

## Heat Wave

I never liked swimming. Kicking and stroking exhausted me and I couldn't get the hang of lifting my head to inhale. When I was a kid, I spent swim lessons clinging to the pool-side until the instructor blew her whistle, telling me to let go or get out of the water. Though I hated swimming, water was the only option for the heat suffocating us the summer I turned fifteen. Every morning we woke to a haze intensifying as the day wore on, overwhelming us with a rotting stench, emanating from trash stored on the driveway separating our narrow house from the neighbors' in Queens. If I wasn't hanging out at the park pool, I was lying on my bed with the fan blowing hot air on my face. I babysat a few times a week, which wasn't so bad since the Murphy's home was air-conditioned and their baby slept the entire afternoon. This miasma lasted through August and then in September, evaporated, taking with it my childhood.

My dad had lost his job in April, yet every day he dressed in his one expensive suit and rode the train to the city searching for sales jobs. My father could sell eggs to a chicken. For years he sold insurance, buying policies for himself and convincing family members they were reckless if they didn't insure their washing machines. He was believable when he looked into your eyes, nodded sympathetically at your misfortune, and closed with a convincing solution – buy what he had to sell. Life insurance was righteous, mattresses improved health, and scatter rugs brightened the drabest homes. He resembled *Teddy Ruxpin*, the smart Teddy Bear I longed to own. Like *Teddy*, he told elaborate stories, made friends with everyone and didn't believe in discipline. Money came and went with equal capriciousness, spent impulsively on stuff - a video camera, record albums, a new toaster, but by mid-summer, his unemployment was wearing us down more than the heat.

My parents met at college where she studied Nursing and he was an English major. He was attracted to her practical attitude and nursing uniform and wooed her with his wry sense of humor and apt quotes from Salinger and Vonnegut. After sophomore year she became pregnant and within a month, they married. Though she talked about finishing her degree, my mother couldn't see spending money on classes when there was barely enough to pay bills. Besides, my father disparaged the unappreciated job of nurses who make a living cleaning up blood and vomit. Couldn't she see she was better than that? While he meticulously knotted his tie for meetings with New York connections, my mom walked twelve blocks to answer phones in a cramped accounting office where she worked part-time. In the evenings, she perused recipes

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searching innovative ways to prepare cheap food. Rolling cold cuts into cute arrangements on a platter adorned with tomato slices did little to diminish the unappetizing flavor of the slimy meat she served that summer.

One humid July evening Dad burst through the door singing *My Way*, toting *Asti Spumante* in one hand and his briefcase in the other. My mother rushed from the bedroom where she was ironing, heat and humidity causing her hair to form a halo of burnished frizz, as if she just received electric shock treatment. “Well, you’re in a good mood,” she accused. He dropped his briefcase and grabbed Mom around the waist, landing a hard, wet kiss before she pushed him away. “I got it – I got the job. Meyers hired me to be the new sales manager at Country Quilts, starting Monday.”

“Thank God, thank God,” my mother sighed while reaching to get glasses for the cheap champagne. Dad popped the cork and with foam pouring onto the linoleum floor, he filled glasses for all of us, even my eleven-year-old brother. Relief and sweat glazed his face as he toasted to his new job and a new beginning selling bedspreads and bath towels.

He went wild with his first paycheck, surprising my brother with a skateboard, a guitar for me, and for my mother, a necklace from which dangled a small, gold heart. I was stunned to receive a new Yamaha, gleaming from flawlessly varnished blonde wood. I knew it didn’t make sense. Though I desperately longed for lessons, listened tirelessly to Jewel and knew every word to *You Were Meant For Me*, I didn’t expect a new guitar.

“Nonsense,” he scoffed. “How can you learn to play on a crappy instrument that sounds like hell? You need a solid guitar, worthy of practice.”

My brother grabbed his *Baker Board* and headed for the driveway. I looked at my mother. She stood at the kitchen table staring at her gift delicately arranged within a black velvet box. Her head slowly swayed side to side and when she finally turned to him, her lips formed a tight smile. “Why?” He shrugged and left the room - the sad, disappointed Teddy Bear.

The next day she returned the necklace while Stevie and I coasted down the driveway. A week later, we were practicing wheelies, gliding into the street, when Stevie lost control. Screeching tires brought my mother instantly to the sidewalk where Stevie’s blood formed

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crimson splatters. Fear, masquerading as anger, gave her strength to lift him off the pavement and squeeze his shoulders until he couldn't hold back tears.

"Jesus Christ, what were you doing?"

"It's okay Mom," he said. "I'm okay."

"Mom, it's alright, Stevie just didn't see the car coming."

"Just didn't see the car? Just didn't see what could have killed him?"

"It's okay Mom," I said, "It's okay now, He's fine, just a little scraped up."

"You, shut up. I'm not asking you what you think."

She grabbed his board and hurled it into the trash. That night when he thought my parents were asleep, I heard Stevie unlatch the back door and rescue the board. He hid it under his bed behind old stuffed animals and street skated when my mother wasn't home.

In August, Dad announced he had made reservations at a cottage community upstate. *Beech Hill Camp* was advertised in the window of a realtor's office he passed on his way to work and one afternoon, he walked in and on the spot had the realtor call and reserve a cottage for us. This was his dream vacation - a remembrance of youthful summers camping in the Northern Woods. My mother tore into him about the money and what Meyers would think of him taking a week off when he's new to the job. He assured her the place was an inexpensive lakeside bungalow, and everyone takes off in August - furthermore Meyers encouraged him, suggesting the camp owner might be in the market for new bedspreads.

It was before sunrise when my mother entered my muggy room and dragged me out of bed to our station wagon stuffed with duffle bags and fishing rods balanced on top of a new outboard motor my father insisted on buying for the occasion. I wondered why, if we were bothering to go away, couldn't we go someplace with air-conditioning, a large swimming pool surrounded by pretty deck chairs, teenagers and fancy restaurant meals. I didn't know who to blame for this mess - my father for fantasizing he was still a Boy Scout or my frugal mother for squelching a good time. Now I was sentenced to a week in a damp cottage squeezed between other bungalows with dingy windows and splintered wooden porches instead of window shopping in The Hamptons like celebrities I read about. Stevie curled up in the back seat with his

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pillow and blanket. I pouted with my guitar resting across my knees. My father backed the car off the driveway and we started our five hour drive while my mother chain smoked in the front, and I brushed ashes off the surface of my precious guitar.

We were grimy, our shorts stuck to the vinyl seats, when my father turned onto the dirt road at the faded sign, *Beech Hill Camp*. Before the car came to a complete stop, Stevie bolted for the lake, “I’m just looking at the lake. I’ll be back in a second.”

My mother called after him, “Come back here young man and help us unpack!”

“Let him go, Diane.”

“Fine, then *you* haul the duffle bag.”

My father watched Stevie dash towards the lake, recalling his love for the swampy pond smell, bass lingering under lilies and crayfish uncovered when stones are turned. I looked forward to the gritty beach where I planned to spread my towel and work on a tan while listening to music and feeling jealous about the fun my friends were having back in the city while I was stuck in the middle of nowhere.

The week passed quickly. My mother took walks with the other women, picking blueberries along the dirt road. Dads arose before us to trout fish and fry his catch for breakfast to eat with Mom’s blueberry muffins. At night, they visited couples and we could hear my father entertaining everyone with fantastical stories beginning with, “I knew this guy who” and ending with some variation of how he saved the guy from peril. While the grown-ups were drinking, Stevie and I played flashlight tag with kids whose parents also brought them to the wilderness to escape city heat. There was one boy, Robbie, I almost kissed but the moment ended with the glare of a flashlight discovering us behind some beech trees. Most afternoons I languished in the warm mountain sun, practicing C, G and D chords and dreading the end of summer.

It was a Sunday afternoon, a few hours before loading the car when my father asked me to join him and my brother on the boat. I didn’t want to go. I was hoping Robbie would find me and get a look at my bikini before we left. “You want to go fishing with Stevie and me?” I searched to see what part of his brain had fallen from his skull.

“Why would I want to go fishing? I hate that stupid lake. It smells like dead fish.”

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“Come on, you never go fishing with me and Daddy.” My brother whined, “Come on, just this once.”

“I said I want to stay here.”

“You just want to look at your dumb magazines.”

He was right. Once, I would've been happy to go along, even if Stevie was part of the package. But at fifteen, I was occupied with my hair and boys. Stevie looked hurt, but that was his fault. Did he really think I would go in that rickety boat, sit on a scalding seat and stare into the pond waiting for some unfortunate fish to finally grab hold of the bait?

I remember walking down to the dock with them and sitting on a towel, my back propped up with life jackets and the guitar held firmly on my lap. The warm sound echoed across the lake as I tried strumming *Sounds of Silence*. My father and brother settled into the boat with the tackle box at Stevie's feet, and a six pack under Dad's seat. Dad steadied the outboard with his left hand and yanked the cord with his right until the motor choked into action and the boat trolled towards the opposite shore, leaving quiet ripples in its wake. After half an hour my fingers tired and I lay back, hoping Robbie would appear from the shadows as the afternoon sun filtered through the pines. I opened *Seventeen* and became engrossed in an article about making eyes look sultry. A few paragraphs into learning the secrets of eyeliner, I looked up to see my mother silhouetted by the late day sun. She announced it was time to start packing and I should gather my stuff. I nodded and returned to the article as she walked uphill to the cottage.

It wasn't long before I heard tires on the gravel road. I turned to see a police cruiser and wondered if one of our crazy neighbors had gotten drunk and drove into a tree. Car doors opened and two state troopers wearing gray uniforms and bucket shaped hats solemnly approached me. I was confused when they asked if I knew where they could find Mrs. Simon. “Mrs. Simon is my mother,” I pointed to our cottage. “She's inside packing. We'll be leaving here as soon as my Dad and brother get back from fishing.” They didn't respond, but turned, leaving me to stare at their backs as they stepped onto the front porch and knocked on the screen door.

My mother appeared with a dish towel slung over her shoulder. I listened, but couldn't make out their words. I stood to join them and stopped when my mother released a high pitched wail, like a wounded animal, followed by gasping noises and shrill sobs. She bent forward, and I thought she was about to be sick on the porch. Then, she crumpled onto the wooden planks. Her

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face was buried in her hands and her cries muffled as the troopers watched helplessly. From the corner of my eye I saw him slumped in the back seat of the cruiser, a blue striped towel wrapped around a shivering body. I moved towards him as if I was swimming and forgetting to inhale.

“What’s going on Stevie, where’s Daddy?” He sat limp, silent. I leaned over the half-opened car window and shouted, “What’s happening, what’s the matter? Stevie, answer me, now!” I heard a tiny voice - barely audible.

“I think Daddy’s dead...”

I don’t remember the ride home or unpacking. Memories of the funeral are fragmented intersecting with vague images of being hugged by distant relatives and the house filling with platters of food and the nauseating scent of lilies

Weeks later, details unfolded - something about a fish on the line and my father standing with a net ready to scoop it from the murky lake water. There was the part about the passing motorboat causing a powerful wake, and my father, who, like me had never learned to swim, lost his balance, toppled into the water, and panicked. And, of course, there were the beers. People on the shore witnessed my eleven-year-old brother dive in a fruitless attempt to save Dad who weighed over two hundred pounds. A rescue boat arrived almost immediately, but it was too late. My father had drowned and had nearly taken my brother with him.

When the days ended, I listened for him to come home, to come crashing through the door with some story about a guy he met who was making a fortune and how he and my dad were going into business together. The guitar leaned against my bedroom wall, inviting me to play, but I couldn’t bear to touch it. I saw him wander the hallway, I heard his voice whisper to my mother in their bedroom, and I heard his heavy steps on the stairs when I was alone on the living room couch. When I went places and saw a guy with gently graying hair, I was certain it was my dad, until he turned, and well, it wasn’t him. My father was everywhere and he was nowhere.

My mother also disappeared, spending hours alone in her room - sleeping or studying old photographs working to unravel the mystery of her fifteen year marriage. Her pale eyes were empty and her skin waxen. Conversations were reduced to one or two word responses, *Fine*,

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*Please, Okay, Not now, Later.* She rarely noticed Stevie and I were still there, living in the same house with her. One afternoon, I overheard her speaking on the phone to her sister. *What was he thinking? Why, Why? How could he be so foolish?* My father, the big foolish Teddy Bear who believed he was magical, was responsible for everything lost from our lives.

Sometimes at night I crept softly into Stevie's room to sit on the end of his bed and listen to him breathe. He lay flat on his back, staring at the ceiling as quiet tears trickled from his eyes, leaving salty trails where they dried. I wanted to make the pain go away, but I didn't know how. I told him over and over I was sorry, so very, very sorry that I hadn't gone fishing with him and Dad, but there was nothing we could have done, even together, to save our father from drowning. How could we save a man twice our size who plunged head first into the water?

When school started, my grandmother came for a few weeks and insisted my mother get help. Even so, it was almost a year before my mom showed an interest in me or Stevie. At first, she focused exclusively on our safety, insisting we call the moment we arrived anywhere, even after riding bikes five minutes to a friend's house. But in the weeks, months and years to follow my mother softened and demonstrated love that had for years been stifled under the tension of trying to put into place strict guidelines in contrast to my father's grandiosity. For the first time, my mom and I went to movies together, ordered pizza and stayed up late talking about school and boys. She took Stevie to a skateboard park where he could safely learn a few tricks. And, with the insurance money and the freedom to make her own decisions, my mother returned to school, finished her degree and became the nurse she always longed to be.

Now, when we visit, my mother smiles broadly, smothering Steve and me with hugs and kisses, listening intently to hear about our careers and friends. We reminisce about school plays and friends we knew, but we never mention the day the heat wave ended and we never discuss the life vests left on the dock the day Stevie and my father went fishing.