

## The Trouble with Summer

The trouble with summer is that it ends. Always does. It's something you can count on. You can count on the same old predictable disappointments, the same old way every year, you get swept up in the muggy Junes and bare foot racing Julys, the lazy stretches of porch watching August and sweet tea afternoons. You can see it coming at you like a thunderstorm, if you squint, building and glossing on the horizon. You can spot it out, in big black calendar x's and the slowly shortening days. You see, there are rules that everything is constrained by. Everything. Dinnertime, store hours, sunset. *Rules*. Even planets got to bend to gravity. Even those suns flinging around in that big old sky are locked into orbits. They just go round and round and round. Forever twirling each other in that upside down or right side up blackness. What comes up comes down and all that stuff. Summer ends every year. August turns into September and you have to slump it all out, chuck on the same old Sarkeegee high uniform, sling on that same damn backpack with the mended tear that your damn mom insists you use, and sit in the Room 301 with the Jerry and Tess and Margaret Bingsfield you've been sitting next to every damn year for 17 years. Round and round and round and round again. Planets, people, it's all the same. Rules are rules. Gravity, highschool. Sarkeegee, its all the same. I'm here, in the middle of it. *Constrained*.

But, the trouble with Summer, is that she didn't. End, that is. Not like augusts, not like sophomore year, not even like that damn Halley's comet that's coming. It might be old as hell, but even that has an end. She doesn't. Didn't. Whatever damn tense you want to use. She never

will. She'll keep being here and there and everywhere all at once because you'll never get her out of your head because you're tangled up in memory and past and present and all the rules she bent and full on smashed in her cherry red corvette because in some cases with some people the rules don't apply. Didn't. Hell. It's all sarsaparilla and heartbreak now. Then. Hell. You'll slip under and drown in her again in snatches of sideways radio, those stars she sang to, that length of road she beat you on, them statues she laughed at, your old man eyes she said, favorite colored shirt, and leather bomber jackets, cuffed pants, strawberry blonde hair, Marilyn smiles—

You see, the trouble is... well, trouble came for Summer. Or maybe she was the trouble herself. Didn't change what happened. Whichever one it was. Followed her around like a puppy, all sad eyed and wagtailed, dripping chaos and broken dishes. She's like a yacht, sleekhulled and full sailed. Made in a far away place for far away people. Splitting through the turquoise waves, cresting and raring and neither sea nor sky, trouble following in wakes. The chops and rillows and ripples come after, the yacht still, a consequence of it going anywhere, being anything, displacement. But she—its—her, hell. She's pretty as a picture, with the wind in her sails, you could paint her. She's already framed, frozen and stopped up, hung in someone's house for people to look at. You can look at it, you can see it, if you're invited, if you walk by. See the things coming and creeping up, as she's leaping up the starboard side, but you can't tell her, just as she could never look back, because she's not yours, it's not your picture, it's not your house, she's not your boat. She's a painted flat universe away, about to fall. That's the thing with troubles, and summers. There's always a *then*. Then, August turns into September. Then, it found her. Suns got to come back around every damn day. Get. Even stars bow to the *then*, then night came. *Then* reality set back in.

Hell, it's not that I'm mad at her. For getting all tangled up in my head, for twisting her strawberry blonde sunshine around my heart, for existing with such a brightness it consumed everything around it at a million degrees. No. I'm not mad at that at all. Now that I think, now that it's its over, I'm mad at the rules. The goddamn things that cause stars to fall and suns to move. Mad at all the moving pieces, black and white, pawns and queens. Mad cause I'm one of them, mad cause it's inescapable, mad at the things we give names. Gravity, trouble, endings, they're all the same. It's all moving towards a horrible grey sameness. Something that jerks the heart out of you, that bright fluttering vivid thing that once was white as snow, and mashes it into a grey sameness same as the things that exist in black holes or on the tails of comets, icy weak, slimy things. Mad at myself for being weak or human or whatever you want to call it. Because nothing was going to be the same after...after Summer. When the then started. Which is now. Now is the *Then*. Summer's sort of ending. I'm not mad, I'm not mad, I'm NOT mad. I'll just keep repeating it til its true. Inside I feel like the color blue. Just all blue. That blue that glows on the horizon edge right before the slap of night. That three minute blue that lingers and hazes. That in between hopeless caught in the thick of it blue that will never be night or day or part of anything larger. Blue that had to be caught and named and captured. Blue is spilling out of my stomach and mouth and eyes and onto everything, and I'm not even breathing anymore because I'm just full of blue.

That's the trouble with Summer.

## Me and Sarkeegee

We were just fine before she came. Well, I was just fine before she came. Sarkeegee was just fine. The whole town was just fine. Same old same old Sarkeegee: boring, predictable, safe, bound by rules. Empty as main street on a Wednesday. My life was fine. I keep saying it like a funny echo round the back of your skull. Fine, fine, as well as can be expected for me, for Townsend's boy. Chip and Beulah's boy. For the quiet one. For the chessplaying, pie-delivering, tuck your shirt on sunday good boy. It wasn't much, Sarkeegee. Wasn't a whole lot to look at, but it was home. You didn't look past main Street for anything, not even Topeka. The universe ended after Fifth and Wilshire. The only things going out were melons and the only thing comin in was money wired into the Post Office. That was on Third. Life took on linear rhythms here, and you know. Flatlining is the same as almost being dead, almost. But we aint dead yet. We're still hanging on to the last trickle of life and smattering of breath twitching through our lungs. As long as your brain doesn't think your dead, you can keep that sucker running forever probably. Mine's been kickin for 17 long years, and not a damn thing has happened that whole time. Might as well have been a zombie. We were melon producers. You say Sarkeegee melon to a grocer in New York, Chicago, DC, they would know, or well, that's what the town always said. That's what we said. Grew the best melons in all Sarasota. Hell, even the state. Big, green, pride of the picnic, serve on your best china kind of melons. Small, prickly naughty shaped ones that sliced so thin you could see the world in melon covered pink through em. Warty, smooth, wavy and clear, heavy and delicate, every damn type of melon you could think of, that you could dream of,

you'll be damn sure it poked its grimy rind through our fields. Bet you never even thought about melons before now. Most people haven't, then again, most people don't live in Sark.

Everything revolved around that, round the gourds and building. We had a melon fest, we had a melon picking contest, melon growing contest, melon eating contest, you name it, if its got to do with any sort of calabash, you can bet your city slicking ass we got it. I felt ambivalent as hell towards them and the *then*. Luckily, being Chip Townsend's boy meant I was destined for a relatively melon-free existence. My slow slog towards death would be as unrelated to melons as anyone could get in Sark, which was still pretty related. It was expected, and expectations are just another form of rules. Future rules, so I saw my life rolling out in lines, straight and vine-free as Howdie Barnes' fields. I would finish up at Sarkeegee High with a good showing, nothing too fancy, but nothing to sniff at neither, I would go to State major in something predictable and solid, like economics or pre-law, then I would come back and be Sheriff after my daddy retired. I was fine with that. Just fine. Life was twenty six hundred square acres of melon fields and two thousand of Nebraska's finest. Just fine, hear it echo round that skull. I wasn't the only one shuttered down the assembly line. Wasn't the only one being loaded onto the truck and exported. There was expectations for the rest of the kids at Sarkeegee High. Sarkeegee High was small. Tiny small. Harry Houdini small. Hundred kid highschool small. If you know what I mean. We would all trickled out, see each other at the college parties, tip our caps at graduation, then quick as the melons down the production lines, made into perfect little, market value, second-third-fourth generation Sarkeegeans, rolling around on our organically grown melon loving legs til we were laid to rest in the melon loving dirt. Buried just like a damn melon. Fertilizer for the next set of seeds to sprout two legs. Saddest part about it all being we would

love it. All of us. From the Snyders to the O'Reilleys. Cause it was a good town under all that melon lovin and smallness. It was pretty and snug, and you knew everyone and everyone sure as hell knew you. Jimmy D and May were all right. Weren't a lot to complain about, even if there was nothing to talk about neither, sides melons. Even Roger Barnes was all right, and he was the one with the expectations to become Mayor just like his daddy. I was fine with that, he was just fine. He would make a good mayor, looked the part, tanned and athletic and I think somewhere behind those baby blue peepers, he did genuinely love melons and this town.

So like I said. We, being Sarkeeggee, were just fine. In fact, summer was just getting into full swing. I had vowed, in my own quiet way, to make it the best summer ever. By that, I mean I was going to make the most of it. I was going to play chess til my hands fell off and my mind turned to Sardinski induced numbness. I sure as hell wasn't going to get sucked into the Fair this year. Not going to lend any hands. Going to be swallowed whole by my academic pursuits and leave the contests and the judging and the pie eating to the rest of the lunatics here. Just one year free from it all. I was sixteen dammit, and if I couldn't opt out now, I was going to be forty five with three kids in the Littlest Melon's Mummies before I damn well knew it. I'd done my time. I'd been a fair minded citizen. But sixteen! I didn't mind rules *then*. In fact, I absorbed em, ate em up. Rules governed everything. The right move, the right strategy, worked for chess, backgammon, hopscotch, six o clock sweet teas, finding a bench on the blacktop. Things that made sense. Winnable, predictable things. I was a chess guy anyway. Didn't mind the sitting. Didn't mind the rules. I wasn't a Roger Barnes, lean legged and blue eyed with arms made to pitch perfectly spiraling footballs for roaring crowds. I wasn't a reader neither. Books were unpredictable, open for interpretation. I wanted a yes or no, an in your face no holds barred, no

two ways about its outcome. Rules determined outcomes, seemed perfectly reasonable to me. Plus, I didn't mind winning and I usually did with Jimmy D. He didn't mind losing. I think honestly, he just liked sitting, like me. There was a heck of a lot of sitting in chess. It was hard to see if he even thought about the moves. Slingshotting his pawns around the board, I swear his eyes were closed most of the time. He was just sitting, settling into the bench by the blacktop, while the lunch crowd raged around. Well, raged is a strong word, more like, softly faded into the things we always did. May buried in a book on the top of the table, skirt pulled in round her legs. The Chandlers jump roping by the swings. I found it a bit odd, we were sophomores in high school, but hell, if it made em, happy, then they could double dutch their hearts out for all I cared. The rest of the school scattered around the tables, talking about homework and home. Snatches of conversations that would drift by as I contemplated my next move. Most of it boring, about melon harvests, or new skirts or news.

But it was all just fine, and filled with fireflies, if you know what I mean. So, when *she* came in, she really blew the lid on the whole operation. Smashed it to shambles. Best laid plans, so they say. My best laid plans included giving it to Jimmy D this fall, and I was halfway through *Strategies of Dmitri Medleev*, when I just gave in to the weather. There's something about August. You can't take it anymore. I got June figured. You are carried along in the high of flooding out the schoolyard, you've left the books and the pencils and the bells behind. Just got the ringing of third period and fourth and fifth out of your mind. You're a bit in love with it to be honest. Take with the warming night, filled with fireflies and friends, hanging out at May's house, eating leftovers on the plates. You can sneak out into the melon fields and argue about which constellation is which. But then by July, it's all going a bit pear shaped. The honeymoon's

wore off. You see how ugly the babe is. She's not Marlene Dietrich hot anymore, you realize the teeth are all horsey and the long necked but makes her look a bit peaky. Summer ain't so swan like, more ugly duckling to me. So you stop hanging out with friends, burn another quarter through Mendeleev, but even he begins to sound like a real twerp. And then you're blindsided by August. What in the hell are you going to do in August. Four weeks. Four whole melon loving weeks. You have to fill it with something. You need to realize that September is going to be beaming up round the corner. So you can't waste it, but you also can't stand it. Makes you puppy-punching mad, a real gutguzzler. So like any sane human would, you just sit there. You do the same things you've always done, because that's just what happens. What goes up...

That's when Summer breezed in. Banged it right up. Blew the lid on the whole town, right smack in the middle of melon season. In the middle of the monotony, the cicada droning, august glaring, tear your eyes out August. She came in. And to be honest, it was a bit of a relief. But I'm not honest. I don't really want to be honest. Because then you would realize how much of a two timer I was. But maybe that's what we owe her. This one thing. This tiny slice of angelfood honestly served up on my momma's china. So fine, you've got me. You've got me by the guilt ridden cojones. I'll try, but it's real hard. It's hard to separate what actually happened from what I wanted to, heartbreak puts a damper on reality. It's a real buzzkill. Hell, maybe I couldn't even see what was really going on, couldn't or wouldn't. Who knows. I know I certainly didn't.

## Another August Day

It was another August day. That much I can remember. Don't know the day exactly. That's the nice bit about summers, the days all slog into each other all satisfying, bumming up in Mondays and Tuesdays and all of the dayses. The front ends just fall off and it becomes a single simultaneous afternoon. No Monses and Tueses. No Thurses or Fri-ses. Just a succession of shade sitting and tea drinking, measured only in that asshat Mendeleev's strategy acquisitions. Whatever day it was, I had decided to middle it with the rest of the Sideliners, the group that I tended to fall into. Said group consisting of chessmate Jimmy D and May Cheng. It was funny the way everyone had separated in town the size of Sarkeegee. Twined around each other in different ways, we all grew off the same trellis, but we stretched towards different lights, different suns. It's hard to pin down exactly what made us all smack together in our threesome. It's strange to think about how people separate. We all started off in the same spot, little pugfaced preschoolers fat and toddling. Got the same education, there was only one preschooler, same cheery cheeked Mrs. Prendergast, but after the threes and the fives, people tend to grow more into themselves, the differences spring out, warping us toward different ends. Maybe it's destiny, maybe it's the nagging and the nattering, the constant repetitions of Sheriffses and Mayor, Can't wait for you to be a doctor, and listen here, you're going to need to know this somedayes. But whatever way you slice the melon, we were the sitters. Cheng, May, was the daughter of the town doctor though I think she coulda whooped us all in chess, but she never played. Just leaned back up against the chainlink behind a book. Not that I'm stereotyping, that whole Asian thing. That's just the sort of person she was. Good at everything she did when she

decided to. Scalpel sharp, like her daddy, could cut us two ways from Tuesdays with one look, calculated. But she never did, not most of the time anyhow, unless we really had it comin. She just sat and watched and sidelined, like the rest of us.

It was August and it was afternoon, that much is certain. That's what flutters in my mind like a flywing or a red balloon stuck on a wire. And there was a cherry red corvette. That is heckuva certain because it was a heckuva car. It's what came first, the thing we could make out before we could make out her. It's a car you remember. It's a car you see when you close your eyes long after it's blazed on up the road. A real jaw dropper, drool inducer. Now nobody has a cherry red corvette here. Nobody, it's Sarkeegee. This is tractor turf. Pickup country, ford driving, thick wheeled, melon dragging cargo country. So many trucks come through here, it may as well be a way station for Chevrolet. So people noticed the car. They seem to go together, girls and cars. Or maybe that's what the magazines want you to think. Car girl, girl car. Long legs, sleek sides, it's all the same in the glossy playboy pages. But here was a hell of a pairing. Better than playboy. Better than anything the Hef could dream up, slather in oil, stick on the hood of something German and mail it to me centerfold. And I think whichever one stick to you more says a heckuva lot about who you are. Was I a car guy, the cherry red, silver fendered, 80mph man, or a the girl guy?

What a car it was, heckuva car. I'm not even a car guy, sideliner, chess guy, not much of a starer, but yowza. It's a car you remember. And it was cruising up at a furious pace, ripping up dust on the main street, and the gleam was really something. It was shiny that one, spotless, almost too bright to look at, reflecting that Sarkeegee sun too hard into our peepers you couldn't make out dust or car because you had to blink away the surprise and confusion. It was really

more of a meteor, bulleting down the road, splitting the time and distance from here to there in a scream of horsepower. Slapping the air with its heady rumble and gravel spitting enthusiasm. Suddenly the melon fields weren't melon fields, they were the Monaco strip, it was a pitcher straight outta a Lee Harris film. You could just feel it in your bones that this was a beginning, the prologue begins, might of well had some symphony secreted away behind the five and dime playing a concerto in D banging up to the crescendo. So it ripped to a stop, right in front of us. It passed the Town Sign, which I swear on my momma's angelfood cake blew straight up and over its hinges, the inlaid Sarkeeggee busting up and over, the poles hippin and hopping like a goddamn bunny rabbit, and us, the captive audience, mainly being a few of the sideliners and Charlotte Mickleson's deranged cat Snarfles who just wandered round with a half crazed look on his calico face, sprawled out on the steps of city hall, us waiting for it all to happen.

The dust cleared, the clouds evaporating like a Hollywood set, one long, impossibly long leg stepping out. It went for miles, it could have gone round to Sarasota and back and my jaw still wouldn't have hit the floor, and then she spoke. Barbarella and Marilyn and Hepburn all wrapped into one impossible queen. There were two people in the car. Both strikingly gorgeous, hammer striking your head open while your brains blatter on the ground gorgeous. Even May was staring unabashedly, *Adventures of Marissa Cline* left open on her lap. At the two of them, one young, one old, one dark, one golden as the summer sun itself.

And then there was her. And then. Oh boy, *and then*. It's funny thinking about the first time you see things. All of a sudden there is a moment when they fill you up, that split second in between when your eyes register it, and you big old brainbox say, hello what have we here. That lag in which everything changes, transduces like a damn radio, slows like a couple twirling on

Jack Paar all gloopy and globby. Because after it happens, it's like you can't even remember what life was like before it came. Instantaneously rewriting history in your head. Like nothing existed before that split second, such a vivid truth that everything else before it didn't exist at all.

And then she spoke. "Say, anyone know how to get to the Hautter place?"

I like to think of my summer as split into two very distinct periods, before Summer and after. The *then* was just hanging around in the air, waiting to be realized, persistent as a cloud of midges. What was the then going to be, I swear I could make it anything. Here was my chance, she didn't know I was Chip Townsend's boy, yet. She didn't know I was a sideliners, probably hadn't seen my chess set slung around my shoulders. I could be anyone, hell for her, I would be anyone. I may play chess, but I do have a pair of eyes which were staring, like a damn cow off at the Ritcher's place. I knew I had to say something, I cleared my throat, feeling the manly rumble building up. Here it came, I would firmly direct, I would assertively state. But the world betrayed me, my body still caught up in Summer shock, couldn't respond. It was probably still processing the overwhelming shout of her existence, and oh my god, was she wearing perfume? It was jasmynes and California and sunsets...and "Hello?" She lowered her movie star stunners and gave me a look, gave me, then big eyed, silent starrer, that was me. So I summoned it all up, gave it the old 110 percent, but all that came out was a mousy little squeak, no words, but a titchy wiggly sound that fell out of my big mouth and landed on the floor at her perfect feet. Not even pretending to be words. Nothing. A squeak. That was all I had in me. Typical.

She threw back her head and laughed long and laughed loud. She laughed like everyone was watching, which they were, Sarkeegee had been shot through the heart, all of us. Every last one in that town square was riveted. The bench sitters and shoppers alike, the councilmen sitting

inside city hall peeking through the window, the bank tellers folding up the blinds and co-op worker holding the broom stopped mid sweep on the porch, the men unloading trucks full of melons one slowly dropping from a loaded box, the strollers turning through the park in the summer heat turning their fedora heads, everyone glued to the goddess. How could you not, with that strawberry splendor? Drawn like moths. To that long laugh, long legs in that heckuva a car. The other resident of the car hadn't moved, dark and somber above the cream leather, a grieving empress, statue-still all in a black sheath dress, elegant city lines hugging intoxicatingly thin silhouettes, a slender hand resting on the red of the car in driving gloves of matching cream with a single monogram delicately embroidered round the wrist. It was all too much for the town, for the afternoon. Sticking in the arteries, bout to burst us into an early grave. There was only one thing to do, and that's just what we tried to do, ignore it. If you wait long enough, and try hard enough, you can ignore almost anything. This was a tried and true Sarkeegee mechanism. We'd ignored two world wars, a civil rights movement, and women's liberation, just stuck our heads into this red dirt and bundled ourselves up in our prize winning melons and sheer ornerness. But some things can't be ignored, just like after staring at the sun, you get those fading after images on the back of lids when you squinch em up. Long after it was gone, there was still a corvette shaped hole in the afternoon, and we all knew where they were now, up at Hautter place. The only question was, why?