

THE REUNION

“You’re Will Ledyard, right?”

The Reunion Committee printed only first names on the plastic tags handed out at the registration table along with lanyards and four drink tickets.

“That’s pretty good, Cindy.” I have no idea who she is, but I can read. “So, you remember me?”

“Not really. I mean, I think you were a jock, but Lisa and Barb over there brought an iPad.” She points in the direction of two women hovering over an electronic device. “We’ve been matching people with their reunion photos.”

“I didn’t submit a photo.”

“Process of elimination. Just about everyone else did. I’m Cindy Gislason, by the way. That’s my married name. I was Cindy Oberg in high school. You know there’s a bar on the second deck.”

Cindy’s drinking white wine from a clear plastic cup. She’s a tiny woman, barely five feet tall, with short, reddish-blond hair worn in tight curls, a button nose, and a heart-shaped mouth that struggles to contain oversized teeth. She looks closer to fifty than seventy, and, as she talks, I’m recalling she was in the *A Capella Choir* and maybe a forgettable version of *Oklahoma!*

“Good to see you, Cindy. I think I remember you from choir. Do you live in Duluth?”

“That’s right; you were a bass in the choir. I knew you looked familiar. I went to UMD and taught theater arts at Hermantown High for years. Now I help Larry with his family’s mortuary business. We live on Skyline Parkway near Chester Bowl and have three adult sons, all married, and five grandkids. Fortunately, they all live in the area. How about you?”

“I live in Minneapolis.” Before I can think of a polite way to escape, two other classmates approach. Unlike Cindy, they do look their age, and I remember them well if not fondly. Liz and Jean were inseparable in high school. Members of the “parking lot gang” that skipped class to drink beer, smoke pot, and engage in other activities that didn’t have the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, they were proud to finish near the bottom of our class. Similarly attired in sleeveless tops and ripped denim

shorts, they appear more interested in displaying fading tattoos than in dressing for comfort on a cool August night on Lake Superior.

“Hey, Cindy,” Liz shouts so half the boat can hear. “You’re talking to a first-timer. One of only three.”

“What does that mean?” Cindy asks, looking bewildered.

“It means this is my first reunion,” I say. “It also means I need a drink, so please excuse me, ladies. I’m sure I’ll catch up with you later.”

As I hurry down the stairs to the middle deck, I hear Jean emphasize the word “asshole,” and I suspect she’s referring to me.

It’s true. This is my first reunion. I’ve kept in touch with a few classmates who, like me, live in the Twin Cities. But I’ve never seen the point in getting together with people I hardly remember to relive a part of my life I’d prefer to forget.

Our fiftieth is a three-day affair. A cruise tonight, a sit-down dinner and program in the Greysolon ballroom at the old Hotel Duluth tomorrow night, and a picnic at Leif Ericson Park on Sunday.

Tonight’s excursion aboard the Vista Star is limited to classmates for two reasons. First, most spouses prefer not to attend, and if they do, one night is plenty. Second, the boat can accommodate two hundred twenty passengers, and a hundred ninety-six alumni out of a class of five hundred registered online. I’m told that’s a good turnout.

The Star embarked from Vista fleet headquarters in the Duluth harbor around seven. There’s a buffet with hot and cold finger food on the lower deck, booths along the windows for visiting on the middle deck, and rows of white benches for sightseeing on the observation deck. As we pass under the iconic Aerial Lift-Bridge and venture out into the big lake, most attendees are mingling on the second deck, where two crooked lines end at a well-stocked bar. I’m surprised that no one is wearing a mask.

I walk to the back of the shorter queue and stand behind a mountain of a man who immediately turns to greet me.

“Hey, Ledyard,” he says, assessing me from head to toe with wide brown eyes behind gold wire-framed glasses. “I know I haven’t seen you since high school. You look great, man. How are you doing?” It’s Pete Bologna, the best lineman on our high school football team. Wearing a dark blue Tommy Bahama floral shirt over black jeans, he’s shaved his round, tanned head, and might have shed forty pounds from a six and a half foot frame that easily carried over three hundred the last time I saw him.

“I’m just fine,” I say, extending my right hand and grateful that his bone-jarring handshake doesn’t break anything. I recall that Pete played defensive tackle for the Badgers in the ‘70s, but I’d lost track of him after that.

“You’re the one who looks great, Pete. Did you ever make it to the NFL?”

“If you call being a ninth-round pick by the Lions making it. No, I joined my dad’s remodeling business right out of college. We started building new homes on the east side in the late eighties under the name North Star Construction and never looked back. My three kids bought me out last year, so now I fish, play golf, and spend winters in Bonita Springs. I can’t complain. How about you?”

“I’ve been teaching English at a community college in the Cities for the past forty years. I help out with the basketball team as well. My wife and I were both going to retire this year, but she caught a horrible strain of the virus in early 2020 and never recovered.”

“Oh, Will, I’m so sorry to hear that.” Pete cups and then squeezes my shoulder with a massive hand. His response is genuine and heartfelt, and I regret having mentioned a painful subject.

“Thank you,” I say. “We had over thirty exceptional years together, and our daughter, son-in-law and two grandsons keep me plenty busy. Did you and Amy Buchanan stay together?” Amy was a football cheerleader and homecoming queen. I had heard she’d followed Pete to Madison, as strange as that sounds today.

“As a matter of fact, we’re still together. Forty-five years we’ve been married. She’s still a part-time realtor up here. Too successful to retire. She was supposed to be here tonight but had a closing on some property up in Hovland. She’ll be at the dinner tomorrow.”

He tells me about their summer place on Lake Nebagamon while we make our way to the front of the line, where two clearly bored young men in black bow ties are masquerading as bartenders. I order a gin and tonic and offer a quick nod and forced smile to several classmates I don't remember as I climb the stairs to return to the observation deck. And then, glancing down at the crowd, I spot her near the back of one of the drink lines. She's engaged in an animated conversation with none other than Joe McSweeney, senior class president, benchwarmer on the varsity basketball team, and longstanding member of the local Kiwanis, Rotarians, Masons and Chamber of Commerce. I think he owns an office equipment company, and I know he's been the chairperson for every one of our class reunions. I know all this because every five years he calls to solicit my attendance at the next one.

Her name is Carrie. Carrie Burnett. But I knew her as Carrie Macaulay. I haven't seen her in nearly forty-five years, yet when she looks up to take a break from Joe and catches my eye, I'm transported back in time. She waves and then says something to Joe, probably about me. I return the wave and continue up to the top deck, where the throng of drink-toting sixty-somethings is multiplying.

I fill a gap in the humans along the leeward railing and lean over to watch the Vista Star slice through the calm evening water. The incessant squealing of gulls is the only unpleasantness, as we pass by the Fitgers' complex where patrons occupy every table on multiple decks. The Lakewalk is teeming with people, walking, jogging, roller-blading, biking, and I'm struck by the beauty and unique landscape of the port city. I grew up here and have kayaked along the North Shore from the Gooseberry River to Grand Marais, but, incredibly, this is the first time I've viewed my hometown from a boat on the lake. I feel a familiar touch graze the back of my hand along the rail. I turn and there she is.

"Hey, Will. It's been a while."

"Close to a lifetime," I say, taking a moment to get a better look at a woman whose younger image has flashed across my consciousness at least once a day since that morning in 1976 when I picked up my mail at the student center and literally cried over the last letter I would ever receive from Carrie Macauley. After six years, after plans to live together at grad school, and mostly because I loved her intensely, I thought a one-pager was inadequate. She wrote two things I'll never forget. The first: *I'm*

sorry, but I need to move on. The second: *There is no one else.* She married a millionaire ten years her senior three months later and moved to Lake Forest, Illinois. I had heard they divorced three or four years ago. It's the only reason I registered for the reunion.

Four decades of living have aged her, but, nicely-tanned and wearing a simple blue jumpsuit, she's maintained the slim, taut body of an athlete and still has the most alluring smile I've ever seen. Her dark brown hair has turned more white than gray, and she wears it ultra-short, adorned by expensive-looking diamond earrings.

"Let's find somewhere to sit and have a chat," she suggests, holding a plastic glass containing a generous pour of red wine. I follow her to a corner booth on the second level.

"I'm surprised to see you," I say, finishing my drink and wishing I had another. "Your name wasn't on the online manifest."

"It was a last minute decision. The only reason I'm here is your name *was* on that list." I don't know how to respond. I'd been devastated by the sudden end of our relationship and can still taste the bilious mixture of resentment and longing that plagued me for years. And yet, the sound of her voice and intoxicating scent of a familiar perfume expose my vulnerability.

"This is my first reunion in all these years," I finally say. "How about you?"

"We attended the dinner at Northland for the twenty-fifth," she says. "But David was bored, so we left after cocktails."

"Tell me about David?" I ask. I've always been curious about the man who displaced me.

"I will if you get me another one of these," she says, shaking an empty glass.

When I return with a Merlot for each of us, she's candid.

"David made a bundle his first year out of college trading commodities with his dad at the Chicago Board of Trade. Ten years and twenty million dollars later he returned to his *alma mater* to talk to my entrepreneurship class. He was handsome and confident and, what can I say, I fell hard. I didn't figure out that he's a serial womanizer until we had two sons and a comfortable life in Lake Forest. I

stayed until our youngest got married. David's retired now and lives in Naples. One thing hasn't changed since the day we met—he prefers women in their twenties.”

She reaches across the table and covers the top of my hands with hers.

“How have you been holding up? I heard about Lauren. The pandemic changed all our lives, but. . .”

“I'm doing better,” I interrupt. It's not true, but I want to change the subject.

We reminisce about our shared past over a few more glasses of wine, oblivious to the stares and gossip of classmates, not one of whom approaches even when the Star docks in the harbor at twilight and we follow the hoard off the boat and into the night.

“Walk me to my car?” she asks.

“Of course.”

“I'm staying with Jan and her partner in their condo on Park Point. They'll be at the dinner tomorrow.” Jan was Carrie's best friend in high school and the valedictorian of our class. I think she's a chemistry professor at UMD.

Neither one of us has any family in the city. Our parents passed years ago and, like us, our siblings left after college.

“I rented a small cabin up the shore,” I say while we walk toward Canal Park. “I love it up there.”

“I know you do,” she says, gazing up at me and slipping her hand into mine. “The last time I was there was cross-country skiing with you. I spent more time on my butt than on my skis.”

We stroll past the parking lot and onto the north pier. It's a perfect summer night. A billion stars conspire with a half-moon to choreograph a shimmering dance of lights on the dark, rolling waves. We climb the steps to the lighthouse where a breeze off the lake brings a chill.

“It's so good to see you, Will,” she says, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me close. I don't resist, kissing her softly on the lips and then longer, harder. We slowly move apart when another couple walks by and leans over the concrete lookout.

“It’s after eleven,” she says. “I should head over to Jan’s.”

She leads me back to the parking lot and a newer Mercedes sedan.

“Maybe I’ll get to see your cabin on the shore tomorrow night,” she says with a quick wink, opening the driver’s door and laying an open hand on my chest. “Good night, Will.”

I go for long run up Scenic 61 on Saturday morning and then meet a friend from Grand Marais for lunch and a round of golf at Superior National. After showering back at the cabin, I dress for the dinner in a blue cotton shirt, khaki slacks, and black linen jacket. Before slipping my wallet into a pocket, I open it and take a long look at the photo under a plastic window. A friend had captured Lauren and me, drinks in hand, laughing hysterically on his boat twenty years ago.

I pack my bags and start the drive back to the Cities. Twenty miles from home, I get a text from Carrie.

Where are you? Dinner’s in fifteen minutes.

I quickly reply.

I’m really sorry. I needed to move on.