

The Red Summer

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“Do you think about it still?” he asks.

I look at him. He gazes at his big, shaky hands the same way he did three summers ago.

“What part?” I say in return, knowing the answer.

“All of it.”

For a moment, we're wordless: we just sit, silently, in the middle of the cafe. We don't look at each other--we're much too nervous to do so--and I listen to the sounds of life around us. In an instant, I'm transported back to Brinkley, which was endlessly noisy and always linked to the boy (*man*), in front of me.

I nod. “Sometimes, I dream it all over again.”

He sits back, and I look at him closely. His hair's no longer wavy, flowing past his ears, and although he's wearing pants, I have a suspicion that his knees aren't battered from the asphalt anymore.

It's strange looking at him. He's older, cleaner, no longer sixteen years old. Yet, he's still the Luca O'Reilly I remember; he's still submerged in his eternal nervousness; he still looks at me the same way. When he walked into this cafe--in Chicago, no less, a state away from our hometown--I recognized him. I knew him. I would know him tomorrow.

I would know him in ten years.

I will know him in death.

As we sit here, years after the last time we saw each other, I realize that he's the most beautiful person I've ever encountered. It's not just how he looks. It's not how he acts either. It's not his physicality, nor his mentality: it's the space between. The way every emotion displays on his face, unconcealable. The way his foot taps, the way it always has. The way his feelings present themselves. The way he can't hide a single thing.

We're young, but we've gone through a lifetime together. Every moment of that summer, every sleepless night, every scrape and bruise, was shared between us, shared between that group of kids in Brinkley.

For the rest of our lives, we'll be tied together by the events of 2019.

Here's what happened.

Three years ago, in early May, I moved into my grandmother's old house, pale yellow with a wraparound porch. The move was nothing crazy, only across town, and was for strictly sentimental reasons. My parents kept their same jobs; I went to the same school. By all means, it shouldn't have affected my life that much, and for the first couple of weeks, it didn't. The drive to school in the morning was a little longer, but other than that there was nothing new: no new friends, no lost friends, no traditions made, no traditions lost. I did my homework at the same table and still went out with my best friends every weekend.

The neighborhood was distinctly less suburban than the subdivision I had lived in before. In Brinkley, every house looked different. If you needed to know where someone lived, they could say, "the blue house," or, "the one with the weeping willow out front,"

and you'd have no trouble finding it. No two roofs were the same shape, no two buildings the same shade.

I loved it. I liked to sit on the front porch and look at the people walking by, trying to match up the faces to the houses.

He must live at the home with the orange mailbox.

I bet they live in the one with the barbed wire and the beaten-down shutters.

She's gorgeous. Like an angel. She has to live in the two-story house at the corner, pure white, without a scratch on the paint.

Whenever I met someone's eye, they smiled. Sometimes it was a neighborly smile, an act of simple courtesy, but sometimes it was a different type of smile: one that made me think that they used to do the exact same thing. Perhaps, on one of my morning bike rides, they'd already matched me up to the rugged yellow house.

I knew no one and no one knew me.

Part of me desired to change that, of course.

But another part of me kept me chained to the front porch because it was so, so beautiful to fall in love with strangers who I knew nothing about. It was a safe zone, a dimension in which I remained the nameless girl who watched people passing by.

One thing I adored about Brinkley was all the little sounds of life. There were birds, of course, and laughing kids on bikes--we had those in my old neighborhood, too--but in Brinkley there were also the sounds of trains far off in the distance and downtown traffic. With all that noise, it was hard to ever feel lonely. I felt solitude, sure, but it was never accompanied by emptiness. Being alone in Brinkley made me feel tiny,

but in a way that made me take in the enormity of the community, of the city, of the earth.

There was something about the people, how they looked, how they acted, that continually left me awed. Every morning in Brinkley there was a mass exodus. Nurses left their homes, often in groups of two or three, and walked to work at dawn, wearing their scrubs like armor. Men walked to their offices, less than a mile away, with their heads held high.

They never looked like they were marching to their deaths. In fact, it was quite the opposite. They looked as if they were being liberated, freed, going to exactly the place they wanted to go. There were no dragging feet or sagging shoulders. I remember thinking:

Man, there must be something in the water.

In hindsight, I don't think it was the water, or the air, or even the atmosphere. It wasn't the wildflowers or colorful houses. It was hope — an undying kind. It was faith. It was gratitude, the type that didn't only manifest itself when things were good, but also when things were scary, uncertain.

They didn't wear themselves out looking for answers. When things happened, when the roofs caved in, they didn't spend much time wondering, *Why me?*

Why now?

Instead, they accepted their inconveniences like unwanted surprise parties, like rain on a sunny day, like bizarre gifts. They took a minute. They held their breath.

And then they moved on.

There didn't seem to be any afterthoughts. No shock waves, no withdrawals. No searching for closure, no restless nights. *That's* what enticed me so much, above everything else: their acceptance.

I often found myself perpetually locked into every stage of grief except the last. I refused to believe facts; I beat myself up; I argued with myself; I felt profound loss. I longed and yearned. I begged and cried. I could never seem to cross the line from lamenting to rejoicing.

So, I watched and waited. I watched these strange creatures with dark circles and smiles, not understanding how they did it, how they just lived and didn't mourn over things that hadn't even happened yet. I waited for the moment when I would become one of them, someone accustomed to the natural fluctuation of life.

The thing is, that wouldn't happen in a moment. It wouldn't happen in days, or weeks, or months. It took place over years. Certainly, it began that summer--the summer of 2019, a summer of blistering heat and storms that turned the sky unnatural hues--but it didn't end when the leaves changed color. The transformation carried on past junior year, past graduation.

When I met Luca O'Reilly, he wasn't alone. He appeared into my life the same way he always would: at the heels of Markus Young, never able to catch up (even though Markus was much smaller). They were accompanied by Malcolm Hudson, a stoic and likable young man who played every sport and argued with no one, and his girlfriend, Ivy Shadid. The four of them came as a set, a set that I would soon become a part of.

The image of them walking down the street, their bodies casting lanky, twisted shadows, scarcely leaves my mind. They seemed to trip over their own feet, get tangled in their own gestures. They were a mess, but an intentional one--like a Rorschach test, or spilt milk--deliberate, irreversible.

I remember their conversations reminded me of Muhammad Ali, their words floating like butterflies and stinging like bees. Quickly, I became lost in the art of their discussion, lost in their obscure topics, lost in the rhythm of the boys' tapping feet. They were masterpieces, buzzing pieces of machinery in the middle of a West Michigan neighborhood. I found myself fascinated with the way they interacted with each other in a way that was so intelligent but so unmistakably adolescent. There was something about them--perhaps the way they moved like a singular, writhing organism, or the way the tone of their voices made music, or the way they seemed to hold their youth in the palms of their hands--that made my chest ache.

Immediately, I grew an affinity for Markus. I marveled at his nerve: he was unafraid, and beautiful, too. On many nights, he skated down the street with big, old headphones on, his long dreads catching the wind behind him. He carried summer on his back.

He was my best friend. I was his. We loved each other greatly, in a bold, unafraid way. We would never be more than friends, and that gave us peace.

That's why Luca terrified me. I knew, somewhere inside of myself, that if I let myself go, I would fall for him. I would love him more than Markus, and maybe even myself. He took the fall for everyone, for everything. He was like an angel to us.

On nights where the shadows carved his face out like Michelangelo, I had to force myself to look away. When he held me in his arms as I cried, I had to try not to think about it afterwards. I ignored the gap in his teeth, his green eyes, his jittering hands.

If I didn't, I felt that I would never recover.

I felt that I didn't deserve him.

So, I never told him. I never did a thing. I knew how he felt about me, but I didn't tell him how I felt about him. There were many nights where I *almost* did. There were times that I looked at him through the trees, through the mist, and I wanted to scream to him:

How do you make the sun follow you around?

But I was too scared.

Instead, I remained silent on the matter. I spent every day with those kids. We swam in the moonlight, drove to the beach and back day by day by waking day. We ate orange creamsicles on Luca's front porch. We were kids.

We were so happy.

It happened in August.

We were driving home from the beach, a little past three in the morning, and my head was laid against the window. The car was noisy and full of life, and silently, I wondered how they did it: how they were so awake, how they could chatter and laugh so late into the night, how they could talk and talk without needing a break. I didn't understand them.

Yet, I loved them. I loved them more than I knew how to, and I felt a happiness so strong that it could only manifest itself as pain. I ached, with gratitude and bittersweetness and everything in between.

It had been a few months since I met them. Still, I fell in love with the world every time we were together. It was so rare.

I had the sudden urge to burst into tears.

I knew that I didn't deserve it. I knew that none of us did. It was a gift, one that I couldn't even begin to fathom.

I looked up, overcome by the beauty of it all. There was not a star in the sky.

To this day, I'm not entirely sure what happened. Maybe Markus began to fall asleep. Maybe he saw an animal on the side of the road. Maybe he just lost control.

Regardless, a few hours later, Malcolm Hudson was pronounced dead.

The death of Malcolm shook Brinkley.

When he passed away, summer stopped. Some would even say that it died.

Brinkley looked different after it happened. The mass exodus wasn't the same. Markus, Ivy, Luca and I tried to cling to one another to cope, but eventually we isolated ourselves.

On the night of his memorial, the neighborhood walked through the woods to the creek, candles in hand. We laid the candles along the clear water, set off lanterns. Ivy gave a beautiful speech. Luca held his sister's hand tightly. I stood alone.

Markus didn't come.

The neighborhood didn't blame him for Malcolm's death. I didn't. Luca didn't. Ivy didn't. Malcolm's parents didn't.

However, Markus was not the same. He was no longer bold, but struck by grief and guilt--he was the driver.

I begged him to come.

He said he would go after, when everyone had left.

So he did.

One person *did* blame him for Malcolm's death.

Beck Hudson, Malcolm's half-brother.

That night, the clear river became red.

A warzone.

It was something that seemed too ancient to have happened just years ago, too perverse to have happened in the twenty-first century, something too dehumanizing to have happened right there in Brinkley.

As I sit here, in this Chicago cafe, the images knock on my subconscious.

I let them in.

This is what I see:

I see Markus beaten near death. I see secrets buried underneath rubble, dying sunflowers underneath scarlet-covered dirt. I see untied shoelaces lying stained on the front porch, I see size nine shoes tracking mud onto wood floors, I see signs of a blood sacrifice, archaic and perplexing, sitting out in the open, unnoticed.

I know if God can weep, then he wept that night.

And if the stars have eyes, they looked away.

For once, thinking of another world doesn't comfort me.

Because even if there's an alternate universe in which Markus stayed home that night, there's another universe in which his body sank to the bottom of the river, and never rose again.

I can't stop thinking.

I can't stop thinking.

I can't stop thinking.

About the hypothetical death of Markus, about what would happen if he truly did die, if he got too beaten up to get back on his feet and stumble home under the streetlights.

That night, the human touch touched Markus in the very worst way.

I still wonder if he feels stinging on his skin at night, if there's scars on his shoulder blades.

Markus limped after that. His feet dragged. They pulled his slouchy body like it was an obligation. His hands twitched, too, and his eyes flickered. His head jerked. His muscles spasmed.

I wonder if, on that night, his nerves rearranged and unarranged themselves themselves in a desperate attempt to stop him from feeling. Maybe he can't feel pain now. Or maybe he feels it more than the rest of us. Maybe his limbs feel like static. Maybe his body is glitching.

I'm in pain trying to grieve over something that I didn't experience.

I know it's a waste to think about this over and over and over again, to believe there's something that I can do to prevent something that already happened.

The only thing I can do is hope.

Hope unrealistically.

Hope that, a hundred years ago, a priest came by and blessed that stream.

Hope that, in the struggle, Beck dipped his arms into the water and all his sins washed away.

Hope that Markus baptized himself in his fighting, somehow saved himself from the evil that lived just a street down from him.

Between the death of Malcolm and the attack on Markus, it was too much.

We all drifted apart, made new friends. But it was never the same. I never again felt the comfort that I felt with the kids from Brinkley. Yet, I know—even now—that we needed that distance. We couldn't grieve forever. It was self-preservation. It was an attempt at healing.

I thought of them often, though. I missed sitting in Markus' basement, talking about everything and nothing. I missed Ivy stroking my hair and borrowing my clothes. But worst of all, I missed Malcolm.

The first time I dreamt of him after he died I woke up in abject terror; after all, I was experiencing his death a second time. It was as if I had woken up after rewatching my entire life, and not only my life, but the lives of everyone I knew. To see Mac in color, twitching and laughing and moving in ways that I never noted when he was alive—isn't that strange, how many mannerisms go unnoticed to us every day, all the time?--was

surreal and paralyzing. I stumbled around the entire day, groaning and mumbling, losing my mind between book pages and saying to myself, over and over, *he was just here, he was just right here.*

And he was.

I look at the Luca O'Reilly in front of me right now, older, changed.

He is truly the most beautiful person.

I know that my grandmother feels that way about my grandfather, too. I know that Malcolm felt that same way about Ivy, that husbands feel the same way about their wives. We all think that someone is the most beautiful. Yet, not a single one of us is wrong.

That's the thing about beauty. It's not contained in one space. It's not one thing. It's not one person. It's everything, everywhere, and it doesn't follow the rules. With beauty, there are no boundaries, no lines to draw.

We can never understand it, but luckily for us, we don't have to.

There is no time to waste.

"Luca?" I say.

"Yeah?"

"I have to tell you something."

THE END