

Summer Boy

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It's Fall again, and Max feels the dread that all boys feel as the wind comes sweeping through the pine trees with the threat of winter on its back. Summer is over; how can Summer be over? He looks out the second story window of his bedroom and marvels at the world bathed in the just-rising sun. It's different than it was yesterday. He can't say how.

He smells at the breeze and wonders at the acorn-husks, the sawdust from the pine mill, the faint touch of old pollen that's been revived by the cool breeze and is spiraling through the morning like so many little motes of dust, like so many little planets swirling through space. He smells blackberry vines and wet marsh grass; he smells the end of summer like a pie that's been baking all year long and is finally ready to pop out of the oven.

Max wants to cry. It can't have been months ago that he sat here and smelled the end of Spring. Fresh cut grass and pistachio ice cream, blooming lilacs and crisp pine needles that fell amidst a thousand maple trees. It seems like yesterday that he was welcoming Summer. What about all the things he was going to do? What about all his plans? Run his sneakers into the ground, tear up his jeans, rip half his good shirts from crawling through prickly vines and muddy ravines.

He checks off the list in his head, knowing it's incomplete and knowing it's too late to finish it but resolving to try anyway. Fall is coming. It's coming like an airplane zipping through the sky—how fast? Max isn't sure, because he doesn't know how fast a plane can go, but Fall is moving quick and the pilot on board is a white knuckled demon and his craft is fueled by boy-tears. Max pictures the demon that flies the plane which brings Fall and hates him for existing.

One last day of summer and that means he can't do it all. He'll have to choose.

Make a camp out in the woods? He's already done that ten times. Hit his bat against the iron bars outside the library? Mrs. Norma will get onto him, and he's nearly memorized the big *gong* it makes, anyway. Maybe he could climb up the oldest tree in the park and see how high he can get—but no, he knows how high he can get already. He could pack a picnic and share bread with the birds and squirrels, but the squirrels will probably be looking for pecans and pine nuts now that winter is on the way. Probably the birds will know about it, too, and they'll be thinking about leaving.

But the lake probably doesn't know summer is ending yet. The lake always takes a few weeks to realize it's getting colder outside and adjust itself to blend into the rest of the world. The lake stays warm for a time, inviting boys and girls to take a dip, to come on in.

Just so long as you aren't alone.

But with only one day left, he really doesn't have time to waste sitting around on his folks.

Max changes into his bathing suit. He leaves his shirt behind because the sun is out and the sun is like a kind of shirt, a shirt that will keep you warm but let you feel the world around you at the same time. Mom and Dad are still sleeping. That means he doesn't have to put on sunscreen. He doesn't even have to eat breakfast or bring a lunch sack or promise to be home at a certain time.

He scribbles a note, because after Jessie's sister drowned, it became a rule that you can't swim at the lake unless you tell someone you're going. When the turbulence from the kitchen door blows it off the magnet and lets it slip like a bill no one wants to pay beneath the cabinet, he doesn't see, because the door's already swinging closed and Max is halfway across the driveway.

He cuts across the park at a diagonal and grins at the soft grass kissing his feet with dew. The flowerbeds that line the main path are always worth looking at and investigating. He draws down deep next to a mess of dandelions—weeds according to his father, flowers according to his mom, and good-smelling according to him—and inhales deeply. It's not just the flowers he smells, but the rich earth they're buried in and the wood of the planers box he's grasping tight under his fingers and the faintest hint of donuts from Bernard's Bakery on 2nd street.

He looks up sharply at the sound of heavy panting and stumbles back in surprise. He falls on his butt and laughs as he falls because it's just Mr. Jenkin's old coon hound, Zip. Zip isn't anything to be afraid of. Shaggy black fur, big round head, Zip comes and licks Max's face and he pushes him away gently, still laughing. Zip offers a big slop of slobber that soaks his bare chest and makes him shiver with delight.

Max climbs to his feet and pats Zip's head. "Thanks, boy."

He takes the quickest way to the lake, leaving the dog behind. Through the park, down the trail, stopping only to peer at the bark of an old oak tree and peel off a piece to hold in his cool hands. *That's good strong bark*, he thinks, loving the tree as he takes a bit of its skin just so he can remember what it feels like after he's left it behind.

The shore is long and lonely. The waves come up to it and fall, but not like a boy stumbling and falling on his butt when he gets surprised by a dog. The waves fall purposefully, with a kind of mind to them that makes Max's mouth part in wonder. No one could fall like that, not even if they tried. How come he's never noticed that before?

The sky looks bigger when it stretches across a big expanse of water. The wind blows and tickles softly over his ears, whispering some kind of Fall secret that Max, a Summer boy, might never understand as long as he lives. The waves fall, rise, and fall again, giggling at the

wind. He thinks they're like a kind of music that you can only hear if you're alone and standing in just the right spot, at the right time of day.

He finds himself thinking of Jessie's sister. Why would the lake go and drown a little girl like that? He squints at it suspiciously, looking further than the shore now and into the darker, deeper water that he doesn't venture into even in the afternoon when there's a dozen people around to help him not feel afraid.

The sun falls on him less like a shirt and more like a coat as he stands at the shore and considers the water. He can see the far shore across the expanse and he wonders whether the water falls there like it falls here. He wonders if the wind is whispering and chatting there just like it's chatting and whispering here.

Max starts to sweat and decides it's time to let the lake do its job and cool him down. He walks over the smooth, round stones, past the waves and into a smoother and gentler depth that seems to be waiting rather than actively calling. Ankle deep, shin deep, knee deep, waist deep. He walks until his shoulders are submerged and turns back to the lonely shore. He's never been to the lake when it's empty like this, never seen the water without voices to disturb it, without thrashing feet and arms to make it splash and spray.

They didn't find Jessie's sister. She went out into the water, one bobbing girl amidst countless bobbing boys and girls. Max was there that day. He was there that day. *Golly*, he thinks, suddenly realizing it. *I was there that day. It could have been me the lake decided to drown. It could be me who they never found.*