

Summers in July

Sometimes I think about those languid, sun-soaked days in July and the narrow, weathered roads we used to bound across, trying not to step on the cracks. I still remember the rugged paths that led to the woods and the sweet, coaxing songs of warblers, rich like nectar. I remember when we chased grasshoppers that darted out of reach just in time and built kingdoms out of loose rock. When we snuck out at midnight to watch the indigo waves glisten and the fireflies glow like sequins on dark velvet. On late Saturday afternoons, we raced each other to the big hill past your street and collapsed in exhaustion, the cool grass beneath our sweat-soaked backs, our lungs filling with perfumed air. With our most saccharine smiles, we headed to my neighbour Majorie's house afterward in search of freshly-baked cookies. Then we returned to the inviting woods to resume our exploring, poking around in the dirt and collecting insects for the exhibition-in-progress that we kept in your closet. When we finally returned to my house after our ventures, my mom would scold us for the dirt we had tracked into the house and our grimy fingers. But we lived each day in anticipation for the next.

We skipped stones in the riverbank and sipped on amber skies. We made pinky promises and pledges to break them. The hills, the forest, the river—everything seemed to be whispering our names, and we followed, like sailors drawn to a siren's voice, two unmoored ships in the midst of a vast, uncharted sea.

On one particularly breezy July morning, we were making our way to a new area of the river we had yet to explore when we saw Francis, a small, glassy-eyed boy who had been in our class the year before. We occasionally saw him wandering around alone in the neighbourhood, but we hadn't ever talked to him properly before.

"Hey Francie," you called. "We're going to the riverbank. Come with us." Francis turned away, but you grabbed his arm before he could leave.

“Come on, Francis,” I prodded. After some pulling and shoving, we managed to get him to follow. Soon enough we arrived at the new spot along the river, an expanse of rock that jutted out high above the rushing water. We hiked our way up to the highest ledge, and I felt a sense of serenity wash over me as I closed my eyes and inhaled the river’s spray.

“Stop it, Luka. I don’t want to be here anymore. I’m leaving,” said Francis, in a whining tone, from behind us. My eyes were still shut against the beaming sunlight when I heard an audible *thump*, a sharp inhale, and a terrible, bloodcurdling scream that faded into the pit-patter of waves. Whipping my head around, I saw you crouched over the rocky ledge and the empty space where Francis had been moments before. The water continued on its course, undisturbed. We shouted Francis’ name into the river and were met with a deafening silence.

The rest of that day was a blur. We sprinted home after what seemed like hours of anxious uncertainty. My hands tremored uncontrollably and my blood felt ice-cold even under the hot sun. Before we knew it, the police had discovered the body after receiving a report from a woman who was hiking by the riverbank. We might have been interviewed once, I don’t remember. But an unspoken understanding came over us and we agreed, silently, to never speak a word about what happened that day and to bury the memory.

It was August by then, and we continued our adventures in the woods. We still constructed rock castles, skipped stones, foraged for unsuspecting insects. But the trees no longer beckoned us; they seemed cold and distant, almost hostile. The warblers’ songs weren’t as mellifluous as they once had been. The river tides hammered at my eardrums as if they were screams, and the bug specimens we hid in our closet became skeletons. Whenever I looked into a mirror I saw Francis’s glassy, lifeless ashen eyes boring back at my own. When I told you this, you stopped skipping stones and stared vacantly at the water, which had started to look like a chasm. None of us said anything for a while.

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Shortly after school had started again, you told me you were moving away because your parents had found better work in another city, a city far away from our quaint little neighbourhood. I thought of the summers we spent together and realized with a tinge of sadness that we hadn't adventured together in a long time.

The last time I saw you was at the mouth of the river. By then it was getting cold, and we stood together awkwardly like a pair of lone willow trees in the wind, gazing out at the cascading water. I felt strangely claustrophobic.

"Apparently there are deserts there," you told me.

"Will you come back?"

"I don't know, June," you said eventually.

Sometimes when I let my mind wander too far—when I feel that momentary pang of longing seize my heart, when I sense that too-familiar chill dance up my spine—I find myself transported back to those demure sidewalks, those rushing streams, and those arcane woods of the neighbourhood where we led our blinkered lives. Sometimes it's as if we had never lived there at all.