

Perhaps
by Rose Divecha

Growing up in a city synonymous with steel and sulfur, Highview Park felt like a sanctuary to me. In the summer months, the seemingly enormous expanse of green lawn was an oasis amidst the asphalt gridwork of numbered streets and wartime houses that made up my neighbourhood. The carpet of yellow dandelion heads provided a soft surface in which to shed my flip-flops and run unfettered and I treasured moments playing on the monkey-bars, metal slides and leather-seated swings. But mostly, Highview Park was a place to hang out with friends away from the prying eyes of parents. Though it was the 1970s and parents rarely pried. There was an expectation of self-reliance. Tattling and whining were never encouraged. So perhaps, that's the reason we never told anyone about the strange dark-haired man who regularly frequented the park. Over the years, I've often wondered why we never did. We knew it was odd, but he seemed harmless, until that night anyway. But even now, I tell myself nothing really happened.

My neighbourhood was home to an array of blue-collared, immigrant families each with a boundless assortment of children. My best friend was Louise. The lanky, short-haired daughter of a British/Italian couple made for an acceptable playmate as far as my Sicilian parents were concerned, as if cultural consistencies somehow meant less risk. There was a year and a half between us in age and while she may have been older, her nervous nature meant it was usually me taking charge and suggesting we leave the safety of East 43rd Street. Louise had a whole host of phobias, from crossing busy roads, to inhaling the fumes of gas-powered lawn mowers, to grasshoppers and

dogs. So, while I was always eager to escape to the park, she often needed convincing for fear of unwanted encounters with any of the aforementioned. She probably took convincing that particular hot summer evening, though I don't really remember. What I do recall, and most pertinent to this story, is having to take my little brother, Philip. He was just five years old at the time with blonde curly locks and a constant tan. I can still see him dressed in his favorite tank top and striped, Adidas shorts with white tube socks pulled high, right up to his skinned knees. Our relationship at that time was one part playmate, two parts siblings and while I felt a strong pride and guardianship towards him, I often resented having him tag along. I imagine he probably had to chase after us that night as we hurriedly walked the two blocks to the park.

The evening sun was slowly setting when we got to Highview but we still had some time before the streetlights came on. We were the only ones there and were happy to have our choice of swing. Philip quickly ran over to one and jumped on.

"Push me!" my brother pleaded, his feet dangling inches from the sandy silt below the swings. The concave contours in the ground beneath him were too far for his little legs to reach. I had pushed him only a couple of times when I felt a presence behind me. I turned to look, one hand still rhythmically pushing my brother as he swung back and forth. A young man stood watching. I looked him over. He had poker-straight, jet-black hair, parted to one side and wore jeans and a t-shirt. His pale, freckled skin showed no signs of having seen the summer sun. He was a familiar figure, not quite known to us but always hanging out at the park. Through my unexperienced eyes he appeared to be in his twenties, though I had no gauge in which to qualify my guess. I

always found his presence odd. Why would an *old guy* like that want to hang out at the park with us kids?

“Why don’t you let me push him for a while?” He asked.

My arms were beginning to tire, and I contemplated letting him take over, but something in the way he smiled at me made me reconsider. “No, it’s okay.” I told him. “We’re fine.”

He grinned, forcing me aside and began pushing my brother, at first slowly but then harder and harder. “You don’t have to stay you know. You girls can go do whatever you want. I’ll watch your little brother for you.” Louise had stopped swinging and we looked at each other worriedly.

“No, it’s okay. Really.” I tried to sound in control. My brother began to cry and shout.

“Stop pushing him! He’s getting too high!” I reached for the swing chain and grabbed hold with both hands but he only laughed and continued pushing. I held on, my hands sweaty and beginning to burn from the friction, while my brother cried and begged him to stop.

In that moment, my focus narrowed. There was just the three of us in this strange tug-of-war and my little brother was the rope, stretched between us, about to snap. I gritted my teeth and dug my feet in the dirt. I would not let go. Discouraged by my determination, I like to believe, the male stranger finally let go. Huffing as he turned to leave, he spoke some last words to me. I can see his mouth moving, the mocking smile on his face. The blood in my ears pounded, obscuring my sense of sound and hindering my ability to make out what he was saying. I steadied the swing and brought it to an

abrupt stop. Flooded by relief I took my brother in my arms until his whimpering subsided and turned to look back. The young male stranger was gone, having disappeared just as quickly as he had appeared. The evening sky burned red.

We walked home in silence, Philip holding my hand. Louise's presence slowly registering with me once again, having faded from my periphery during the scary assault. Her trivial worries now seemed ridiculous compared to the real dangers in the world. Our presumptions of safety shattered. Our parents had constantly warned us about strangers; about getting into cars with people we didn't know, being lured away with candy and walking home alone. But this was different, wasn't it? Was I somehow to blame for this encounter? Had I put my little brother in danger? Perhaps. Better not to tell anyone. I tried to process what had happened. I still do. But nothing really changed. For years after, I'd still see that guy at the park but he never approached me - or as far as I know, my brother - again.

We left the park a little shaken up that night but didn't discuss the incident, not with each other, or a parent. Looking back on that era, it's easy to feel nostalgic. It was a simpler, safer time. Or so we all thought. But that didn't mean bad things never happened. It just meant we didn't burden our parents with the details. I know, in a brief moment, a child's lapse in judgement could have yielded a very different outcome and it still makes me shudder. While I protected my brother and kept him safe that night, what about the other times, when I wasn't around to protect him? And what of the other children in the neighbourhood, the ones who didn't have a big sister looking out for them? I tell myself it's okay. I was only ten. Things were different then.

Driving through the old neighbourhood recently had me once again wondering why we never spoke up. Forty-five years later, what was I still afraid of? I had to know if my brother recalled the swing incident and more importantly, if he'd had any further run-ins with the dark-haired stranger. It was time to find out.

"Do you remember the guy who always hung out at Highview Park? I asked him at a family gathering not too long ago. We stood alone in the kitchen away from the others.

I watched Philip's reaction as he searched his memory.

"You know...pale, dark hair, always wore jeans, even in the summer."

He looked at me, squinting a little, trying to picture the guy I was describing.

"No, not really." He responded.

"Are you sure you don't remember that night on the swings?" I pushed.

I watched as he contemplated further and for a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of recognition flash across his face.

"Well, maybe...perhaps."