

The sun is high and bold in the Colorado sky, baking the grass beneath my feet, turning the world hot and dry. Above me, the heavens are bluer than a robin's egg, unmarred by even a wisp of white.

I shouldn't be cold, but I am. I can't stop shivering.

I hear the gurgle of the river, still out of sight over the ridge. Other than that, it's silent. The birds were singing this morning, but now they've grown quiet. The thick stillness of the late-summer day is beginning. The only thing stirring is a rattlesnake, somewhere deep in the grass. I hear him: rattling, then being still, rattling, then being still. My feet move in time with him, as if dancing to his tune. Rattle-step-step, silence-step-step, rattle-step-step, silence-step-step.

There's something unnatural about it, and it's this recognition that brings me up short. I turn to look behind me, toward my grandfather's big farmhouse. From here, I shouldn't be able to see it. It should be blocked by trees and distance, and yet it's there, larger than life.

This is a dream. It's not August. Not anymore. It's early December, unless I've been sick longer than I thought. Not even twenty years old, and yet I may not see my next birthday. Somewhere inside that house, I am lying, racked with illness. If I concentrate, I can feel the way my body shakes from the fever. I can feel the weight of the quilts that can't warm me.

The dream is better, and so I turn away from the house, back toward the bright August day. I know where I'm going — where I always go. To the gently sloping bank above the river, the large, flat, sun-drenched rocks that overlook the water, and the tree that bears our initials.

I'm going to see Teddy.

I shiver and wrap my arms around myself, hoping the sun will warm me soon. It should. I can tell it's going to be one hell of a hot day. The ground is practically steaming. Later, the clouds will roll in from the west. The molten blue sky will sizzle with anticipation, the heat will crackle and break, and then the rain will come, cool and fresh, quenching the ground and cooling the earth. Only fifteen or twenty minutes — thirty at the most — then the storm will move off, leaving the grass damp and pungent, as if all of nature has breathed a sigh of relief. I know this because I've seen it happen over and over again, the cycle of front-range weather that's often as predictable as the sun. As predictable as the start and stop of the snake's strangely rhythmic rattle.

His sound is a warning, but he's no threat to me.

I find the tree and lie back in the grass, not quite in the shade. I need to feel the sun. Teddy isn't here yet, but he will be. This is our spot. The only place we've ever had privacy. The place we played as children, splashing in the shallow water. The place we came as teenagers to smoke cigarettes stolen from his father, or to taste the gin stolen from mine. It's the place we first touched. And kissed.

The place we fell in love.

I remember him lying by my side, back when our innocent friendship was just turning into something new and exhilarating. That hadn't been in August. That had been in May, 1917, more than a year ago. We were lying on the bank, in this exact spot. Side by side, and yet a bit too close to each other. I was hyperaware of his breathing. Of the rise and fall of his chest, just visible in my peripheral vision. And then he touched my hand.

He didn't hold it. Instead, he caressed me. He brushed his fingertip over the sensitive flesh between my thumb and first finger. It was so simple, but the heart-poundingly erotic joy of it sent shivers up my spine. I closed my eyes and concentrated on his touch — down and over the base of my thumb, around the curve of my wrist and back up, along the back of my hand to my knuckles, then a slow, steady tickle to the tip of my finger.

Back on that distant day, the sun had warmed my eyelids. My chest. My groin. I had drawn a deep, shaky breath, suddenly aware that I'd become unabashedly aroused. I was torn about how to react. Surely, I'd thought, I should pull away. I should make a joke. Run to the cold water of the river and turn this all back into a game.

But I didn't want that, and somehow I knew Teddy didn't either. So I remained motionless as he slid his fingers into my palm. He circled the tender skin there, making me whimper. He caressed my fingers, one at a time, stroking them from knuckle to tip, as if it were some more intimate part of me he was touching, and the slow tease of it made me yearn for exactly that. It was as if each nerve was more sensitive than it had ever been before. As if each sensation on my hand could be felt everywhere — my arm, my stomach, the back of my neck, and best of all, in the deep, pulsing ache of my groin. I had never felt that way. I'd touched myself, brought myself to fruition, but even that hadn't compared to the feel of Teddy's fingers on mine.

My heart pounded and my breath came in trembling, labored pants. His fingers moved away, and I nearly moaned in disappointment, but then I felt him above me. I opened my eyes. He had rolled toward me, nearly on top of me, propping himself on his elbow. His cheeks were red, his lips moist.

He asked, in a whisper, "Can I kiss you?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

He moved slowly. Whether he was afraid I'd pull away, or afraid I wouldn't, I didn't know, but I lay still until his trembling lips met mine.

Even now, in my dream inside a dream, I can't quite remember the details, but I remember the sensations. The breathless urgency as we grew bolder. The unbuttoned pants and exploring hands. The way he panted in my ear as we stroked and strained. The way it was over far too quickly and we'd lain there, not minding the sticky mess between us, staring into each other's eyes.

"Can we do it again?" he'd asked.

And we had. We'd spent a blissful summer meeting whenever we could, falling frantically into each other's arms, learning just how deep and amazing our passion could be.

But then summer had ended, and I'd had to leave my grandfather's farm as I did every fall. I had to go back to town, back to my mother's house, in

time for the start of school. It was my first year at the university.

And Teddy, for some reason I'd never quite understood, had enlisted.

The truth comes back to me then, like a knife in my throat, and there, in my dream construct of that place — the place where Teddy and I had fished and played as kids, the place where we'd made love as young adults — I curl into a ball and cry.

Teddy is dead, killed somewhere in France. I don't know the details — only saw his name on that horrible, dreaded list in the paper — but the memory of his death comes with an image of his body, broken and bloody, lying forgotten in some Godforsaken trench. It's a construct of my imagination and nothing more, and yet it's haunted me for months. The war may be over, but peace won't bring Teddy back.

The last day we had together was a day like this one — the bright, vibrant heat of August scorching the earth, the Colorado sun beating down on us as we struggled to say goodbye. We should have spent the day loving each other, finding what pleasure we could, but we'd fought instead. He'd begged me to enlist with him. I thought he'd gone mad. And so our summer of discovery had ended in a bitter, mournful silence.

I've been lost ever since.

The thought of him always brings the heartbreak back, but I don't have the strength to cry for long. My tears slow, and I lie there in the grass, exhausted, listening to wind. Somewhere to my right, the rattlesnake continues his unnaturally patterned racket.

"Benjamin."

It's Teddy, here at last. I sit up, rubbing the tears from my eyes. For half a second, I worry he'll be like that image in my mind, his uniform soaked with blood, the pallor of death upon his skin, but when I look, I find him the way he was in that last perfect summer — fit and healthy, his cheeks bronzed by the sun, his hair blowing across his face. He's dressed in the same simple work clothes he always wore, and the familiarity of the moment makes my heart ache.

"Hello," I say. The horrible inadequacy of the word is like a weight in my chest.

Teddy leans against the tree and smiles at me. "Hello back."

A dream. All a dream. Teddy is dead, and I'm in a fever-induced delirium. I remember the epidemic sweeping through the town, and the paper reporting alarming death tolls from all over the state. I remember deciding, along with my mother, to flee to the country and the perceived safety of the fresh air of my grandfather's farm. But it was too late. I was already sick.

Yes, this sun-drenched August afternoon is a figment of my imagination, but I don't care. I don't want reality — the dark, oppressive room, reeking of illness, the pain that sinks bone-deep, the labored breathing. I only want to stay with Teddy. "Are you really here?"

He laughs. "Can't you see me?"

"Yes, but..."

"I didn't mean to make you wait, but I hadn't expect you to be here so soon."

"You're dead."

He shrugs, as if it's a moot point. As if I've said nothing more than, "your hair is brown," or "your eyes are hazel." His expression is sheepishly amused. "I suppose you made the right decision, not enlisting."

I find no humor in the situation. Only pain and grief. "Why wouldn't you listen to me?" I ask, standing to face him. "Why wouldn't you stay?"

"For what, Ben? To spend my whole life working my daddy's farm, waiting every year for the three short months you're here before going back to your real life? Waiting for the day you'd come back only to tell me you'd found a wife?" His voice cracks, and I know he's fighting tears. "Waiting for the year when you didn't come at all?"

My eyes sting and my throat is tight, but he isn't crying, so neither will I. "You could have moved to town with me."

He turns away, not needing to answer. It's a repeat of the argument we had on that fateful last day. I know why he refused my suggestion. We couldn't have been lovers in town. It would have meant sneaking around, hiding ourselves, telling lies.

But at least he would still be alive.

The dry grass crunches beneath my feet as I cross to him. I touch the place where we once carved our initials into the tree. "The day we did this, we said 'forever.' I meant that."

"So did I."

I sigh, because there's no answer now, just as there wasn't one then. The world wasn't made for men like us. "I loved you, Teddy. God, I loved you so much."

He nods, and I see the pain of that last day in his eyes. "I loved you too. I still do."

"That summer... Those were the best months of my life."

"Mine too."

"If only we could have made time stand still."

"Now we can."

I'm not sure what he means, but I don't care. I hold my hand out to him. "We can be together? Like before."

He smiles at me and a slow blush creeps its way up his cheeks. "Soon."

He reaches to take my hand, but it slips through mine. I can't touch him and the realization makes me want to cry again. It seems unfair. Everything else here is so real. The ground is solid. The tree is strong and rigid next to me, the bark rough and unyielding. And yet Teddy is beyond my reach.

"Soon," he says again, moving closer.

I can feel him now, and yet not in the way I'd like. He isn't flesh and blood, but he's warm. More than that. He is warmth itself. Warmer than the sun. For the first time since falling sick, I don't feel cold. I stop shivering. I let him wrap me up in his radiance. I fall blissfully into his heat. I remember with blinding clarity the feeling of flesh on flesh, the whisper of our skin, the taste of his kiss.

"Be with me," he says.

I close my eyes and I let myself drift as he teases me to passion. No, I can't quite feel the touch of his hands or the brush of his lips, but I remember. I *know*. I sense him with me, our thoughts mingling as our bodies merge. Soon I'm gasping, panting, straining, climaxing like I haven't in ages. Not since that summer.

Not since him.

"You haven't changed," he says, sounding amused. "I love the sounds you make."

"I wish I could feel you."

"Soon."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it's true."

"I'll get to touch you?"

"Yes."

"And kiss you?"

"I promise."

"Will that be a dream too?"

He laughs, although it's a sound of mirth more than joy. He steps back, away from me, and the chill of the fever immediately returns, worse than ever. My bones seem to rattle with the force of my trembling. "Don't you understand? I'm here to show you the way."

"The way?" And then, almost as soon as I say the words, I grasp his meaning. "I'm dying."

He nods slowly, watching me carefully, judging my reaction. "Can't you feel it?"

Can I? I feel the fever, yes, but nothing more. Not from here. To do that, I'll have to reach back to my real place in the world, and yet that will mean leaving him.

"Go ahead," he says gently, as if sensing my dilemma. "I'll wait."

I wish I could hold his hand, just to be sure I don't lose him again, but I can't. Instead, I hang onto the tree. I anchor myself on our initials, carved more than a year ago into the deep, gray bark, and I focus my gaze inward. I concentrate on the feeling of my body. The shivering. The aches.

The rattle.

It's not a snake.

It's me. It's the sounds of my breathing. Each breath comes harder than the one before. I'm losing the strength to push air past the fluid that fills my lungs. I'm not sure when the pneumonia set in, but I know without doubt that's what it is.

I really am going to die.

Perhaps I should panic, but I don't. I'm relieved. All those months without Teddy. The knowledge of our argument and his death. The pain of knowing I'd never be able to love anybody the way I'd loved him. It's been so hard to fight the sickness when I have no reason to live.

I open my eyes again to face him. "What happens now?"

“All you have to do is follow me.”

And I do. Over the parched ground, across the river, through the lands of our youth. The cold falls away. My shivering subsides. He reaches out to take my hand and as we walk, his fingers grow solid against mine. I find myself smiling. I’m warm at last.

I’ve never been so happy to feel the sun.

About the Author

Marie Sexton lives in Colorado. She's a fan of just about anything that involves muscular young men piling on top of each other. In particular, she loves the Denver Broncos and enjoys going to the games with her husband. Her imaginary friends often tag along. Marie has one daughter, two cats, and one dog, all of whom seem bent on destroying what remains of her sanity. She loves them anyway. You can find her at <http://MarieSexton.net>.

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