

Remember Yesterday?

by

Phil Rowlands

To: stevephillips@gmail.com

Subject: Tonypandy Grammar Reunion

Haven't had a reply from you Steve. You are coming I hope? We're in your old watering hole The Welcome Inn this year. There's not too many of us left now! Ha ha! Phil Snook, Ralph and Pam Richardson, Eddie Kiff and Lisa Snodgrass (nee Williams) are def coming. Didn't you and Lisa have a thing going back in the day? Let me know ASAP

x x x

Linda.

Dear old Linda, still the organiser. I stared at the email for a long time. Could I detect the faint but pungent odour of desperation or was it just my imagination? Soon there would be precious few of us left to organise anything more than a game of dominoes. An image of a polar bear stranded on a fast dissolving sliver of ice cap came to mind. We all mark the passing of time with our own measure.

Reunions at my age become synonymous with death and decay.

ME: "Are you still in touch with Alfie?"

FORMER CLASSMATE: (SOLEMN PAUSE) "Haven't you heard?"

ME: (Thinking - obviously not!) No.

FORMER CLASSMATE: "Died last year, the 'Big C'. Only found out he had it in May, he was dead by September."

ME: (RESPECTFUL NOD OF THE HEAD) "Typical Alfie, he was never one to hang around where he wasn't wanted."

(ABRUPT END TO CONVERSATION)

I was actually surprised Linda had sent me an invite. The situation must be dire. I was beginning to feel like the Indian with the unpronounceable name who was the last of his tribe, Mohicans if my memory serves me correct. Did I really want to listen to a longer roll call of the 'dear departed' and spend my night figuratively tripping over the dead bodies of former classmates? Linda would probably have been better off organising a séance.

There was definitely no way I was going to attend another reunion but now things had changed. I continued to stare at the email my focus on just two words:

LISA WILLIAMS!

They flamed like beacons from a distant past. Suddenly I was conscious of the face staring back at me from the translucent depths of the laptop. Age hadn't been too unkind. In fact the silvery grey hair afforded me a quiet dignity of the sort admired in

marble busts of ancient Roman emperors. The mirror was less kind than the laptop. I never liked that mirror. It had been a present from an Aunt who wasn't invited to our wedding. As a child I had been convinced she was a witch and always avoided her hairy warts when ordered to supply a parting kiss. The mirror was her revenge. Everybody looked good in it except me.

My jowls were beginning to sag like two over packed bags of Tesco shopping. "You're not bad for your age Dad," my daughters would frequently remark if ever they caught me glaring back at my spiteful reflection, faint praise that damned worse than the truth. As the years relentlessly turn what we once were diminishes and fades lingering only in the shadows of our memories. Lost souls bound to a world that has long since passed away.

Now Lisa had stirred the ashes. To my surprise I felt the heat of half remembered passionate encounters glow bright like embers of a fire that had not quite gone out. Was it possible that fifty years on the mere mention of her name could still quicken my pulse with anticipation? I was no longer Dad, or Gramps or any of the other titles the years deposit like sediment on the original bedrock of our being. I was Steve again and life lay fresh before me in all its promised glory.

Guilt dragged me protesting back to my senses. Gwen and I had been together nearly 40 years. Our marriage was crammed full of the usual clichés. We'd had our ups and downs but with a little bit of give and take we'd muddled through and although we weren't exactly Jack and Jill we did live on a hill. We had three children we loved and two grandchildren we adored. Yearning for a nostalgic hike through the blue remembered hills seemed almost an act of treachery, a rejection of all that we had built together.

To: lindamac@hotmail.com

Subject: Tonypandy Grammar Reunion

Hi Linda,

Sorry I haven't got back in touch. Of course I'll be there! Wouldn't miss it for the world. Gwen can't make it so I'm afraid I'll be on my own.

See you then.

Steve.

I quickly shut the lid of the laptop and glanced around furtively even though I knew Gwen was at her local writers group for at least another hour. What was I thinking committing myself to an evening listening to another litany of hard luck stories or bitter reminiscences of broken relationships and who had been awarded custody of the dog? Worse were those family obsessed individuals who gleefully gloated over the success of their offspring and stubbornly refused to be diverted to any other topic once they got you cornered. But worst of all were the tiny but elite group of over achievers who spent the evening smugly sipping their martinis as they watched from the lofty height of their inflated bank balances the madding crowd grow madder by the minute.

LISA WILLIAMS!

That's what I was thinking.

She was known in school as ‘Moaning Lisa’. Beautiful yet distant and unattainable clothed in an aura of melancholy. The common consensus among the rejected teenage gigolos was that Lisa Williams was frigid. At least that was how they chose to salve their wounded pride. How could someone who incited such heated passion in my exploding teenage hormones emotionally consist of ice? I could feel a new expression on my face, feel a glowing sensation taking place, hear guitars playing lovely tunes every time that she walked in the room. I was convinced ‘The Searchers’ hit song of the day had been written with me in mind.

Many of my peers were pretty good at talking the talk when it came to recounting their amorous adventures with the opposite sex. I just listened, sautéed by my own indecision over the simmering heat of repressed emotions. Rejection was the tin lid that pressed down firmly on the volatile mix of my suppressed passions until one day I could bear it no longer. Better to be spurned than endure the daily agony of inaction that gave way to reproachful nights full of self loathing. Tomorrow it would be different.

Tomorrow came. What if I did not get a chance to speak to her? There was always tomorrow! Then it happened. I emerged from the art class full of high spirits. Art was my favourite subject and was held in a room adjacent to the staircase. As I turned onto the top step so Lisa was approaching from below. We both stopped and I could swear she smiled at me. It was always hard to tell with Lisa. In that moment the damn burst and my pent up feelings erupted in a molten torrent of raw emotion.

“Lisa,” I stuttered, “would you like to go out with me?”

For me, back then, that constituted a torrent of raw emotion.

She said nothing for a long moment and I felt my courage ebb away. I was nine again standing at the edge of an ocean that was just too big and too cold.

“When?” She asked.

My mouth was so dry that forming words was almost impossible.

“Tonight,” I croaked.

“Where?” She asked.

I was beginning to hyperventilate. Was she toying with me? Classmates passed us and cast curious glances, some whispered to each other and my brain primed itself to enter fight or fly mode.

“The Picturedrome,” I said. It was the first thing that popped into my head, the local flea pit on Tonypandy Square, hardly the most romantic setting for a first date.

“What time?” she inquired in that calm quiet voice that only accentuated my rising panic.

“Seven,” I spluttered and waited for the inevitable put down. Hopefully it would be nothing more brutal than, “Sorry I’m washing my hair.”

“Ok,” she replied smiling a real smile. Two of her friends appeared as if from nowhere and they breezed off together leaving me adrift like a dead leaf in their wake. God, what had I done?

The rest of the day I spent in a funk of blind panic. What would I wear? What would I say? Would I even be able to speak? Rejection would have been much easier to handle. Should I hold her hand? Should we sit in the back row known commonly as ‘grunt and grope alley’ or would she think me too forward? How would she react if I

put my arm around her? What about our first kiss if it ever came to that? God, what had I done?

Throughout that interminable afternoon I studiously avoided Lisa. Cast adrift on the seas of my feverish imagination the evening's assignation hung round my neck like the albatross from Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Somehow I managed to maintain a semblance of normality and when the school bell rang I was out of the blocks and heading home quicker than Usain Bolt.

"You're home early," observed my mother her antennae tingling as I barged in through the back door.

"Need a quick bath," I replied and realised immediately I had made a serious tactical error.

"Going out somewhere?" she probed.

"Yes," I replied in a doomed attempt to end the conversation.

"Where?" she inquired eyeing me in much the way our cat eyed birds that landed in the garden.

"Pictures," I replied casually and knew there was no avoiding the next question.

"With the boys?" she asked raising an eyebrow.

I didn't need a mirror to realise I'd turned the colour of a ripe tomato. My mother narrowed her eyes and smiled.

"I see," she said accusingly, "a date is it?"

My silence was ample confirmation.

"What's her name?"

This was what suspects must feel like when they are being grilled by the FBI.

"Lisa," I mumbled.

"Does she have a surname?" my mother was relentless and I was hopelessly backed into a corner with no chance of a bell to save my blushes.

"Williams," I conceded.

My mother nodded and gazed at me for what seemed an eternity without speaking.

The silence was becoming oppressive.

"You go have your bath and I'll put your suit out on the bed," she said at last.

I was so relieved to escape that I didn't consider the implications.

A hot bath never failed to relax me but not this time. I might as well have been marinating in my own cold sweat. What if she didn't turn up? What if she did? There were worst things than standing like a loser outside your local cinema waiting for a girl who didn't show. I would not be the first and I would not be the last but what if she did show and the date was an absolute disaster? Me and Lisa Williams, who was I kidding, she was Champions League material while the best I could aspire to was a kick about on the local park. Had I condemned myself to a lifetime of sniggering contempt?

"Heard about Lisa and Steve? Apparently he tried to grope her in the back row."

What actually happened was I dropped my favourite flavour Spangle and tried to grab it before it hit the floor. It was dark and I miscalculated.

"Gross!"

"Yeah, apparently he's a real creep."

"Oh hi Steve," they wave and walk off giggling and that's just the beginning.

“Steve! Better get a move on it’s a quarter past six, wouldn’t do to be late on your first date.”

Like the Archangel’s trump my mother’s voice dragged me back from the precipice of self doubt. I clambered out of the bath dried myself and brushed my teeth with a masochistic ferocity that was tantamount to an assault on the enamel. My next task was to decide what aftershave to wear even though I had not yet begun shaving in earnest. Blue Blazer, Old Spice or Lemon and Lime Old Spice, the choice was dizzying. Which would Lisa prefer? I settled for Old Spice Lemon and Lime then changed my mind three times before deciding to stick with my original selection.

In order to keep from being submerged in a rising tide of panic I focused on making myself as presentable as possible. I was holding it together well until I walked into my room and saw the suit laid out on the bed. My mother had obviously been shopping in Polikoff’s factory outlet again. Probably buy one get two free. I stared at it horror wrestling with disbelief for mastery of my emotions. What was she thinking? Ten years back and I wouldn’t have blinked an eyelid but in fashion terms ten years ago is equivalent to the Jurassic period.

One of the iconic images of the Fifties was the Teddy Boy. Gangs of youths, dressed in clothes that paid tribute to the age of the Edwardian ‘Dandy’, hung aimlessly around dance halls and street corners wolf whistling at girls and generally looking for trouble. Rock and Roll was king and everyone wore ‘brothel creepers’ or ‘winkle pickers’. Even their feet had attitude which was hardly surprising given the pressure they must have been under from the skin tight ‘drain pipe’ trousers. Mercifully the trousers on the bed looked as if they would allow my blood to circulate fairly freely around my legs. That was the only positive I could extract from the situation.

Just as tribute bands are pale reflections of the original artist so the suit was a muted homage to those halcyon days when rebellious youth found its expression in outrageous fashion. It was light green with a dark green collar and dark green piping around the pockets. A garment designed to bridge the gap between generations unfortunately disappeared into the dark void that separated them. The only response the wearer could reasonably expect was either a grimace or a smirk. It was the coup de grace to my hopes of a blossoming romance with the lovely Lisa. I sat forlornly on the edge of the bed and hung my head. Looking back I wonder if the suit was a calculated attempt by my mother to deliberately sabotage any possibility of my forming a relationship with a girl who would supplant her place in my affections. Truth was she just didn’t have a clue about what was considered cool or nerdy. Fashion was not her thing.

Fate had conspired with my mother to crush my hopes and dreams and so, defeated, I put on the suit.

“You look lovely Stephen,” she twittered as I entered the room, “doesn’t he look lovely Harry?”

“Lovely,” said my father not looking up from his newspaper.

“Put that paper down for goodness sake and show a little interest. This is your son’s first date.”

My father lowered the newspaper and in his eyes my worst fears were realised.

“You can borrow my penknife if you like son,” he said.

“What are you talking about,” my mother was confused, “why would he want to borrow your penknife.”

“In case he can’t find his flick knife,” replied my father heaping more confusion on my mother’s head.

Five minutes late! I’d been stood up. I’ll give her another five then I’m going home. Five minutes turned into twenty as I studiously ignored the glances of passers by their expressions fluctuating between amusement and pity. God I hoped nobody I knew from school turned up. The possibility filled me with such dread that flight was the only realistic option. My date had hit the iceberg and I was sinking fast, time to lower the lifeboat.

“Hi, sorry, the bus was late.”

And there she was a vision of loveliness standing in front of me like some Aphrodite emerging from the deep.

“That’s ok,” I replied, “you look really nice.”

She did not reply her eyes were fixed firmly on my suit.

“Where did you get your suit?” she asked.

“My mother bought it,” I replied, “she works in Polikoff’s.”

“Oh,” she said making no further comment.

There was a moment’s uncomfortable silence.

“Come on,” said Lisa taking me by the hand, “or we’ll miss the start. I’ve been dying to see this film for ages.”

I happily allowed myself to be gently dragged towards the ticket booth as Lisa took the lead. To be truthful I was in a kind of trance unable to believe I was actually holding hands with Lisa Williams. We sat in the back row. The film was only a third of the way through when she rested her head on my shoulder. I tentatively placed an arm around her and she snuggled even closer. That was how we watched Diana Ross depict the troubled life of Billie Holiday in ‘Lady Sings the Blues’ apart from an occasional fumble in the bag of popcorn.

We missed the bus and I walked her home. It was quite a trek but neither of us cared. When we got to her doorstep she stood in front of me and smiled.

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” she said.

Before I could reply she leant forward and kissed me full on the lips for what seemed a long time. Then suddenly she pulled away and turned to open the door.

“Can I see you again?” I spluttered afraid she would vanish out of my life like some Welsh Persephone summoned back to a realm beyond my reach.

“You’ll see me in school tomorrow,” she replied. Seeing my crestfallen expression she laughed, “What about Friday?”

“Friday would be great,” I said, “same time?”

“Same place,” she countered, “wear a different suit,” then disappeared indoors.

I walked home in a daze. Every so often I would pinch myself to make sure I really was awake and this wasn’t some cruel fragile dream that must evaporate at the first light of a grey dawn. I mentally constructed a future with Lisa at its heart but even then deep down I think I knew its foundation was built on shifting sand. So began my butterfly summer with Lisa Williams. We dated regularly. I began to understand that beneath her quietly confident exterior dwelt an insecure individual in constant need of reassurance and I believe in me she sensed a kindred spirit. Even now I wonder if I

had been able to give expression to my true feelings would things have turned out different. But we were both young and unsure of ourselves bound to our fates by whatever god had fashioned us in his image. We simply met too soon. Roy Orbison was right, “We were too young to understand to ever know.”

Lisa became a regular visitor to our house and a firm favourite with my father. My mother was less of a fan and always maintained a certain distance. We increasingly spent more time in the front room listening to records or snogging on the sofa. The Sixties gave birth to pop culture with groups like the Beatles, the Searchers and the Kinks providing the background music against which was played out our brief romance. One song in particular held a special significance for us. ‘Yesterday’ by the Beatles was playing the first time we made love one sultry summer evening when my parents were out with friends. I foolishly believed it had consummated our relationship but I was wrong.

Like the invisible worm that flies in the night our innate insecurities burrowed their way into the heart of our blossoming and vulnerable love. More than ever Lisa needed the reassurance that I was unable to articulate and we drifted apart. The end still came as a shock from which I believe I never fully recovered. Like a shipwrecked mariner I clung to the hope I could win her back but that finally died when she met someone else. We both went our separate ways. Me to college, where in my final year I met Gwen and the rest as they say, is history.

“What are you up to then?”

I hadn’t even heard the front door open so preoccupied had I become with my bitter sweet reminiscences. Was there an accusatory tone in Gwen’s voice or was it simply my guilty conscience?

“You’re home early love,” I responded and shut the lap top quickly before Gwen could glimpse the email.

“Yeah,” she replied giving me a querulous glance as though she had come home and caught me surfing sites that men of my age allegedly gravitate towards. More blue remembered hills. “The library finishes earlier now. Bloody council, there’ll be no where left to go if they make any more cuts. We’ll probably end up having to meet on a park bench. I expect we’ll have to book it in advance mind.”

I nodded, feigning concern.

“Something interesting,” she said staring at my laptop and I realised I had aroused her suspicions when I slammed it shut.

“Not really,” I tried to sound convincing, “just an email from Linda about another reunion.”

She hovered over me and I knew I had no alternative but to open the damn thing. So what if she did read the email? The name Lisa Williams would hold no significance for her. In our early days we had spoken about past relationships but for some reason I had never mentioned Lisa. Gwen possessed more than her fair share of womanly intuition and suspected I was holding something or someone back but had never been able to tease a name from me. Lisa was just one of those secret shadows most married couples dance around in the course of their lives together. Then I recalled Linda’s mischievous words dangled like live bait at the end of the email.

“Didn’t you and Lisa have a thing going back in the day?”

Gwen would surely put two and two together but the longer I delayed the more suspicious she would become. I opened the laptop and held my breath. This was ridiculous, why did I feel like an adulterous husband hiding in his lover's wardrobe? Gwen squinted at the screen.

"That print's much too small," she observed, "I'd need my reading glasses."

I heaved a sigh of relief as she turned away.

"Anyway," she called as she put the kettle on, "I thought you said you'd never go to another. You moaned enough about the last one."

"Yeah well," I stalled desperately thinking of a plausible reason for my dramatic change of heart, "it will probably be the last chance I'll get to see all of them again. Phil wasn't looking too good last time. To be honest I'm surprised he's still around for this one."

"I can see you're really going to be the life and soul of the party," she said. "You can count me out, I couldn't stick another one, you'll have to go on your own."

"Fair enough," I replied struggling to sound disappointed.

I stood outside The Welcome Inn as nervous as I had been on our first date. Was this a mistake? We hadn't exactly parted as friends, we'd just parted.

"Steve Phillips boy!" said a voice to my left.

Two elderly gents stood against the side of the building smiling at me effusively. Who they were I had not a clue.

"Long time no see," said the second voice as he moved to shake my hand with genuine enthusiasm.

In that moment I realised they were actually former classmates but which exactly I had absolutely no idea. At least I was still recognisable.

"Boys mun," I responded pumping their proffered hands, hoping to bluff my way through this excruciating encounter. "Well, better get in and mingle," I said at length and turned away to make for the door.

"Catch up with you inside," one of them shouted.

I raised my hand feebly in response.

Contrary to my expectations the place was crowded. It seemed as if all the swallows had gathered for one last summer. A cursory glance around the room proved fruitless but what was I expecting anyway? I had changed and so inevitably had Lisa. Time touches all of us with its bitter embrace. I made my way to the bar seeking the familiar security of a beer. Most people were clustered in groups deep in conversation. Studiously avoiding eye contact with anyone I crossed to the least populated corner of the room and sipped my drink. The irony of the situation suddenly struck me. It had been almost fifty years since our fleeting affair. Lisa and I could be standing next to each other and not even know it. This had been a massive mistake. I would drink my beer and leave.

Even as I made my decision someone detached themselves from a group at the other side of the room and headed straight for me. When I say 'headed' she actually seemed to glide with a grace I recognised despite the intervening years. I took a sip of tepid beer, not for the taste but to wet the inside of my mouth which had suddenly dried up. I was outside the Picturedrome again in my Teddy Boy tribute suit getting ready to trip over my tongue.

"Hello Steve, long time no see how are you?"

I swallowed hard and nodded.

“Good, I’m good, how about you?”

Was that the best I could come up with? No wonder she’d dumped me.

In response to my question she turned her palms outwards as if to say, “What you see is what you get.”

“I can tell you now Steve, after all these years, I had a real thing for you back then.”

There was a look in her eyes that told me ‘the thing’ was still very much alive.

“Then why did you leave me,” I wanted to ask but all I could say was, “God Lisa, you haven’t changed a bit. Do you remember ‘Yesterday’?”

She didn’t reply but her eyes hardened and a distinct chilliness enveloped me. Had I gone too far too soon? Was she with her husband and considered my remark inappropriate or offensive?

“I remember yesterday very well Steve, but you’re obviously having a little trouble. My name’s Barbara.”

Barbara turned abruptly on her heels and flounced back across the room. I took another sip of beer. If I left now I might still catch the end of ‘Match of the Day’.

To: stevephillips@gmail.com

Subject: Tonypandy Grammar Reunion

Hi Steve,

Sorry I didn’t get a chance to speak to you on Friday. Seems you left quite early on in proceedings. Barbara John said she spoke to you. Did you know she had quite a crush on you back in the day? TBH she was a bit upset that you didn’t remember her. To make it worse you thought she was Lisa!!!

Lisa couldn’t make it. She’s on honeymoon with her fourth husband in the Caribbean. Whirlwind romance apparently but you know Lisa she always was a bit of a butterfly. Barbara said you asked if she remembered yesterday which she thought was an odd way to put it. Wasn’t ‘Yesterday’ a song by the Beatles? If I recall correctly it always made Lisa cry whenever she heard it.

Well see you at the next reunion if we’re both still around.

Bye Steve.

x x x

Linda

Books by Phil Rowlands:

Jack's High



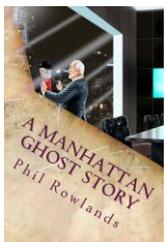
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BBC writersroom

A Manhattan Ghost Story



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