

The Gap in the Trees

by Elizabeth Brown

Ah, fresh air. It had been so long since I'd felt the whip of the chilling wind on my skin and the slightly painful but exhilarating feeling of breathing cold air into my lungs. The sun beat down from above, tanning my pasty, bone-white skin and warming me down to my core. The door banged close behind me, the clanging sound ringing triumphantly in my ears like a victory song. I was finally free. Free to roam. Free to breathe. Free to remember. Free to live.

The head nurse, Nazi-Nurse I called her, had been busy with a rogue schizophrenic patient and had accidentally left my door unlocked. I knew that was my chance. I could not spend another moment rotting in that dreaded room like a forgotten childhood toy left under the bed. She always watched me like a hawk with her beady, trust-no-one eyes and seemed to always suspect I would leave at the slightest opportunity. Of course she was right, and every time I even shifted my weight her austere bun would whip around and her hair-covered mole would twitch in her all too Hitler-esque fashion.

I understood my family had to do it. My son was almost 40 and had a wife, a kid, a home. He had to take care of himself. My daughter wanted to travel the world to write her next great novel, and I couldn't let little old me hold her back. But I hated that place. Those thick, musty, pink curtains, mocking my masculinity; the smell of disinfectant and old fried chicken from the run down cafeteria roiling my skin; the senile old men and women at every turn vegetating in reclining chairs and pretending we had something in common. I couldn't take it. I was not like those

people. I was old, granted, but that was the extent of our similarities. I wasn't meant to die locked up in the Glendale Care Facility. Despite my family's best intentions, it wasn't for me and I had to get out and live, breathe, remember, die.

I'll admit, it had all been getting more and more fuzzy lately. I was beginning to feel like I *was* like all of the lifeless old geezers wandering those cursed linoleum floors. I had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's six months ago, and since then I had been toiling in Glendale and losing more and more of my memory everyday. It started out with just forgetting to turn off my car, leaving my keys all over the house, and mixing up the names of acquaintances. However, when I forgot my daughter's book signing she had told me about the day before and completely forgot where I was going on the way to the grocery store for the fifth time, I knew something was wrong. One thing led to another, and before you know it I was locked up in hell playing endless games of checkers and watching hours of daytime TV. Anyway, lately I had been losing myself more and more often. The other day I didn't recognize anyone in all of the pictures in my room and it took me hours to remember my son's name.

This morning when I woke up and opened my Bible for my morning devotion, a picture of a beautiful woman fell out. She had rich, chocolate brown hair and a perfect ski-slope nose that turned up just the slightest bit at the end. She was wearing a loose-fitting red dress that caught the light in the background perfectly and shimmered like the ocean's surface in the midafternoon sun on her porcelain skin. All I could think about was how magnificent this anonymous beauty was, but try as I might, I had no idea to whom the picture belonged, or whom it held. I stared

at the picture all morning, and after a chat with my daughter on the phone from Singapore at about 10 a.m., it hit me. The picture was of my wife, Lucy.

When I realized I had forgotten the image of my own wife, the love of my life, my reason for ever breathing, I knew it was time to go. So that's how I got to this bus stop on the side of the road. It felt so good out. It was one of those perfect, fall afternoons in the North Carolina mountains, the air the perfect amount of moisture, the wind fluttering like the eyelashes of a sleeping child, and the leaves the colors of a southern Thanksgiving meal. I knew what I had to do. I had been thinking it for a while, and forgetting my own wife was all I needed to affirm my belief. As the bus pulled up, I climbed aboard, walked to the back, and took a seat against the window.

It was summer. The pavement was dry and cracked and the chirp of crickets and the buzz of mosquitoes followed you everywhere you went. It was 1985 and Bruce Springsteen floated out of the radio and erased all of our worries. I held my wife's hand and sang to her as she let her other, delicate hand dangle out of the open window. We were driving back up the mountain after a trip to the grocery store for some milk. Our son Baxley had just turned 12 and he was going through almost a gallon a day. She looked so beautiful. Her face was set in an absent-minded smile as she soaked in the sun's rays and the majesty of the sprawling valley below. She could feel me staring at her-as I often did- and turned to me. She leaned over and kissed my cheek with a knowing smirk, and then turned back towards the sun, no cares in the world.

The bus came to a screeching halt. We had reached the midpoint on the mountain, and the young, twitchy bus driver yelled back at me,

"It's the end of the line old man!"

The end of the line. I slowly rose out of my chair and felt the crack of my knees and joints as I stretched out my wrinkling body. I could feel my age demeaning me and mocking me more and more each day. It taunted me and quite frankly scared me to death. I could feel my energy slipping away, my memories fading, the reality yet ambiguity that my life had come and gone haunting me every moment. I tottered to the front of the bus, tipped my hat to the agitated young man, and flipped him a quarter. I knew exactly where I was. My destination was only about a quarter mile up the mountain. Suddenly, I felt a surge of energy as my renewed sense of purpose consumed my every thought, and I walked with the spring of a high school boy fresh off his first paycheck.

I'm sure I looked quite odd. It's not everyday you see a 70-year-old man trudging along the Blue Ridge Parkway in a tucked in button down, freshly pressed khakis, and his nicest bow tie. But it was a special occasion, and it called for only the most dapper of ensembles. I began to sweat as I neared the spot. Whether out of nerves, guilt, pain, or just the fact that I had been confined and was out of shape I know not, but when I finally reached my goal, I was positively drenched.

We were almost home. Bruce had long ago stopped crooning and we were simply cruising in comfortable, tranquil silence. I reached over and stroked her hair as I thought about how lucky I was to have her. Lucy. I loved her with every piece of my being. From the moment I had seen her on my first day at Alleghany High School, I knew she was the one. It had been 25 years since she walked into that US History class, took a seat next to me in the back, and changed my life forever. Every moment of those 25 years I loved her more and more. All I could think in that moment was how could it

even be possible for me to love her more the next day, but I somehow knew I would. We were passing my favorite part of the entire Blue Ridge Parkway. Just before the sharp ascent in the road towards our house began was the most beautiful, natural parting in the trees where you could see all the way to the skyscrapers in Winston-Salem on a clear day, and the fields below rolled for miles. We loved that spot. Lucy unbuckled her seat belt and turned all the way towards the window, allowing herself to soak up the heat, warmth, beauty, and tranquility of that moment. Then it all went black.

The tears were pouring down my face now. My body shook with cries as my mind went to places it had avoided for so long. I would never forget that day. A car full of raucous teenagers, celebrating their last days of summer, was speeding down the mountain when it slammed full force into the middle of our car. Our car flipped four times before careening off the edge of the mountain. The edge we loved so much. I used to know every detail. Every name of every boy in the car. Every injury I sustained. Every reason why I survived and Lucy didn't. Everything. But it was all unimportant now. All that mattered was that Lucy was gone. She had faced the view she loved so much with undoubting trust and an unswerving peace, and with it she had left me. My beautiful Lucy. Gone.

I couldn't believe I hadn't recognized her, even for a moment. The thought was unbearable. How could I forget my Lucy? How could I live the rest of my life without remembering my wife, eventually my kids, and then dying alone without even remembering my own name? I knew what I had to do. The idea of losing her again, of losing Lucy, was not an option. The pain hit me like a punch to the stomach

as suddenly I lost my breath and doubled over. I gasped for air. The pain of losing Lucy again was simply too much to bear. I would not die not knowing my wife.

I forced myself to stand up as the wind began to kick up around me. For the first time since reaching the spot, I took in my surroundings. The marks on the road where the boys had attempted to swerve and avoid hitting us were long gone. The guardrail at the edge of the mountain had long since been replaced and redesigned. But one thing remained the same. The gap in the trees. The valley rolled below with untouched beauty, and as I looked out into the endless patchwork of green, I could feel the tranquility Lucy felt that day. Looking into serenity itself, accepting life's hardships, and soaking in the good things. Lucy's thoughts. I was content. This was it. I clambered over the guardrail and marveled at the drop below, wondering how on earth I ever survived that kind of fall.

The day was perfectly clear, much like the last time I faced this view that held so much tragedy, and faintly in the distance the skyscraper appeared. It was barely visible, but it was there, beckoning me into the unknown, shouting to me that it would be okay, that she was out there, that I was right. And I knew I was. Lucy was there waiting. Waiting for me to join her while I still knew her beauty, remembered her face. So I jumped to her. I joined her at last. The cold wind whipped, the air stung my lungs for the last time, I was happy, free, and I remembered.