do list on Saturday followed by dinner, just the two of us, at the Guard House Inn. Sunday was church in the morning, all of us, followed by brunch at La Fourchette. A trip to Staples to pick up last minute school project supplies, and a quick change into worn clothes, I made sure to leave everyone fully sated and relaxing away a Sunday afternoon.

I loaded the Suburban with our lawnmower, chain saw, hedge trimmer, and two rakes. I added a pack of heavy duty trash bags and prepared to exit the house leaving everyone stretched out in the family room streaming “Titanic” on Netflix for the umpteenth time.

“He’s doing a favor for a friend,” my wife explained.

Elizabeth parodied the scene at the end of the movie using her best high pitched squeaky voice, “Come back. Come back. Daddy, come back.”

I laughed, kissed everyone on the forehead, and promised to be home before the end of the movie.

The drive took maybe five minutes, and I was surprised I hadn’t found myself on Brown’s Lane in the last twenty years. I made the left off Radnor-Chester Road feeling the same anxiety when pedaling a gold Schwinn chopper decades before. Most of the one story houses were gone, stuccoed mansions in their place. The cul-de-sac looked smaller than when we had used it for street hockey, our plastic orange pucks frequently lost in the bushes. I had forgotten their long driveway, uphill, and my efforts to conceal my shortness of breath after pedaling to the top.

Lisa’s mailbox greeted me first. The post listed to the right, and the door open and bent. A numeral “5” was on one side, but missing from the other, a ghost outline left by the adhesive. I closed the door snapping one of the rusted hinges in the process and straightened the post tamping the ground with my foot.

The surface of the asphalt drive had disintegrated to cinders, and there were several potholes that would have derailed the two-wheeler of my youth. I was glad the house was hidden from view until I reached the top. I put my foot on the brake grasping the depth of Lisa’s pain. The house needed paint, and the roof shingles had curled at the ends. The front bushes had overgrown into the walkway, and several errant hollies blocked the living room window. The front lawn was mostly gone, the result of aged and untamed trees. I parked my car where decades before I had parked my bike, a simple kick-stand holding it upright.

I walked around the house to the terrace where we had kissed as first teens, everything new and fresh, our futures before us. Weeds had grown between the broken pieces of flagstone stretching to claim the memories. I looked for the two trees that supported the hammock where we had played and read the saucier passages about Garp. They were still there, but closer together, and burled knots where the hooks had been.

I felt like an unwelcome observer and went about the work of cutting the grass, raking up the branches, and trimming the bushes. I found myself looking for trace evidence of our youth, a comic from a piece of bubble gum, flip tab necklaces from the scores of canned soda, shells brought home from the shore, but all I found was the detritus of a burned out star.

Two and a half hours passed, my window closing. I loaded the car and surveyed my efforts. The screen door at front bore a large tear, and I decided it would look better removed. I ascended the three steps facing the alligatored and raised panel door where I had stood so many years ago clutching a Moody Blues album begging God for the opportunity to slow dance to “Nights in White Satin.”

I pulled the screen from the oxidized aluminum frame and peered through the living room window. There was furniture, sparse, but things I remembered. I wondered if Lisa’s mother would answer the door, and I would find myself thirteen again. A stiff breeze broke the spell, and I headed home knowing I wouldn’t call. I thought of our time together, never lovers, better friends, adrift during the stormy seas of puberty and adolescence.

“Nights in White Satin” played in my head as I pulled in our driveway, the closing lines emanating from the tattered webs of recollection. “But we decide which is right, and which is an illusion.”

**THE END**