

Lovers in July

For the greater part of my life, I had lived in a bad neighborhood. It was not the kind of place where you could leave your house and know for sure where you were going. It wasn't the place where the sane would want to live—but I, standing at five-three with my stick-arms and large head—I had no choice.

The streets always had remnants of last night covering them. Empty bottles of beer and rum and whiskey shattered under patched up tires. Cigarette butts sprouted from the dirt like small, mutated weeds and the smell of smoke still permeated the morning air. I had read once in a book about a garden in a country somewhere far-off. I tried to grow some flowers in front of my family's house, but they faded within a week. It was understandable, I guess. Had I been those flowers, I would have wilted too.

For me, it was less obvious. It didn't take a week—instead, the process lasted sixteen years. Within the early stages of manhood, I felt my shoulders drooping, my face growing paler and paler and my limbs becoming dried stems and leaves. My eyes lost any vigor they may have held. Their expression became dryer and more distant. Like the flowers in front of my house, they showed a loss of what ought to have been permanent—hope and free will. All around me, the people were the same. Those who walked down the streets, those who remained in school, the survivors, the prostitutes, the criminals, the pastor down the street who smoked god-knows-what – they were all part of a garden in our neighborhood. Their faces were wilted, showed a willingness to surrender unconditionally. They had no eyes—theirs were mirrors, reflecting the gray streets with gray cars and brown cigarette butts stuck in brown dirt.

When I began to write, my mother scolded me. My brother wrote too—poems dedicated to a certain Ashley Stone who stood beside him when he got too drunk to walk and fell of the sidewalk into a small ditch. It was in that ditch that he was yanked out from the ground by some larger gardener, because he had wilted more than what was acceptable. Ashley disappeared after that, but I doubt she got anywhere. Reality is difficult to escape from—and I'm sure of that, even though our pastor disagrees. At the funeral, he told us to love God, because God gives us that escape. He lied, and I knew it. His escape wasn't with God, and the only thing that this

gardener had ever done for us was to not give us fertilizer and water and let us dry and dry and fall.

When my brother fell, I could remember his face. It was pale, not unlike mine. His hands were clasped across his chest and his hair curled over his forehead. He didn't look right... it wasn't the way he was supposed to look after a party. His head was large, like mine, and in my mirror-eyes I could see myself. I didn't cry.

My father told me that I was strong. I knew he was wrong. I was frail, more so than the man lying in front of me. I hadn't considered my brother lucky, and I never really wanted to give up on living. I wasn't crazy, not like my neighbor down the street who didn't come out one morning to take his dog out on a walk—not like my neighbor, who locked himself in his garage and prayed and prayed and prayed until he finally fell. I walked past his house that day, and didn't notice anything. When I found out, I said “Oh.” and continued with my life.

Standing above wood and steel and flesh and two-dollar per square-foot velvet, I wondered if that neighbor's wife had found out, said “Oh” and continued to wash the dishes. Nothing changed. I got home that day, and everything was the exact same way it was before. I did my homework, went to school, walked back. It rained, and the rain didn't mean anything to me.

During the summer, it would always get really hot. The heat would scorch any proud patch of grass that rose in between the cracks in the cement. Within a week it would become yellow and brown and our neighborhood became monochrome once more. The summer after my brother died was particularly unbearable. It felt like all I drank would seep out of my skin and collect in my hair. Occasionally, I would feel a cool drop down my spine, and it sent shivers up through my entire body. I would sometimes take a walk towards the sixty-year old swimming pool at the far end of my street. It would always be filled with girls there, lying with an almost ceremonial languor in the sun. Their bronze faces, for once not covered with makeup or creams or sunscreen, looked towards me—but never at me. Their gazes were too lofty, and their hands slowly brushed their foreheads. Some girls I knew would smile, beckoning me over with long, tan, fingers. I smiled back, dug my hands in my pockets, and walked through waves of heat. It was too hot to talk, to laugh. It was too hot to move, and when I arrived at their sides, the world seemed to stop.

It was one of those apocalyptically-hot summers when the trees did not rustle and the birds dropped from the skies. I could almost see my breath coming out of my mouth as steam, boiling into the atmosphere. The water in the pool was covered with a dark film of flies and mosquitoes. Too hot for them, even. Graffiti covered the walls around us, and the colorful symbols blended with heat waves to create an oppressive greenhouse-effect. Throughout it all, the girls lounged at the poolside like bronzed goddesses. They had ignored me by then. As I stood up, one made a weak motion to stop me, but her black eyes closed and I left.

“Joey, Joey—Where were you, hun’?”

“By the pool.”

“Oh—Oh.” My mother pressed her lips together, concentrating on something beyond my reach. Then, she gave me a quick nod, to signal that I could leave. The sun set. I made a large “X” on the box for July first on the calendar in my room. Another day passed. I survived, according to that half-torn bundle of glossy paper.

So it went—July second, July third. Each day seemed hotter and hotter, and on the fourth, people didn’t go out on the streets to light fireworks. There were a couple of drunk guys wandering around, waving a flag and laughing and living. That was it for celebration. They were our parade, and I watched them until midnight, until they started fighting and yelling and I knew the day was over.

The morning of the fifth, I walked outside to pick up the broken bottles. The city gave us extra money to give them our junk, and I couldn’t argue with such well-placed stupidity. A thin trail of blood streaked my finger with red as I put them in my bag. I heard someone cluck in disappointment behind me.

“Hey, kid. You need help?”

“No thanks.” I replied automatically. “Sir.” I added quickly, not turning around.

“Hmm..” I could hear the smile behind the man’s tone. He began to piss me off. I turned, and glared at him.

“Whaddaya want?”

He shrugged, and continued to smile, mocking me. He drew out a puff from his thin cigarette, then held it between his fingers in a self-important manner. His face was long, thin. He didn’t look like he belonged.

“Cigarette?” He held the pack out to me. I took one, and lit it. It glowed red for an instant before a plume of smoke rose into the air. Flecks of ash fell to the ground.

“Thanks.” I replied, a little late.

“So you live around here?”

“Yeah, down the street.” I waved in the general direction of my house. He nodded.

“Oh.”

He leaned against the heated side of one of the buildings, and I glanced over at him. Our eyes met for an instant—his were gray, a dark, deep-set gray. They seemed to observe me with an impartial distance—without prejudice or kindness. They were blank, murky, like the depths of a pool which one ought to be afraid of.

What struck me most, though, was the realization that his eyes weren’t mirrors. They reflected no poverty or misery. They were dark, but not yet tainted.

“What’s your name, kid?” His voice broke the silence.

“Joey.”

“Joey.” He repeated, storing my name along with others in the depths of his murky eyes. “Mine’s Pete—Pete Werner.”

“S a pleasure.” I replied lazily, taking a drag from my cigarette. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No.” He laughed.

We stood in silence for a couple more minutes, finishing off our cigarettes. The heat began to escalate as the sun rose in the sky. I prodded the bag of glass bottles with my foot. The man next to me was the same age as my brother, but I hadn’t noticed up until I looked at him once more and saw something very familiar in his gaze. When the sun came up, the light didn’t hit his face. It grazed past momentarily, not wanting to get close. I threw my cigarette butt down and stepped on it. The sun hit me but not him. My eyes were mirrors of the ground and his were screens which showed only shadows. Occasionally, a flicker passed by, but it was soon buried under gray waves. I picked up the bag, and waved goodbye to him. I didn’t wait to see if he would wave back. I walked forward, down the street, past the corner-store, past the old lady who stopped to feed her dog—or maybe a stray.

I tried to form an idea of who the man was, what he was doing in our beat-up street. I tried to understand the contours of his twenty-something year old face, to base my conceptions of him off of prejudices. But I couldn't. He was too different, too alive, too alert. Even when he aimlessly wandered the street, he did so with an air of purpose. Next, I attempted to relate him to the other twenty-something I knew. But he wasn't like my brother. He wasn't crude and passionate and careless. He had a definite reason to be—his very existence seemed to be one of efficiency and importance.

I stopped at the corner-store, and presented my bag to the ancient shopkeeper who must've been in that spot for centuries. His hands moved over the glass deliberately, and he gave me a crooked smile. "Thirty cents."

"kay." I took the money, and pocketed it.

"Hot day, isn't it?" He squinted up at the fluorescent lights, as if they were the source of his discomfort.

"Yep." My fingertips brushed against packs of gum. The brand names shone underneath the lights.

"How's your mother doing?"

"Good."

"Good." He nodded, ultimately assuring me that I was doing the right thing, that my answers were correct. His wrinkles moved in caricature-like ways when he smiled. I smiled back politely, and walked out of the small, air-conditioned store which had been there for as long as anyone could remember.

After a couple of days, I saw the strange man once more. I called out to him, but he didn't turn around to look at me. Again, a cigarette sat between his fingers, and he stared at it for a little bit. Then, he glanced up and smiled. A short wave signaled his acknowledgement of me, and I waved back.

"Hey!"

"Hey." I could barely hear him.

"What are you doing here anyways?"

I saw his mouth forming syllables, but couldn't hear anything. I pretended to, though, and nodded. His purpose for being there was unknown to me, but that was okay. The only thing which concerned me was the fact that he was there—again.

Maybe stupidly, I walked outside to meet him.

“Kid.” He greeted me, chewing on the cigarette. Flecks of ash fell to the ground and dissipated. When he smiled, his face darkened a little. It was odd. “You got some spare time?” Time? I had plenty of that. In fact, it was the only resource I did not lack.

“Sure.” I shrugged, nonchalant. “Your name’s Pete, right? I had a brother about your age.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “Had?”

“Had.” I confirmed.

“Anyways—” He kicked the gravel. “I’m here to research for a book I’m writing. I was wondering if you could show me around. Y’know, so that—my observations are more accurate.”

“Why not?” I shrugged again. “I don’t get why you’d come here, of all places. But sure. Hell, I could even introduce you to other people.”

“Thanks. It means a lot, kid.” He held his hand out. I didn’t shake it.

We walked around for a bit, me and Pete. I showed him the corner store, the pool with the lounging goddesses, the place where all the whores stood, my school, the crack house, the rows of broken down houses. For the most part, he was silent. When I glanced over him, I could see his murky eyes discerning the colors and shapes of his surroundings. I asked him a couple of questions, but his answers were sparse and disinterested. I found out that he was in college, and left so he could write. I found out that he traveled around the country. He wouldn’t tell me more than that.

Eventually, I gave up, dug my hands in my pockets and accepted the silence. We stopped by the bridge on the outskirts of the neighborhood, because of the intense afternoon heat. He sat on a rusted bench under a tree. Nearby, there was a couple kissing. I looked at them for a moment, the way the heat waves molded their two bodies into one blurry entity. Pete was also looking in their direction, and then turned to me.

“Who are they?”

“I dunno.”

A strange expression crossed his calm, narrow face. He took out a notebook from his back pocket and began to scribble words on the pages. The pencil began to slip from his sweat-covered fingers, and he frowned at it. I looked at him for a while, then turned my attention to the orange-green water under the bridge. I kept track of the bottles floating in it—imagining that I was inside them, overheating in the plastic coffin. The weather was too damn hot.

Pete put his notebook away, and leaned back on the bench. He was calm once more, and his gaze was incomprehensible. My mirror-eyes closed.

“You lived here your whole life?”

“Yeah.” I wiped sweat off of my brow.

“What do you want to do in the future?”

“I haven’t thought of that yet.” I considered the question for a few moments, and then spoke again. “I like to write too.”

“You have a lot of material to write about here.” He stated slowly. “Everything I’ve seen seems to have a story.”

I laughed. “Sure.”

“Really,” He affirmed. “I can see potential in your future as a writer. You’ve seen a lot.”

“I dunno.” The sweat dripped from my hair onto my nose. I shook my head, spreading little drops across the yellow grass. “Maybe. It’s the only thing I’m half-decent at.”

Pete stood up, and brushed himself off. He looked in the direction of the sun, and quickly glanced away. “Damn heat.” He muttered, putting his notebook and pen away.

He said goodbye to me, and promised that I would see his book in stores soon. I grinned back, mostly out of disbelief. The last thing I remember about him were his gray eyes, murky, untainted. Then, he disappeared into the transparent waves and dying trees.