

American Cheese Under The Stars

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"Are you asleep?"

Nine-thirty on a Friday night, the south shore of Long Island, sometime in the early '70s. A lifetime ago; a moment ago. A breath of July wafted through the open window and stirred the curtains. Andrea and I were in our beds in the room we shared. Her side was the messy one. Mom was standing in our doorway, a perfect silhouette of patience against the dim light from the hall. The sound from the TV downstairs filtered up to us as she paused.

"Are you asleep?" she repeated. An uncertain moment of silence. Were we in trouble for still being awake?

"No," we answered, at almost the same time.

"How would you like to go on a picnic?" What could she mean?

"When?" I asked.

"Now." *Now?* In our pajamas? In the middle of the night?

"Yes!" we shouted, scrambling to sit up. Mom smiled and turned on the bedside lamp.

"We're going to Jones Beach. Get your slippers on!"

We raced down the stairs. Dad was in the kitchen, heading for the back door with his keys. He was carrying the sturdy, white canvas tote bag, transporter of all the picnics of my childhood. "Ready?" he grinned. We bobbed our heads in unison.

Mom came in behind us. "It will be a picnic under the stars," she said, laughing.

Andrea and I slid into the wide back seat of the Buick. Not arguing for once, we snuggled together, chattering and fidgeting. We were so *pleased* with ourselves. We'd never heard of anyone going on a picnic this late at night. It simply wasn't done!

We were a car full of rebels.

Dad backed the car into the deserted street. He rolled down the window, let the night in, and we flew along the nearly empty parkway. We crossed the wide, dark bay, the hum of the tires changing as we drove over one of the bridges that stitched the barrier islands to the mainland. He turned right onto Ocean Parkway – and we were nearly there.

"I see it!"

The Needle, we called it. The water tower. The tall, brick obelisk that stands, like a sentinel, at Jones Beach. Every trip to the shore, Andrea and I would jostle each other, craning our necks, vying to be the first to spot it through the car window. Trees, trees, as far as the eye could see...and then, suddenly, poking out of the green, the very top of The Needle.

"No, *I* see it!"

Dad parked close to the tunnel that burrowed under the highway between the parking lot and the beach. Just a handful of cars there in the summer night. Andrea and I were like kittens tumbling across a lawn, skipping and jumping and running ahead.

"HIII!! WHOOOO!!" We hooted and whistled like mad owls, like banshees. This was Tunnel Etiquette. As you ran through the tunnel, you called out sharp sounds, the louder the better, to maximize the echo possibilities. It was practically mandatory. Our voices, extra-loud in the evening stillness, bounced off the damp stone walls. The tunnel breathed us out into the cool air again and we hurried along the path, past the summer plantings, to the place itself – Jones Beach. Dance music from the band shell drifted toward us, carried by the wind off the water. Snowy-haired couples waltzed around the concrete dance floor, beaming as they held each other close.

No dancing for us, though. *We* were on a picnic.

Small knots of teenagers, leaning on the boardwalk railings, snapped their gum and tried to look grown up. The boys, talking too loud, tried to impress the girls. The girls, laughing too hard, tried to attract the boys.

Kid stuff. *We* were on a picnic.

"This way," Dad urged as he led us down the broad wooden steps to the beach.

"Take your slippers off." Mom bent to remove her own sandals. We trudged across the wide stretch of sand, still warm from its day in the sun. It skrootched pleasantly beneath our feet.

"How about right here?" Dad set the trusty tote bag down on the sand, and Mom pulled out the old blue blanket that was *de rigeuer* for picnic use. She unfolded it in the wind. It billowed like a sail and she settled it onto the ground. We placed our shoes and slippers on the corners to weigh it down.

The ocean was before us, black and forbidding. So different from the way it looked during the day. At noon, white foam would crown the glass-green waves that roiled and tumbled onto the shore. Now, the night had taken its color. We faced the water, and let the wind blow our hair back.

After an appropriate moment of awe at the dark majesty of the Atlantic, we sat down, and Mom handed around our late-night snack. Cold hard-boiled eggs. The bright orange of American

cheese peeping out from between slices of white bread. Dewy peaches nestled in paper towels, and a thermos of lemonade, to be sipped from little paper cups.

Food of the gods.

We laughed and chatted as we ate. We could *hear* the ocean more than see it. The *rumble splash shoosh* of the tide going in and out - it was a great *thing* out there, breathing, and watching over us.

We lay back to see the stars. They burned just for us, the only people out on the sand that night.

"I see the Big Dipper."

"I see the moon."

That was about the extent of our astronomical knowledge. No matter. The stars are beautiful even when you don't know their names.

We lingered, quiet now, content. The warm darkness was a cloak around our shoulders. Finally, Dad sighed and stood up. "Well - we have had ourselves a *time*," he smiled. He took up the blanket and shook it in the wind. Mom grabbed the other side and together they folded it - sides together, step in to match the ends. Step out again, step in to match the ends. A little minuet of familiarity on the sand. We turned toward the boardwalk, the wind behind us now, blowing our hair into our eyes.

"Slippers back on!" Through the tunnel we went once more, walking more slowly, hooting more quietly now. Andrea and I yawned and rubbed our eyes as we climbed into the car. Dad nosed the big Buick back out onto the parkway. In the back seat, we pulled our slippered feet up and lay down, our heads cradled on our arms.

"Move your arm."

"Move yours."

The car accelerated through the darkness. The sea breeze whispered through the open windows. Mom and Dad talked quietly in the front seat, the murmur of their voices soft and reassuring to two sleepy children.

As we sped past the rows of streetlights, the shadows rocked and shifted through the car. We bathed in the faint amber glow that intensified as we approached each light, until, for a few moments, we could have read a poem in its radiance. Little by little then, passing each streetlight, we lost the glow. The shadows danced in the opposite direction, until we spent several heartbeats in the arms of the dark, at the midpoint between two lights. Then just as quickly, the glow would return to us. Over and over, all the way home, the shadows ebbed and flowed, a memory of the tide. The sweet, hypnotic rhythm urged Andrea and me to close our eyes, and soon, unable to hold out any longer, we slept. Our hair combed by the east wind, our faces fresh with seaspray, in sleep we licked our lips and tasted salt, while we dreamed the

dreams of children fresh from a gentle adventure. We dreamed the crumpled lace of the breakers and the quiet velvet of the sky. We slept the sleep that only children enjoy; the perfect, peaceful sleep that comes with knowing, as you know to breathe, that you are wanted and needed and cherished. We slept, and the love in that car was as sweet as a Jersey peach. It was as strong and as deep as the sea and as immutable as the shining, nameless stars.