

Seasons
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I. July, Little Rock, 1983

There are things no one tells you about the summer.

When you are ten years old, finally grown-up enough to stay home without a babysitter, and you have spent the morning pressing your tape recorder to the TV to capture your favorite theme songs, no one tells you that you are not wasting your day.

No one tells you that a summer day, in June, in 1983, cannot be wasted.

Jeff, who is your younger brother, begins repeating, “Shhh, be quiet, Jeff! Jeff, I said be quiet!” during the opening credits of *Welcome Back, Kotter*, and you yell at him for ruining the recording. No one tells you if your dreams are your ticket out, and years later, when you replay the tape, you will be astonished by your voice and its pipsqueak venom.

It is nearly one o’clock by the time Scott Hayden, your best friend, arrives at your back door. He has already eaten lunch, and so have you, as well as your post-lunch snack. Jeff is upstairs pedaling your mom’s antique sewing machine, whose wheel you can hear thrumming like a train through the floor, and you and Scott seize the chance to sneak outside without him. The air is so damp and sticky that everything you say seems to emerge in its own heavy syrup, like sap from a tree, each sentence falling splat against the pavement. As a rule, the weather in Little Rock has this effect on people until mid-September, when the first cool rains arrive and all the old conversations dissolve and wash away.

You walk to Star Systems, the video arcade, which is two blocks from Sturbridge, the apartment complex where you both live. Scott keeps threatening to moon the cars on Rodney Parham, and he might actually do it. He is crazy, hilarious, in the best and most exasperating way, so electric-wiry and fickle that every hour you spend with him becomes a beautiful needless adventure. He likes to embarrass you at the drugstore by drooling onto the floor or by pretending, loudly, that he has caught you stealing candy. Once, as a prank, he douses his shoes in insect repellent, sets them alight, and strolls through the self-service bay of an Exxon station. No one tells you what will happen to him one day.

The token machine at Star Systems is out of order, which means that you have to exchange your money at the counter. You have seventy-five cents, which you are carrying in

your shoe because your shorts have no pockets. Slowly you peel the coins from the sole of your foot, handing them one by one to the girl at the counter, who wrinkles her nose and pinches them between her fingernails. No one tells you what she might be thinking. Your favorite game is Q*Bert, because of the little orange hero with the flat feet and the gun-barrel nose, but you have never mastered the game's peculiar slanting style of play, and before you know it, your lives have drained away—every one of them. You watch Scott steer through the Pole Position course, the same billboards and white clouds drifting by again and again until he crashes for the last time, and then you return to his apartment, where the two of you drink Shastas and eat Fruit Roll-Ups.

“Do you want to see something cool?” he asks, and shows you the big bag of fireworks his dad has bought for the Fourth of July: bottle rockets, firecrackers, even a handful of M-80s—illegal, but there they are anyway. “Dad keeps the lighter with him in the car,” Scott says. “At all times. But that won't be a problem if you'll help me out, man.” You follow him to Bruno's Little Italy, which is separated from the apartments by a pair of parking lots, their tar baked gray by the heat. Scott spins a story about his missing dog for the restaurant's hostess—half-Irish Setter and half-Golden Retriever, a puppy, in fact, a puppy named Patsy, Patsy O'Malley, who went running this way not three minutes ago, has anyone seen her, oh where could she possibly be—while you snatch a couple of matchbooks from the basket in the foyer. Then together you head for the creek.

You take turns firing bottle rockets into the water, watching the white bubbles that wobble to the surface and belch their smoke into the air. No one tells you how many fish you might be killing. The M-80s are powerful, but when you bury them in the clay of the creek bed, they explode only down to the waist, creating smooth open moon craters with red cardboard cylinders in the center. The firecrackers, on the other hand, burst with a satisfying spray of yellow muck, leaving behind a maze of smoking caverns, and it is easy to imagine a smaller version of yourself exploring them.

Scott leads you back to the courtyard. On a dare, you shoot a few bottle rockets onto the tall, sloping roof of the apartment where Rodney lives—Rodney, who is sixteen, drinks beer, and rides a motorcycle; Rodney, who on Friday and Saturday nights escorts his girlfriends into the woods behind the apartment complex, where he has stashed a shabby mattress that you and Scott keep booby-trapping with pine cones. The bottle rockets go zinging up the roof's ramp of

shingles, detonating at the ridgeline or in midair. You manage to fire off half a dozen before Rodney comes bounding outside to chase you. He is not wearing his shoes, and by climbing through the pile of rocks behind the dumpster, the two of you are easily able to escape him. From a distance, you taunt him, and he curses back at you with words that are worse than any you have ever heard, a *mother* without the *f*, a *god* without the *d*, using two- and three-syllable substitutions that glint with a strange dirty mystery. No one tells you what will happen to Rodney one day, either.

The rest of the afternoon you spend riding your bikes and unearthing balls from the scrub behind the tennis courts and dissecting the pods you find growing on a plant by the mailboxes, peeling the rinds from around the moist brain-like nuts and smelling the tang they leave on your skin. It is past rush hour by the time you return home. Scott's dad is angry with him for stealing the family's fireworks, and your mom is angry with you for leaving your brother unsupervised. There they stand, together in the courtyard, saying, "You're in trouble, Mister. The both of you. Big, big trouble," but it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter at all, because this is not their summer, it is yours, it belongs to you, it will never belong to you so completely again, which is something else no one ever tells you about the summer.

II. Three and a Half Snows

1.

I was four years old before I saw my first snowfall. It happened just after my family moved from Coral Springs, Florida, to Little Rock, Arkansas. I woke one morning to an unusual vacancy of sound. The silence seemed to swell against itself like the silence inside a tunnel, and immediately I knew that something was different. My bedroom was partially submerged below the front yard, the high window level with the grass. I poured myself a bowl of cereal, pulled a chair up to the wall, and stood looking out at the transformed neighborhood: at the still white river of the street, the smoothly flowing hills where the rocks used to be, the oak trees etched down to the smallest twig. It all had the quality of a secret.

2.

Some five years later, during the largest snowfall of my childhood, I was playing in the field alongside my house when a camera operator came trudging through the banks. “Hey, kid! Do something interesting!” he shouted. I was not a coordinated person—whenever I threw a Frisbee, it would peel off to the side, rolling away from me like a hubcap—but I packed a snowball, cocked my arm, and hit the lens of his camera from a distance of forty feet. I was afraid I had broken something and ran away. That night, my mom called me into the living room to show me the teaser that kept playing on the local news. For a long time after, every time it snowed in Little Rock, I would see myself on television, making the one and only miracle throw of my life.

3.

Once, when I was in the fifth grade, it began to snow so hard and unexpectedly that the second half of the school day was cancelled. Our parents were called to pick us up. The classroom slowly emptied out as we watched the air beyond the window swirl in a lazy net. Eventually only two of us were left—me and Stacey Bell, a girl I had been in love with for five years and would remain in love with for another four, until I transferred to a different high school. Our teacher locked the room and took us to the foyer. The air was so cold I could see my breath mingling with Stacey’s against the broad glass doors. It was a moment of dreamlike intimacy. There seemed the possibility, however remote, that she would kiss me. The world was a marvelous place.

½.

Though my life has sometimes carried me away from Little Rock, I have always returned. I know the city well. The seasons here have taken on a different texture recently, the winters becoming more temperate and the summers becoming less. Most years offer no more than a day or two of freezing weather, with just enough snowfall for me to press my footprints into the pavement for a few seconds before they turn to water. Sometimes, in the momentary dusting that

comes down on a February afternoon, I remember the way my street looked through the high window of my bedroom when everything was cocooned in white. It hasn't snowed like that here in years.

III. Last Words

My grandfather said, "Okay, I'm ready to go home."

He said, "Can you work the lock? I can't reach it from the inside."

He said, "How does something like this happen? Why won't the damn thing open?"

The night before, he had climbed over the side rail of his bed, falling and bruising his hip, and the hospital's head nurse had instructed that a protective net be fastened to the frame to prevent him from doing so again. The net was suspended over the bed on four posts, shoeboxing him inside. He was ninety-eight. His heart was failing. The doctor had made it plain to us that any word he uttered could be his last. Maybe that was why every sentence he spoke seemed to cap itself off as I listened, passing over into an enigmatic final pronouncement.

He said, "I never imagined I would end up trapped in here."

He said, "If only someone had told me when I was a child..."

He said, "This is completely ridiculous."

My mother had taken her cell phone into the hall to check her messages, and for the moment I was alone with him. I didn't know what to say. The net around his bed was zipped shut, but it would have been a simple thing for me to open it. If I did, though, I knew he would begin asking for his shoes again, trying to sit up and insisting that I drive him home. And perhaps that would be the right thing to do, I thought, to drive him home, but the decision had not been left to me.

In 1997, a few months apart and at the urging of my mother, we had both moved to Little Rock, Arkansas. I was returning from graduate school, hoping to figure out a way to meet the rest of my life, and he was relocating from his apartment in Miami, hoping, I imagined, for the same. We all believed he would live for another year or two, but instead he lasted for nearly a decade.

At first, the impression I carried of him was left over from my childhood: he was my short, fat grandpa, as opposed to my tall, thin one. Once or twice a year he would visit from

Florida, preparing elaborate Italian dishes from scratch, playing Banker-Broker with my brother and me, and singing “Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life” as he walked through our house. Gradually, though, sitting over the dinner table or helping him pick his way through the grocery store, I came to know him better. He was born in 1907 into a home that was later demolished to make way for the World Trade Center. He left school at fourteen to become a butcher, a trade that paid well enough for him to assist his entire family through the Great Depression and still buy a new car every year. He married late and fathered two children, the first before shipping out for WWII and the second after he was discharged. His wife died of breast cancer a few years before I was born.

Shortly after he moved into the retirement center, the rare single man among a multitude of single women, he was approached several times by neighbors angling to strike up a romance with him. To them, he answered, “That phase of my life is over.” To me, he explained, “What do I want with a bunch of old bags?”

In 2001, I took him to see the movie *Malena*. He knew he was going to die soon, he said, and he wanted to brush up on his Italian so that he would be able to converse with his relatives when he saw them in Heaven. The movie had its share of sex and profanity, and I wondered if he would be offended by it, but afterward his only complaint was with the fact that the Italian spoken by the characters was not his native dialect.

Now here he was in the hospital saying, “If we could just find a way to undo the lock, Kevin, you could get me out of here.”

I said, “I’m sorry. I can’t open it for you.”

I said, “The doctors want you to stay in bed, Grandpa. I’m not supposed to let you out.”

I said, “Nobody here wants you to hurt yourself.”

For a moment he was confused. Then he was furious. In a flare of energy, he made two fists, punching the mattress on either side of his body.

He said, “I guess you’re not as good a person as I thought you were.”

Not long after, I went home to get some sleep. When I returned the next afternoon, my grandfather had taken on a surprising placidity. The net had been removed from his bed, and he lay staring at the ceiling, working his lips over his gums. Toward evening he noticed my mother standing beside him. He extended his hand. He said, “Well, I’m dying now. It was a pleasure to know you.”

Were these his last words? It depends on your perspective. He lived for another week, but by the next morning, he had already free-fallen into his past, beginning that slow dive of the mind that would carry him back through his retirement, his marriage, his youth, and his childhood to the silence of his final sleep. Though they were not the last words to leave his mouth, they were the last words spoken by the man I had come to know, or at least by the person I thought he was.