**Seasons**

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When Mr. Lassiter was boring us with a lecture about Earth tilting on its axis, I felt it. The classroom listed ever so slightly to the left as he prattled. I sought confirmation in other students’ faces but saw not the slightest reaction.

Not even Mr. Lassiter, one of the few lay teachers at the parochial school, back when one existed in spring of 1968, seemed to notice as he explained how the tilting caused the seasons. The scuffed wooden floorboards began to separate, tongue from groove, snapping and popping, if only in my mind. My row of connected desks, most of them scarred by the penknife etchings of the lovelorn, became a small vessel undulating in ten-foot seas. Still, there was no echo of concern.

I dared to glance over my shoulder at the unapproachable class darling, Rosalee, who met my eyes, as if she’d summoned them, with her mesmerizing amber irises and smiled knowingly.

Rosalee, about whom it was rumored had been sexually liberated for a number of years—she’d dated only upperclassmen since her freshman year—shifted fetchingly on the bench seat and raised her chin just so in the most provocative way.

Mr. Lassiter, patting his sharply parted, Brylcreemed hairdo, cleared his throat and waited until I faced forward. I flushed red at the unwanted attention, which had the side effect of calming my delusional sea swells, and the listing row of desks leveled off.

“As the Northern Hemisphere, of which we are a part, dips toward the sun this time of year, our temperatures begin to heat up,” Mr. Lassiter droned on. “Buds, then blossoms appear on trees, and the migrating robin returns. Hibernating species emerge from their foxholes.” An Army veteran, Mr. Lassiter was fond of that analogy. “Indeed, class, all of God’s creation responds to its urges as our hemisphere tilts toward the sun. Even we humans.” His circling eyes settled on me, still flummoxed by Rosalee’s flirtation, as the bell sounded the end of class. “Fortunately, we humans have been granted the grace to act on the urges in only pure and appropriate ways.”

The Earth and I were still feeling off-center as I stood, buttoned my blazer, and queued for the exit and my next class.

“Did you hear, Stash?” Rosalee asked, just above a whisper, the heat of her breath reaching my ear. The thrill of her proximity, when combined with a whiff of Jean Naté, hampered my hearing. “STAN-ley!” she urged (that word again), dropping my Polish nickname and pressing into my back. “Bobby Kennedy’s campaign train is coming through town this Friday. A bunch of us are going to cut afternoon classes so we can see him. Are you in, Stash? What other opportunity are you going to have to see the next president of the United States? Oh my God, Bobby Kennedy. Can you believe it!”

So, there we stood in the bright Friday afternoon sun in a downpour of the tilting Earth’s urges. Rosalee’s grip on my upper arm nearly halted blood flow as she squealed at the sight of the diminutive candidate, his trademark floppy hair and lengthy teeth producing screams from excited onlookers.

She bounced subconsciously, waving frantically as RFK slowly shrank in the distance, his fading image a haunting metaphor for his assassinated brother.

“I guess that’s it,” I said, turning to scan the thinning crowd. I wondered what my parents, who’d contributed to VP Dick Nixon’s campaign, would feel about my presence at the train tracks. Would they be as angry as a cluster of construction workers, whose glowering mugs and spitting invectives reflected their disdain for the senator?

Rosalee turned into me, took both my hands in hers, and pulled us together in a kiss that until that moment only upperclassmen had known. It wasn’t French, as the definition had been explained to me, but it was long. Neither was it the last kiss between us.

I still have the cover from the next day’s daily newspaper. A quarter of the front page, now a pale bronze, is a photo of Robert Kennedy waving, like a train’s conductor, from the steps of the caboose, our town’s iconic courthouse spire in the background. There is a distinct gouge in the photo next to his face, where my dad flicked his middle finger in disgust and mumbled something about the largesse of a bootlegging father.

Building on Rosalee’s fervor, my interest in Kennedy burgeoned. I combed the newspapers and sat through the evening news to find out everything I could about him. My dad described Kennedy’s emergence in the presidential race as a “societal breakdown.” To me, it was the beginning of hope for meaningful change, the end of an unjust war in Southeast Asia, and, together with the leadership of an African American minister from Georgia, a path out from under the weight of racism.

However, just as the Northern Hemisphere was inconspicuously tilting toward the sun, my hopes for a better America were silently racing toward a tragic end. When it came in less than two months, I kept waiting for someone else to carry my heroes’ mantle, but no one stepped forward. I looked around for confirmation that the movement they inspired would continue, but, just like that day in Mr. Lassiter’s class, there was no echo of concern.

An email came a few years back announcing a milestone high school class reunion. Normally, I’d send such notices to the trash, so far removed from that season of my life that I couldn’t care less. For whatever reason, I opened this one, which included a list of deceased classmates.

Rosalee Parker McClanahan of King of Prussia, Pa., had died of lupus at age 56. She is survived by her husband, who is a few years older, and two teenage sons. *An upperclassman*, I thought with nostalgic ambivalence, and her sons about the age I was when she and Bobby Kennedy tilted my world on its axis.