

## 1 – FALLING DOWN

BANG!

And time stood still.

In the darkness and silence, a teenage girl found herself suspended in a state of blissful emptiness. It felt oddly familiar, as if she had been here before. Though there was nothing to recognize, she sensed a primal connection to this void.

Who was she in this vast nothingness? The question caught her off guard. Who had posed that inquiry? *Who am I? What am I?* These thoughts triggered a cascade of introspection: *If there is nothing and I am here, then I am the sole existence. I am everything, for there is nothing and no one else. But why am I here? And how can I answer these questions alone?*

With these ponderings, she emerged from the blissful void, and time slowly resumed its course.

Lisa began to feel sensations, each distinct and separate. She could choose which experiences to focus on. When she directed her attention to her face, she sensed the coolness of the wet tile beneath her right cheek. Shifting her focus downward, she became aware of her right

hand, which throbbed in a pool of rainwater. Choosing to escape the pain, she returned her attention to her face, only to discover warm blood trickling from her nose, causing a metallic taste in her mouth. Then her ears seemed to awaken, capturing the sound of raindrops falling around her, like a unique applause, an encouragement.

In that moment, Lisa felt the full force of pain in her face, along with the shock of her fall. The familiar ache surged from her heart to her throat, prompting an involuntary cry.

“Lisa! Honey, are you okay?” she heard her mother’s voice calling from a distance.

The pain intensified, and Lisa’s eyes welled up with hot tears.

Everything continued to unfold in slow motion, and now it seemed as if there were two versions of Lisa: one lying on the floor, experiencing sensations, and another observing from a detached perspective. The observing Lisa questioned everything. Should she try to get up? Or would it be better to remain still for a while? What exactly was pain? And why had she fallen again?

Meanwhile, the “real” Lisa cried out loudly, while her mother hurried toward her. Suddenly, she was lifted up by warm, strong hands.

Shortly after, her mother’s hands joined in the embrace, and time returned to its normal pace. Her mother and grandfather held her tightly, showering her with kisses and comforting words. Lisa’s last thought, as the

observing Lisa floated around, was that pain led to comfort. And when the real Lisa took a deep breath, she felt whole again, enveloped in the arms of her grandfather and mother, almost reminiscent of the blissful void she had just experienced.

Reluctantly, Lisa didn't want this feeling to fade away. But after a few minutes, her mother released her, and Grandpa, as sturdy as ever, began to carry her down the long path to the farmhouse's front door. "You always know how to make a grand entrance," he said cheerfully, gazing at her.

She managed a faint smile, and as they stepped into the light of the farm, she looked into the familiar bright blue eyes she adored.



Sitting at the dinner table with an ice pack against her face, Lisa observed her mother and grandfather, drenched from the rain, bringing her bags in from the car.

"That's everything," Lisa overheard her mother saying to Grandpa in the hallway. "She was worried about how she'd keep herself entertained for the next few days, so she packed a lot of things. I can't quite understand it – she's in high school now, but she still acts like a dependent little girl whenever something goes wrong, like before."

"Well, she's thirteen; it's her age," Grandpa replied in his warm, deep voice. "And let's not forget she often dis-

plays the wisdom of an adult.”

Lisa’s mother nodded. “It pains me to leave her like this, with her injuries on her face.”

“Everything will be fine,” Grandpa reassured. “When you pick her up on Saturday, you won’t see a scratch anymore.”

Lisa’s mother entered the living room, enveloping her in a tight hug.

“I’m fine, Mom,” Lisa reassured her, mustering an almost adult-like gaze. “Just go and don’t worry about me.”

Her mother’s eyes welled up. “Alright, I’ll leave you two alone,” she said, her voice filled with emotion. “Be careful and have a great time, sweetheart.”

“Bye,” Lisa called from the doorway, waving at her mother as she drove off toward their apartment in Minneapolis.



Grandpa emerged from the kitchen, carrying a jar of honey. Lisa looked at him, curiosity etched on her face.

“This is for the cuts on your face,” he explained. “Applying some of this special honey will help them heal in a few days.” Lisa settled back into her seat at the dinner table as Grandpa gently applied the honey to her cuts and bruises. It felt soothing. When he finished, he looked at her and asked, “Why did you let yourself fall like that out there?”

Lisa felt an electric pulse in her heart. *How did he*

*know?* It didn't surprise her, though, because Grandpa always seemed to have a knack for understanding. "What happened, princess? What's troubling you?"

Tears welled up in Lisa's eyes as she began to speak. Grandpa embraced her, holding her close and gently rocking her from side to side.

"You can tell me anything," he whispered into her ear. "Sharing your feelings with me will make you feel better; you know that."

Lisa nodded, her voice trembling as she opened up.

"I feel so alone. It's as if everyone is against me. Madison doesn't want to hang out with me anymore. She's ashamed of me because I'm still so little. "She's much taller than me, and everyone in class adores her. She says things about me that aren't true, and now the whole class is bullying me."

"I understand," Grandpa said, continuing to embrace and rock her gently. "Wasn't Madison your best friend?"

Lisa shook her head. "She used to be," she replied softly.

"And what else is happening?" Grandpa inquired, his voice still gentle.

"Well, Mom treats me like a little kid. I want to do things my way, by myself, but she won't let me. My friends and the other kids in my class are allowed to do so much more than me. They can go out at night, have a later curfew, take the subway alone – things like that. They see me as a helpless child, so they don't want to hang out with me."

“That’s terrible,” Grandpa sympathized. “I understand what you mean. But I think there’s more to it.”

Lisa fell silent for a moment. “I miss Dad and wish we could live together again,” she said softly. “And I miss Grandma.”

Grandpa paused, a solemn moment passing between them. He squeezed her hand, then spoke meaningfully, “I hope you will still enjoy the next few days we have together.”

Lisa, with tears in her eyes, looked at him intently. “Grandpa, I love you so much, and I truly enjoy being with you.” She paused for a moment, then continued, “But I feel so alone here with you. There are no other kids to spend time with, just a garden and an empty field. I’m afraid I’ll be bored for the next few days, and then I’ll feel lonely.”

“So that’s why you let yourself fall out there,” Grandpa said, his smile widening.

Lisa looked down, feeling a tinge of embarrassment. She nodded slightly and whispered, “I don’t know why, but I just had to let myself fall.”

Grandpa’s smile grew even broader. “Well done, my girl,” he said with a resolute voice.

Lisa looked up, surprise evident on her face. She questioned him, seeking an explanation.

“I’m impressed,” Grandpa explained. “You shared your deepest sadness and frustrations with me. You tried to protect me from feeling down, but in the end, you honestly expressed your concerns about our time together.

And you knew I would understand why you let yourself fall, almost intentionally, on the way to the front door. That's impressive because it shows your honesty, purity, and sensitivity."

"Aren't you angry or disappointed?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"No, quite the opposite," Grandpa responded, his excitement palpable. "You can never disappoint me or make me angry. Please always remember that. No, I'm simply glad that you feel comfortable enough to share these emotions with me. And, of course, as your grandfather, I'll do my best to help you through it all."

Lisa rolled her eyes playfully. "I know, Grandpa, and it's really sweet of you. But you can't change Madison or the other kids in my class. You can't change Mom's behavior or make her let me be more independent. You can't bring Dad and Grandma back, and you can't summon other kids to move here."

"You're absolutely right," Grandpa said enthusiastically, his excitement contagious. "You're incredibly wise, did you know that? "I'm gonna make us both a cup of tea now before we head upstairs. It's already getting pretty late," Grandpa said.

As Grandpa made his way to the kitchen, Lisa sat at the dining table, a surprised expression on her face. What did he mean by that? Was he a little crazy? Having watched the movie *Alice in Wonderland* the day before, she imagined Grandpa as the Mad Hatter and giggled to herself. Just then, Sara, Grandpa's cat, brushed against

Lisa's right leg, and she reached down to pet her.

Grandpa returned with a pot of tea, pouring large cups for Lisa and himself before sitting across from her.

"Why did you call me wise earlier?" Lisa asked, taking a careful sip of her hot tea. The taste of chamomile brought back memories of Grandma, who always made her that tea, and a warmth spread through her.

"I said that because you understand that I can't change your best friend, your classmates, or your mom. It's very wise of you to realize that," Grandpa explained.

Lisa looked at him, her confusion evident. "I'd be crazy if I thought you could change them, wouldn't I?"

Ignoring her unintended sarcasm, Grandpa continued, "You'll see why it's wise. Let me ask you something: Does this issue with Madison feel like something that has changed beyond your control, even though you wish it hadn't?"

Lisa nodded.

"And with your mother, does it feel like nothing ever changes, no matter what you do, even though you desperately want things to change?"

Lisa nodded again.

"And does it feel like you have no friends here, and you miss your dad and grandma, and even though you know it won't change, you still wish it could?"

Lisa nodded for the third time, conviction in her gesture.

"So, you want the things that change to stay the same, and at the same time, you want the things that stub-



bornly stay the same to change?” Grandpa asked.

Lisa considered for a moment and nodded thoughtfully.

“That’s a sign that you’re growing up, getting bigger,” Grandpa said with a wide smile.

“If growing up means things I like disappear and the bad things stick around, I’d rather stay young and little,” Lisa pouted. “Is that what getting older is all about?”

Grandpa nodded. “For most people, it’s exactly that.”

“But I’m not like most people!” Lisa exclaimed, slamming her hands on the table in frustration.

“You’re right. It shouldn’t be what growing up feels like, but most people haven’t discovered the secret of life,” Grandpa said.

Lisa raised her eyebrows. “The secret of life? Is there really a secret?”

Grandpa nodded.

Excited, Lisa asked, “Can that secret help me?”

Again, Grandpa nodded.

After a brief pause, Lisa said, “I don’t think you’re going to tell me what the secret is, are you?”

“Why do you think it’s a secret?” Grandpa questioned. “Imagine watching a fun or exciting movie. Would you want to know how it ends halfway through? Would that make it as fun or exciting?”

Lisa pondered for a moment. “No, not really. It would take away the enjoyment and excitement.”

“Exactly,” Grandpa nodded. “It’s the same with the secret of life. If someone tells you what it is, you miss out

on experiencing and discovering it. The secret loses its power because you haven't unraveled it yourself."

Lisa's shoulders slumped.

"What's the matter?" Grandpa asked, amused.

"Well, you said I'm growing up, getting bigger, and that it will happen just like with most people unless I discover the secret of life. But you won't tell me what it is," Lisa explained.

"Do you remember the rules I taught you the last time we were together?" Grandpa asked.

Lisa nodded. "Rule One: *If I want something, I have to take action to get it.* Rule Two: *I should try to figure it out on my own first.* But I don't know what to do or where to start. Which brings us to Rule Three: *If I don't know what to do, I'll ask for help.* But I just did that by asking you about the secret of life, and you won't tell me. I get it now," Lisa said.

"Do you still remember the fourth rule?" Grandpa inquired.

Lisa thought for a moment. "Yes. *If the answer I get doesn't help, I should try asking the question in a different way.*"

"And... can you?" Grandpa asked.

Lisa hesitated. "Uh... yeah, of course," she replied, her face lighting up. "Grandpa, would you be willing to help me discover the secret of life for myself?"

Grandpa nodded with satisfaction. "Very well. I can help you experience things so you can uncover the secret on your own. But I must warn you," he said, his expres-

sion becoming serious as he gave Lisa a penetrating look. Pausing for a moment, he spoke in a lower voice, “This secret will profoundly change your perspective on the world and your life. Once you unravel it, nothing will ever be the same. Is that truly what you want?”

Lisa donned a pensive expression. “If it means choosing between nice things that disappear and bad things that persist, or having my whole world turned upside down, then yes, I want that.”

“I love the way you put it – *turning your world upside down*. In a way, that’s precisely what will happen. But you must understand that this will be a journey that requires significant time in the days ahead. We’ll embark on numerous adventures together. Are you up for this undertaking?”

“Yes, absolutely!” Lisa exclaimed with determination.

“In that case, it’s bedtime, my princess.”



Fifteen minutes later, Lisa lay in the spare bed in the attic, surveying her surroundings. Memories flooded back of when she used to lie here, with Grandma tucking her in and reading another story. The recollection invoked a warm sensation throughout her body, almost as if Grandma were present once more. Suddenly, the creaking of footsteps sent a shiver of terror down her spine. She knew it was Grandpa ascending the stairs, but for an instant, Grandma felt undeniably real.

“I came to bid you goodnight,” Grandpa whispered upon entering the room. “But it seems you’re wide awake.”

Lisa sat up in bed. “When will we begin the project?” she inquired eagerly.

“We’ve already started,” Grandpa declared.

“No way.”

“Oh, yes. Remember, I mentioned that this project would transform your view of the world and your life. What were your thoughts and feelings when I said that?”

“I don’t know. I think I felt intrigued and thought it sounded exciting. I love new things.”

“Ah, so if you love new things, what are your feelings toward old things, like me?” Grandpa asked with a mischievous wink.

“It depends,” Lisa replied, laughing. “If old things are wonderful, I adore them. But if they’re not, I don’t.”

“So you want to keep everything nice and discard the bad?”

“Well, obviously,” Lisa said with a hint of sarcasm. “Who wouldn’t?”

“What do you want to get rid of?” Grandpa inquired.

“I already told you. Mom treats me like a baby. She’s overly protective, even taking me to school. But I want to ride my bike to school on my own. No one in my class gets dropped off by their parents.”

“Okay,” Grandpa acknowledged, a satisfied expression on his face. “Was there a time when you enjoyed it?”

Lisa sat up, deep in thought. “Well... when I was

younger, I did enjoy Mom taking me to school. I appreciated her hug before I went in and how we walked home together. It was sweet to find hot chocolate waiting for us. When it rained, she always had an umbrella or would drive us. So, yes, there was a time when it was nice. But now, I can handle it on my own.”

“I see,” Grandpa said, his gaze fixed on Lisa. “Can you recognize that there are things you used to enjoy but now find bothersome? That, at different stages in life, something enjoyable can become the opposite?”

“Yes, because I’ve changed,” Lisa declared, her voice growing louder. “I’m growing up, becoming more independent.”

“Perhaps your mother needs to realize and accept your transformation before she can change herself. Now, let’s talk about Madison. Something has changed with her too. She no longer wants to be your best friend.”

Lisa looked down, feeling a pang of sadness. “So... she doesn’t want to be my friend because she has changed? It has nothing to do with me?”

Grandpa nodded.

“But that’s not entirely true. It does involve me because she says hurtful things about me,” Lisa thought aloud.

“It’s a reflection of her own insecurities,” Grandpa explained. “When someone belittles another person, it’s often due to their own lack of confidence. Madison has grown and suddenly become popular in your class. It affects her, makes her insecure. What if she loses that popularity? All that attention has changed her, and now

she tries to maintain her status by directing negativity toward someone else. And you, as her former best friend, are an easy target.”

Lisa’s eyes widened as she absorbed this newfound insight.

“So,” she mused after a moment, “if Mom doesn’t change alongside me, I won’t like it. And I don’t like that Madison has changed either because I’ve lost my best friend. It hurts that she bullies me, but I should actually feel sorry for her. I should see her as pitiful because of her insecurities.

“And,” Lisa’s words spilled out rapidly, “maybe Mom is resistant to my growth because she feels like she’s losing her little girl. But I’ll always be her daughter – I’m simply maturing and becoming more independent. Now that I understand what might be bothering her, I can explain that she doesn’t need to worry. And perhaps she can accept that I’m changing and will continue to change.”

Lisa looked at Grandpa, excitement radiating from her.

“You see?” Grandpa said, a smile lighting up his face as he stood up. “We’ve already gotten the project underway. And we’ll continue tomorrow. You need to get a good night’s rest because it’s going to be an intense day. So, I’m going to wish you goodnight now.”

“Grandpa?” Lisa asked, her voice soft and gentle.

“Yes?”

“To me, you’ve always been the same amazing Grandpa since I’ve known you. When was the last time you changed?”

Grandpa settled back down on the edge of the bed.

“When was the last time I changed?” he mused aloud. “It was when you were born, and I laid eyes on you for the first time. It was like being struck by lightning. There was an instant connection between us, as if I had known you all along. It was a feeling unlike anything I had ever experienced before. I can’t quite explain it, but it was a deep-rooted memory, something primal. It was as if, in that very moment, my heart opened up wider and made space just for you. Grandma used to say that you awakened a tenderness in me.”

Grandpa gazed off into the distance, and Lisa observed him, appreciating his appearance.

“Well, then a few years later, something terrible happened to your father.”

Lisa nodded, fully aware of what Grandpa was referring to.

“When I received that phone call from the police,” he continued, “it was like being struck by lightning once again. Looking back, it was the complete opposite of the feeling I had when you were born. It felt as if your father had been ripped away from my heart. And then, Grandma passed away a year later. Those two events changed me. But the same applies to you, my dear,” Grandpa said, looking at Lisa and gently stroking her hair.

“So, you’ve experienced things in life that you didn’t want to...” Lisa softly pondered her question, searching for an answer. “And now? Are there still things that you wish were different but aren’t? Like an unfulfilled dream?”

Grandpa locked eyes with Lisa, his gaze fixed on her bright eyes. “When you’re young, like you, you dream about the future, about what life has in store for you. But when you’re old, like me, you learn to accept things as they are, and your dreams become focused on others. My dreams revolve around you, about what you’ll experience in your life, what you’ll accomplish. I had those dreams for your father too, but they shattered like a burst bubble.”

“Grandpa, now you’re dwelling on sad thoughts and avoiding my question,” Lisa gently pointed out.

“You’re right,” Grandpa admitted, a slight smile playing on his lips, acknowledging his granddaughter’s perceptiveness. He paused for a moment. “I think I need some time to give you a proper answer because nothing comes to mind right now. I promise you, I’ll reflect on it tonight, and we can discuss it tomorrow. Does that sound okay?”

Lisa nodded, taking a deep breath before lying down and closing her eyes. “Goodnight, Grandpa. And good luck with your contemplation of dreams. Tonight, I’ll delve into my own dream.”

Grandpa leaned over, planting a tender kiss on his only grandchild’s forehead, his greatest treasure.

As he switched off the light and quietly exited the room, Lisa’s soft breathing assured him that she had already drifted off to sleep.