

In the Summers by the Lake

My earliest memory of her is in pigtails and a yellow jumper with a white sailor's cap. We were six and it was summer at the lake. Our parents were all friends from college. This made us friends from birth. There was seven of us Janet, Jimmy, Teddy, Bert, Sandy, Cassie and myself. Most of us lived in the same housing subdivision nearly on the same block. Every summer we all went to the same camp ground around a lake. We played on the swings and rode horses by day and played tag at night. I didn't think much of Cassie back then. She was a friend and not much more. I think our parents wanted us to just be kids. Gender roles and stereotypes didn't play into our play. Unlike the rest, Cassi's family lived in a different town. We only saw her in the summers by the lake.

I think it was really around the age of eight when the idea of gender came into our play. Not that we didn't understand about what it was it was just that it didn't matter that much. The boys played just as hard as the girls as my mother would say. And play hard we did. From dawn to late night, we were all at it. That summer the horses owned by the park were not available. We would later find out a handler had called the humane association and they took possession of the horses until an investigation cleared them. With the horses gone, we spent most of our day time in the water. Back flips, cannon balls, belly flops and the dreaded not so slippery slide were the order of the day. At night we played freeze tag. I think it was then when I knew something was different. The last night we played tag and I was it. I tagged her and when my hand touched her arm a bolt of lighting struck. Well, that was what it felt like. All that night I stayed awake staring up at the ceiling of my room thinking about the touch of her arm.

Time passes as does our attentions. Childhood is a series of experiences stacked on top of each other. My mother would say a child is like a sink filling with water. The water drops are experiences. At first every drop was something special but eventually those drops were overtaken by the rising water until the sink was full and a child was an adult. I don't know about that. I think your sink is never filled. You find something new every day. As those new experiences came the touch of an arm melded into the background until it was just forgotten. My

dad would say that when you were young you crave firsts. The first kiss, the first-time home alone, the first time driving by yourself and so on. Once you have the first time then you seek out another first without contemplating the event that just transpired. The anticipation of a first is more important than the actual first. He would end by saying there is always another first no matter how old you get, but some of those firsts aren't something you look forward to. Dad died when I was twenty-nine of a massive coronary. He lived long enough for a first grandchild. He said it was his favorite first.

Every summer was like a time portal into a better existence. We could be whatever we wanted without anyone to tell us to stop or grow up. We still played freeze tag at the age of twelve. All that summer I found myself staring at Cassie. I couldn't say why. I had some remembrance of that touch but not an actual memory. She was growing tall and lean. For some reason I liked it. I tried to be on her team no matter what we played. That was in everything except the nightly freeze tag. That was a free-for-all. The last night I was it for a while. I saw her duck behind a tree. I snuck up and tagged her. She froze in place like she should, but I didn't move. In our game the person that was it was it until he or she tagged everyone. The last one tagged was the new it. Without thinking about it I kissed her. She looked stunned. I ran away and eventually went back to searching for new victims to tag. The next day we all went home.

That fall I wrote her a letter about what happened and why I felt bad about doing it without her permission. The letter came back return to sender. She didn't open it. I wrote her a letter every week or so. At first it was like the first letter, then eventually it was almost like a diary about my day and what I felt. It felt good to write this all down even if she wouldn't read them. To my surprise, none of the letters came back to me. She never wrote back. That is until the last day of school and the return to the lake. She wrote saying she didn't know how to feel about what happened. She said she was sorry about the first letter and she wished she could take it back. Then in a stunning turn she said she wouldn't take the kiss back. She thought about it every day. I taped that letter to the back of a picture in my room. When I was alone I would turn the picture around to stare at it. I found that letter on the back of that picture about a year ago. It was yellowed with age and torn on one edge.

She had asked me not to mention the letter to anyone and if we could, let's go back to the lake like none of this happened. Summer came, and she never showed up. Her father was offered a short-term assignment in Paris France and the whole family went. I think that was my first heart break. All that summer she sent postcards. Soon my mother noticed that there may be something more than a simple friendship between her and me. Cassie sent me a picture of herself by the Eiffel tower dressed in all black with a red beret sitting on a Vespa scooter. Mom saw it and decided I needed the talk. She gave me such a clinical and frank talk about sex that never once touched on the idea of love. It was all act and consequences. I have that picture in a frame on my desk. It reminds me of simpler times.

I find myself sitting here trying to write about all this with my kids just outside. They are playing of all things freeze tag. I wonder if our parents watched us play thinking about their own childhoods. Even now when I see mom she has that far off look in her eyes. She watches her grandchildren and writes to Hub Pages about what she thinks of current events. She retired after forty-three years as a nurse in a hospital. She volunteers at a free clinic three-days a week and seems to have no plans to slow down. I hope I can have her energy when I retire. Heck, I could use some of that right now. I have an appointment with the ophthalmologist next week and the word I dreaded for the last couple of years will be said. I need bifocals. As dad would have said, "*another first.*"

That was the last summer of freeze tag. Or so we thought. We were all around the age of thirteen and the game once competitive became almost vicious. One-night Bert tripped in the dark and broke his arm on a large rock. That ended the night games. The rest of the summer we played board games at night. None of the cabins had televisions, so no shows or video games. Dad had his radio. It picked up television signals as well as the AM/FM bands. He would listen to the Cleveland Indians Play. I never thought about him back then. He would work back in town then drive the two hours to the lake, so we could have that summer. On Saturdays the fathers would gather and listen to the games while drinking and grilling. He never complained or

showed he was unhappy with how things worked. When I got married he had said to me, “*do your best and never let your burdens weigh on your children.*”

The next summer play time was over. Like so many children who grew up by the lake we walked away from the childish things. There was a rec center on the campgrounds. It was occupied by the older kids during the summer but at fourteen we were now among the older kids. The center had a foosball table, a pool table and some ancient pinball games. You had to ask to use the pool table. They kept the balls and cues in a locked cabinet. One-year way back in the 1960's a heated game became a fight. It was early in the morning and we were all there playing pool when she showed up. Cassie left that summer a gawky twelve-year-old and came back a fourteen-year-old woman. Both Sandy and Janet still dressed like tomboys in jeans and t shirts, but Cassie came back in a long blue skirt and white blouse looking older than her age. By the next day the girls all dressed like women.

It would be easy to say that Cassie's arrival had signaled the end of our innocent bond but in truth it was already over. We were already splitting into groups by then. Games played went from teams to boys versus girls. That summer I first noticed a bond forming between Bert and Sandy. At first it wasn't that obvious. Bert would just stare at her when she wasn't looking. Then I realized she was doing the same. By midsummer they both stopped coming to the center. We found them one day in an old cabin. They were kissing. Not really making out but not as platonic as my first kiss with Cassie. By the end of the summer they weren't talking to each other. Cassie and I did this awkward side stare at each other but never did anything else. I was the best man at Bert and Sandy's wedding about nine years after that summer. They now have seven kids.

The following summer my mom was on a special rotation while going back to school to learn how to work in an operating room. We didn't go to the lake. With all my friends there I was alone and feeling that way. Dad came home one day with a wreck of a car. A 1970 Chevy Nova. He set it up in the garage and that summer he and I worked on the car. We completely rebuilt the engine. All the while I was receiving letters from Cassie by the lake. She would write

about what I was missing and how they all missed me. In her letters it sounded like the rift between the boys and girls was gone and we were all friends again. She sent me a picture of herself that I made sure my mom couldn't find. It was innocent in appearance. Her in a one-piece swimming suit, but to me it was a pinup and it fueled many not so clean dreams. By the end of the summer my dad handed me the keys to the car. He said, "*when you get your license the car is yours, but you will need to pay the insurance.*" The night he gave me the keys I dreamed of rolling into the camp and finding Cassie.

I took every odd job I could, so I could have that summer off. By that summer I had my insurance paid in full for the year and enough money for gas for a while. I didn't know it at the time, but this was my last summer by the lake. Soon college would take me away from home. That first day I rolled into the camp in my gleaming red Nova. All the dad's eyes were on me, well really the car. I parked the car in the lot and it stayed there for most of the summer. I made my way to the lake and found Cassie. She was in what looked like a two-piece swim suit. Not quite a bikini but not really a one-piece. That winter the letters had stopped. Her last letter seemed like she was feeling down. I wrote her, but she didn't write back. Looking back, I wonder why we never called each other. For some reason the letters seemed more intimate than a phone call. It was easier to say what was on our minds when we wrote it down. It was then when I realized she wasn't alone.

His name was David. He was about a year older, but he looked like he was in his twenties. He saw the way I looked at Cassie and just maybe felt the way she was looking at me. He came up behind her and put his arm around her cupping her left breast in one move. That winter they had started to date. Somehow, he knew someone who came to the lake and he found a way to get invited for the summer. When he put his hand on her she frowned a little. I didn't realize at the time, but I was also frowning. The group dynamics shifted all that summer until we were like our parents. Coming together for events but staying separate the rest of the time. Near the end of the summer I found myself on a bench swing alone and staring at the setting sun. Cassie joined me. She said, "*I didn't mean to let things go like this. I don't know how it*

happened, but he was just there and I.” She stopped talking. We sat there watching the sun set. She leaned in and kissed me. It was the last time we would ever kiss.

That night the old gang came back together. Bert and Sandy would date on and off until they married. Jimmy went to College back east and never came back. I looked him up on Facebook. He works as an actuary for a big firm in New York City. Teddy married his high school sweetheart Jim just as soon as they made it legal. The two adopted a little boy then a girl and live in the state of Washington were they both work as forest rangers. State Senator Janet Johnson is in her fifth term as I write this. She met and married her husband in law school. that night we played freeze tag again. One last time. It was like time had not passed. We were kids again and nothing could go wrong. I think about that now. I started to write this after coming home from Cassie’s funeral. She stayed with David who would later become abusive. About two weeks ago he hit her with a baseball bat and cracked her skull. She died a week later in the hospital having never regained consciousness. He is awaiting trial for manslaughter.

I met my wife Sara in college. She was studying to become a teacher while I was in business school. I run an auto dealership selling rare and vintage restored cars. Many are ones that we rebuilt ourselves. We have five kids. Our oldest, Tabitha was eyeing an old Trans am in the back. When she is old enough we will rebuild it together and it will be hers. But that is not now. Dad was fond of saying, *“let the future happen in its own time.”* Sara couldn’t come to the funeral. She had just had our fifth baby and was home with her and my mother. We named our last daughter Cassie. I hear screaming and crying so I guess the game of tag is over. Maybe we should go to the lake this summer?