

The Summer After Eighth Grade - Isabel, Year 10, NSW

As we walked down that muggy, stagnant street, I was looking at Avery Donovan but she was not looking at me. She was looking everywhere else, spinning around in a heat-driven craze as she pointed *there*, and *there*, and *there*.

“Look, Lucy, the old tree’s starting to die,”

“Look, Lucy, at the bluebird’s wings,”

“Look, Lucy, that poor little dog’s got fleas.”

Avery moved swiftly, her long, dark plait swinging down her back as she stumbled slightly in her shoes. We had the same shoes, her and I, cheap knockoff crocs from the boardwalk stalls. Both pairs were a bright, abrasive orange that couldn’t ever appeal to anybody except us. Hers were scrawled all over with half-formed drawings, an art project still not finished a year after it had been started. Mine, on the other hand, remained unmarked, my pedantic nature keeping them clean even from dust or dirt.

As I followed her, our almost - but not quite - matching shoes burned like plastic on my feet. They probably were plastic. Knockoffs, and all.

“These cicadas are so annoying,” Avery complained as she swept back to face me. Her long fingers were clasped together in a prayer-like position, and with the harsh sunlight blurring her edges, she seemed close to an angel. “And honestly, can you hurry up?”

Lethargically, I picked at my shirt’s neckline, which was slicked to my collarbone with sweat. It was too small for me, and had been for months, yet I still wore it, as if I could deny the stretching out of my body.

“Why? We aren’t going anywhere.”

We never went anywhere in the summer. We’d wander the dying streets, with nothing ahead of us, nor behind. An eternal, glowing present. I had lived this summer before - last year and the year before - and I was determined to live it again. A summer of sidewalk friendship, of languid heat, and of a world that could narrow down to the space between our faces.

Avery’s hands dropped back to her sides, the clattering of her bracelets like the chiming of bells. Ever restless, she brought them back up again, rubbing her eyes incessantly until mascara was streaked across her hand.

“No,” she said, frustrated, “I told Emily we’d meet her on the beach at noon.”

“Emily?”

“From English, remember?”

“Oh,” I said. “Okay.”

I could feel my tone fall flat onto the steaming asphalt, where they would lay useless and completely ignored next to the rest of the litter: Avery wasn't paying attention to my words, she was simply looping her arm through mine and pulling me forwards down to the beach path. The sidewalk concrete melted into grass, then into bare soil speckled with coarse sand.

At the pressure of her touch, I wanted to draw closer, and press the entire left side of my body to hers, and then closer, still, despite the oppressive heat dampening both our skin. But an old wooden board had begun to lay itself right underneath my skin. Entirely rotted, filled with mildew and pockets of tepid rainwater. As we went, I could feel it stiffen my shoulders, my legs, my spine, my mouth, until my whole body had gone completely rigid.

Eventually, Avery fell from my side to in front, and the linking of our arms drew out until only our fingers remained linked. I was left staring at her back, at the contracting and expanding of her shoulders as she breathed. My own breath was not in my shoulders, nor anywhere else in my body, but stuck somewhere far, far away.

When we reached the wooden planks of the boardwalk, Avery slipped out of my grip entirely, going instead to wrap her hands around the railing that framed the beach. She leaned out, so far it was almost dangerous, with her posture bent against the weight of the sun. Avery was looking for Emily, watching for Emily.

And with a frantic wave, Avery found her. Emily was sitting on the sand, her stomach to the sun and back to the sea. I watched as, without hesitation, Avery slid her crocs off and swung her legs over the railing. Smoothly, she dropped down to the sand and out of my sight.

I was so apart from it all, I almost felt like I was watching a movie. Like I could glance to my side and I would see Avery laying on the couch, her nimble legs pushed over my lap. But it was only me who was watching.

Always, watching.