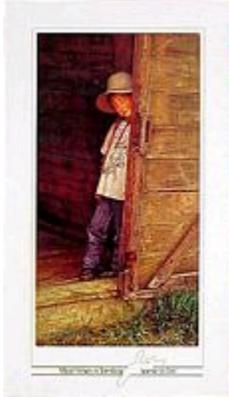




summer days - pt.2

Written by bubba



*Continued from **summer days**...*

The attic door was always locked. Pops kept the key, but I had my own. I didn't keep it on me. That would have driven him nuts, had he known. I knelt down and reached under the small, wooden landing. My hand twisted around until I felt the key resting on the wooden shelf. I grabbed it and let myself in.

Our attic. It was everything you would expect it to be...dark, dusty and reeking of mothballs. The one tiny window permitted shards of light to cut across the floor and etch shapely shadows across the stacks of boxed goods.

There was a little of everything in our attic. There were chests of clothes, books, jewelry and toys, some stacked, some scattered. Pops had his corner of awards. Medals and ribbons from elementary and secondary school formed a makeshift shrine on the wall. I guess he couldn't bear to have his accomplishments gathering dust in a box. Pops never even went up there, though. There was furniture...a wooden rocker, an antique mirror, some tables and a buffet. 3 generations of Stewarts had lived in our house. And because we were all related, there was never a need to clear out all the things that didn't belong. Each generation had it's own secret treasures and a few more were deposited every year. It was a real archive of memories. I had staked out my own space on the far side, next to the only window. A palette of blankets and pillows took the ache out of the hardwood floor and provided me with warmth during the out-of-summer months. My journals were hidden there too, but I would never say where.

It was hotter than a kiln in that attic. My skin that was merely sticky on the way across the yard began to liquefy once I shut the door behind me. I had to shut it though. I didn't want any surprises. I stomped, extra loud, over to my palette of blankets just in case Robert was paying attention. He could hear me up here, I knew that, so it would do me no good to try and be silent. Better to let him believe that I was just carrying on business as usual. I sat down and creaked around for dramatics sake. After I was sure I hadn't done anything unusual I rolled over onto my stomach and stretched my thin body out over the dusty strips of pine that made up the attic floor. Distributing my weight as evenly as possible would minimize the protesting moans from the floor. It was necessary for me to simultaneously push with my toes and do a waterless breaststroke to propel myself towards my destination. Like a crippled iguana I silently slithered towards the corner of the attic that was above Robert's room. Sweat rolled off of my nose into perfectly round droplets that were erased by my slithering body, gliding behind them. The summer before 8th grade I was letting my hair grow out. My ponytail holder had loosened allowing wisps of red to run astray and paste themselves across my eyes and mouth.

I reached the corner without any mishaps. I could already hear Robert on the phone. He had probably not even heard me enter the attic. Without thinking, I raked my fingers through my unruly bangs, lifting them back up onto my head. The dust that had gathered on my hands during my voyage across the attic eagerly mixed with the moisture on my face forming a thin mud. Great...war paint. That wasn't the worst of it, I had to sneeze. I pulled the collar of my shirt up and pressed my eyes shut. Yellow stars filled my head as I silently blew my brain out. I opened my eyes. Robert was still talking. Behind my great grandfather's accordion was the last tool I would need. My hand fished out one of mom's crystal highball glasses, the best for acoustics. I was ready to infiltrate.



Granted, I was only thirteen years old and a native to a sequestered town on a Kansas

prairie. Most evils of the world never made so much as a pit stop in Fayetteville. But there were plenty of things I'd heard. Some things made sense, others didn't make sense for years. Had I been using a juice glass or one of Katy's jelly jars that day I would have written off what I heard as a poor connection and reminded myself of why I prefer highballs. But that wasn't the case. I heard everything just fine, but, for the life of me I had no idea what Robert was up to.

"All I'm saying is that the bigger the bowl, the bigger the bite we take. I say we look into some plastic party cups. You know, the kind you can see through...minimize expenses."

Party cups? Robert was having a party?! Probably he had the inside scoop on when mom and dad were going to visit aunt Myrna in Gardena and he was...

"Yeah," he laughed. "They're invisible!"

Invisible? What was he talking about? I plugged my ceiling side ear with a dusty right pinky finger.

"What difference does it make what we say? Listen, you just leave that to me. As long as we're on the same page it's not gonna make one monkey's ass bitta difference. I'm gonna handle the publicity. I'm gonna handle it. It'll help us keep a thumb on you know who. Tomorrow morning." A brief silence. "Yeah. Yeah, you just get the cups, clear ones...and some vizqueen. Yeah."

The receiver clicked as he placed it back on the base and Robert's bed gave a wince as he lay down on it...and I froze. Great. No phone, no distraction. We were facing each other, through my floor and his ceiling. Any move I made would immediately give away my whereabouts.

"Sophie! Katie! Robert! Supper!" A savior my mother was! Robert jumped up from his bed and skipped out of his room. I waited until I heard him banging down the stairs before I moved, just to be sure.

Pops was like clockwork. And mom prided herself in positioning the last dish of food on the table just as he returned home from the shop. The two of them shared that subtle reliability and I'm sure it quietly helped them maintain a sense of order in their lives when things got chaotic. He had parked in the driveway that day and reached the door to the kitchen the same time I did.

"Hi Strawberry," he said pushing those runaway bangs out of my face to get a better look. "You look like you've been mining!" We both stopped.

"Mining?" Uh oh, the dirt on my face...

"Yeah, your face is smudged." He traced my war paint with his pointy right. "What have you been up to?"

I jumped up the stairs as quickly as I could. "Just playing. I'm going to wash. I missed you today pops!"



He was right. When I looked in the washroom mirror, I thought mining was probably a compliment. I looked like I'd been drinking the oil out of an 18 wheeler.

During dinner I kept my eyes glued on Robert, hoping for a comment or some hint about his transparent party cups. Nothing. It was obvious to me that he was preoccupied though. There was no usual summer chatter of baseball scores or riverbed barbecues. Katy had a crisis, reserved for preteens...Clifford Drexyl was picking on her. Mom looked to pops for reinforcement that that is, in fact, what young men do when they're fond of a young lady. Pops gave up no ground.

"Hmph," was his only advice. I sat quietly, that was usual enough. Robert gave no direction about his newest venture, verbal or otherwise. To this day I can think of few things stronger than the drive of a teenage girl's curiosity to explore the nuances of her older brother's lifestyle. I wasn't giving up.

The next morning I awoke with the morning sun. The dark green silhouette of sweat on my pistachio pillowcase told me I had another Kansas July day to look forward to. Six thirty in the morning and it had to be a sticky 80 degrees already. Without taking the time to bathe, I pulled on my blue sneakers and jumped down the stairs to the kitchen. Mom was tending the stove as pops sat catatonic, his eyes on the paper in his left hand, his right hand suspending a cup of coffee halfway to it's destination. Katy and Robert were still sleeping.

"You're up early," mom observed as she used salad tongs to fish out a clump of bacon strips from the big cast iron skillet and then set them on the paper towel that would absorb all of their fatty yumminess.

"Yeah I couldn't sleep," I said, probably too quickly. The white noise sizzling from the frying pan gave me some refuge from conversation, but I figured I better make a quick exit.

To be continued...

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