Childish Summers

The bank was high and steep, and from that small cliff two short legs dangled. The water was just 10 feet below, however, and not dangerously quick even after a summer rain. The little legs had never heard, nor guessed, but that bank was dug by a full river, long before the legs were born. At one time, its deep waters had fed a whole forest; many willows had quenched their thirst along that lazy brown river. Back then, floods would occasionally break through the low land, turning the rolling hills into islands. This was no good for development, so the subdivision planners changed this hazard into a series of circular ponds within pretty parks; afterwards the water became much more temperate in the area these legs swung. Yet, that stream did not wholly yield. Its willows’ roots ran deep, twisted the land, and confounded the wheeled equipment. The stream, though now steady, was strong, and repeatedly frustrated attempts to blot it out completely. So, even as the lost profits gnawed at their thoughts, the investors begrudgingly settled for a simple path built in the woods, which at least raised the value of what houses could be built for their proximity to greenspace.

This is the bank where the small legs swung. As far above the legs as the water was below, another set of legs balanced on a branch. These belonged to a young boy who had climbed about as high as he could, and he was smiling, because he had never climbed so high. On the bank sat a girl of the same age, and she continued her story, “Before the man could get far from the house, though, he heard sirens approaching - Police sirens. He dodged in and out of backyards, under bleachers, and even tried hiding in the dumpsters at school, but the police kept on his heels. They kept running after him. Then, he figured out how he could lose them for good. With the police following, he ran along Mercer street until he found this path. Then, at a bend he ducked behind a magnolia into some bushes and off the path. That’s where the police missed him. Their stomping boots ran right by as he held his breath in a thornbush. It wasn’t long before the officers realized they had lost the trail and doubled back, but it was already too late. The man had been raised in this area, and knew these woods like the back of his hand. Once those officers were out of earshot, he stole into the dark of the forest and couldn’t be found – because the police didn’t know how to navigate in this forest, all the secret paths and shortcuts. He still lives in here, hunting for food and drinking from the creek. That’s why you see so many fallen trees crossing the river – because he put them there to use as bridges.”

The boy landed with a thud about a yard behind her, then drug himself to the bank and sat himself there, “that was a tough climb,”

“You’re covered in pricklies”

“Yeah,” he said, as he picked these out of his shirt, “And I’ve got a bit of scratch too,” he held up his right arm in pride.

The girl scrunched up her face in disgust, then her look softened as her eyes moved to the other side of the bank again, “How would you care for yourself, if you got hurt and you were living out here?”

“If you can’t wash it in water at your house? You could wash it in the creek I guess.”

She looked down at the green and brown swirls beneath, “No, that water is dirty. That’s not good for a scratch.”

The boy looked down too, then at his arm, and realized he wished he had some tap water from home. “So what though? This will heal on its own fine.”

“But what if you were *living* out here? What if you had to escape the law and care for yourself in the wild?”

“Oh, I thought that was a serious question.” The boy resumed picking pricklies. “You’re just asking for a story.”

“It *is* a serious question, because it’s for a serious *story*.”

“Huh, well I don’t know. I’m sure you’ll figure it out though. There’s people who survive out in the wild, they have to do it somehow.”

“Yeah” Her legs swung. Burs from his shirt landed in the creek. The moss-covered water slowly carried these away beneath them.

“Want to cross the creek?” He suggested. She looked out again, but the sun was getting lower, and that side of the water was less known to her. It looked darker, and a little scary.

“Um, no.” She looked at the boy, “Won’t it be time to go back soon? You won’t be able to get to the top of another tree, if you take as much time as you did with this one.”

“I don’t have to climb – don’t you want to explore?”

She looked back at the other side. When she was little she used to have nightmares of bad things lying just off the path. Now, though, she was big, and she liked the woods - at least, she liked the familiar parts. She hadn’t crossed the river many times, and... it was still a little scary, “Another day? Maybe when it looks brighter?”

The boy noticed that the two of them were shadowed by a small patch of cloud at that moment, but he also knew the girl got worried by new areas in the woods, “Fine. Tomorrow, if the sun’s shining?”

“Okay.” The two of them did cross the creek the next day, and many more days after that until school started. Then, the soccer season kept them both busy afterschool, which lasted while there was still enough daylight in the evenings to play by. In the spring the boy broke a leg, and hardly went outside until it healed in late June. The girl however spent the second half of that summer with her Aunt. When school came, the girl continued with soccer, while the boy tried cross country. The next summer they spent most sunny days together near the creek, as they did for 3 more summers after, save for a handful of weeklong camps each had.

Neither any longer feared the woods on the other side of the creek, even at twilight, and both were starting to get old enough to appreciate the hues of the sunset; they were nearly teenagers the evening they stayed out too late.

It had been drizzling earlier in the day, but not enough to keep them from playing outside. The boy, in a red rain jacket, was building himself a lean-to out of sticks. The girl sat on a log in a long navy-blue rain jacket humming to herself next to a cold fire pit. She had been trying to tell a story about the fire pit, how it was used for warmth in the winter by a family living off-grid, but stopped when she noticed crumpled beer cans around the pit, unsure of how they fit in the story.

“Do you know what this is?” The girl asked, holding up one of the cans.

The boy peeked over his small structure, “A soda can?”

The girl looked at it, “But I don’t know this brand of soda, never even heard of it.”

“What’s it called?”

“3 sheeps.”

“3 sheep.” The boy corrected her, “Sheep I think is one of those words where the singular and plural are the same word.”

“It says 3 sheep*sss*. With an ‘s’,” the girl insisted.

“Weird. Mrs. Stofferahn wouldn’t let that grammar slide.”

“Yeah… why would a family living in the woods have soda cans?” The girl wondered, “bean cans I could see, but not soda.” She tossed it into the fire pit.

“Huh, not sure.” Cicadas chattered. Water gurgled along the creek bed. The boy looked for sticks.

The girl had been quiet for some time when the boy looked over to see why. He saw her putting something in her jacket. Even with just a brief glance though, he could tell what it was; he had seen bottles like that on the top shelf at home, but he asked anyway, “What are you drinking, Maddie?”

The girl looked up at him suddenly, then back down at it, “um, it’s my mom’s alcohol.”

“Oh.”

The girl raised her head, “do you want to share it?”

“Oh, uh, no thanks.” The boy stammered, then looked away as the girl swallowed a drink from the bottle. “It’s getting kinda hard to see the sticks, do you want to go back?”

“Do you want to stay a little longer? The sunset is so pretty.”

The boy turned, looked out that direction, and saw that she wasn’t wrong, “Okay.” He spread his jacket on the ground and sat down on it. The clouds were just clearing out in the West.

The light changed slowly, and as the sun waned it filled the sky with a light too bright for the eyes. The creek was a golden fire, and the clouds blushed. Every bright color orbited an intense central glow. Then, as this faded, the sky started to look bruised, and the silhouetted trees loomed.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure”

“When you’re older,” the boy said, “What do you want to do?”

The girl was silent for a moment, “I don’t really think I want to get older.” She replied, in a somber voice, “I don’t really like thinking about the future at all.”

Lightning bugs blinked around them as twilight settled.

“Do you have a favorite memory?” The girl asked.

The boy shifted on the ground. “Yeah, I do. It’s from that month I spent recovering from my broken leg. It was such a boring and sluggish month, so I really looked forward to any time someone would visit…

The girl was drowsy though, and started to fall asleep, but she knew the story he was telling - she was in it. As she slipped into sleep her dreams played the memory for her: It was a bright, sunny day, with only enough clouds to soften the sun’s rays. The girl was a frequent visitor to the boy’s house that summer, but today she carefully knocked on the door with her left hand, as the other held a small frog she had brought from the creek. When the boy’s mom answered, the girl hid the frog behind her back. The mom asked how the girl was, and how her summer was going, and about the solstice bar-be-que her parents were planning, and what dish the mom could bring, and if the girl was excited to visit her aunt in the Pacific Northwest later that summer, and on and on. The girl answered every question as best she could; after all, the mom probably didn’t get out to talk to other people much now that she had to stay with her son’s broken leg most of the day. Eventually though, the frog grew impatient, and let out a *ribbit* so loud that even the boy inside heard, who asked, “What was that?” Then, the mom’s countenance grew stern, and asked the girl what she had in her hand. The girl brought her hands to her front, and opened her fingers. The mom’s tone did not change as she asked why the girl had brought a frog. Neither, though, did the girl herself falter as she stood before her and answered, saying that she brought the frog for the boy, because he must miss the creek, being stuck inside all day, and this was like a little bit of the creek. Then, the mother’s face softened; maybe recalling how courteous the girl normally was; or thinking it kind that she’d think of her son; or maybe something besides. Whatever it was, she responded in a gentle voice, and asked the girl to be careful with the frog, and not to let it jump on the couch, or any other furniture. The girl promised that she would be very careful. The girl and the boy then played with the frog all afternoon in a sun-filled living room, letting it jump from hand to hand, and as little on the couch as they could manage.

“Maddie, wake up.” She looked around and blinked several times as a dream faded. “I think we should go.”

She wasn’t sitting on a couch in the sun, she was sitting on a wet log, hunched over in a rain jacket, next to a bottle of tequila.

“It’s getting late.”

The lighting bugs were gone, and it was nearly pitch black. The boy was standing with his jacket already on. She looked back out West, but only saw a distant streetlight.

“I want to go home.”

Her parents weren’t planning a block party, they were getting divorced. If they weren’t still fighting, she’d probably wake up whichever one was sleeping on the couch when she got back.

“Please, Maddie.”

"No," she said to herself. "This can't be right."

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, is this really who I am?” She said in a louder voice, “I'm a twelve year old girl who steals liquor from her home? Who hates her life and daydreams about running away to live in the forest?" She said, then whispered, "Those summers when we were kids feel like a dream, like they're not even real."

“Maa-dee” the boy whined, “What about the rest of this summer?”

“What about it?” She snapped back, “What about when we’re older, and don’t get summer vacation anymore?”

“Well, then, we’ll be older, and we can finally do the things we really want to do,” the boy said.

Maddie frowned, “When you had a childhood as good as ours, what’s there to look forward to? Things change that you can’t stop, and it’s never as good as it once was.”

Nick was silent for a moment, then answered, “That memory I told you about is my favorite because that day, I figured out why it meant so much that you’d visit - because you could’ve done all the things I wanted to do instead, but you sat inside instead of under the sun. And I thought to myself that I want to love people like that someday.”

Then it was like Maddie finally heard the friendly voice. Her face changed, and when she lifted her head her eyes were soft but bright, even in the dark. Nick’s familiar silhouette, hooded, stood near, and looked like one of the prophets of old, counseling a queen, who suddenly felt her newly kindled heart call her to fulfill its great potential. She stood.

But she stumbled, and caught herself on Nick’s shoulder; at this, both realized how much she had drunk. Nick watched her face as her poisoned mind tried to make sense of the situation. She started to cry.

“No, no, I don’t want to. There’s only so many nights left in the summer, I don’t want to go back.”

Nick helped back on her own feet, “You can hold onto me, I can help you get back to your house.”

She lifted her head, until her eyes were level with Nick’s; at this age they were still the same height. Nick looked into her eyes, and saw that they were wild, and wouldn’t keep focus, until they eventually settled on the bottle. “What’ll I’ll do with this?” she wondered, before throwing her head back and putting it back to her lips.

At this, Nick worried that he may have made a mistake. He stepped back, saying, “I’m sorry Maddie, I’m going back.”

As he turned to leave, Maddie gulped down the liquid, and seemed to see some last chance fading. She couldn’t catch it, but she could stop it. She yelled out, “NO!” and swung the bottle out in front of her, slamming it against something solid. Nick was out before he hit the ground.

Maddie lost her balance, and fell on top of him. She got up on her knees, and started throwing her fists at the dark body on the ground, screaming, “I don’t want to go! I want to stay!” with all the strength she could muster.

Still, she missed more than she hit, and after a while she tired. Then, looking around, her blurry vision made out a streetlight. Maddie stumbled and crawled from tree to tree until she made it there. About a half hour later, Nick came to, and, moaning, did the same.