

Not Yet Summer

by

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Prologue

For almost seven years the warehouse had been empty. Once the town had made a profit leasing it to a succession of companies, but now it was too small for modern business needs, and so it stood abandoned and unnoticed among the squat, grey buildings that lined the cemented-up banks of the town's dying stream. As winter turned to summer and then to winter again, the building became rundown, its windows broken, the locks on the doors smashed. There was no money available either to tear down or to modernize the warehouse; so it stood as it was, empty, except for occasional strays that took refuge before looking elsewhere for a home.

Chapter One

Marylee

When the alarm clock went off, Marylee slapped it with her hand, then lay back, trying to recapture the haven of sleep. There had been a dream – a rare thing of happiness and warmth. It lingered in her consciousness like beads of sunlight strung out in a haze, warming and drawing her. If she could just sleep awhile longer...

“Marylee!” Mrs. Watson rapped sharply on the door to her bedroom. “Get up. I heard that alarm, so there’s no use pretending you didn’t. You’d better not be late for school again!”

Marylee heard her walking briskly down the hall and pictured her squat form, her small-featured face. Her foster mother’s face was routinely kind, but somehow it never warmed to affection.

Reluctantly Marylee opened her eyes. She stared at the blue wall with the framed

magazine picture of a boy hauling in a fish from a foaming stream.

It was one of the two things in the room she really cared for – in spite of the grinning boy. The rest of the room was like the intent of the picture – square, dull and boyish. The Watsons had always had boys as foster children before, and the room was still impersonally geared to the male gender. The only concession to her sex was the bouquet of artificial flowers hastily stuck in one corner.

Except for the boy's intrusion into the scene, the picture evoked a wild freedom that Marylee longed for. There were old trees, some bent, some upright, all crowding down to the stream. The water gurgled and rushed over the rocks, foaming around the jagged edges. Way off in the background were mountains, misty blue and solitary.

Once, between foster homes, Marylee had been sent to a camp in country like that – a magic time. Her raging soul had emptied into the laughing water, and the twisting hurt and loneliness had drifted away into a haze. The silent trees had crowded close, feeling warm and loving when she stretched her childish arms around them. She had never cared for the lifelessness of her doll after that – after she had hugged the cool, living warmth of the great trees.

And the counselor had not told Marylee she was odd when she had whispered that she imagined the trees as people who would love her and sweep down their leaves to hug her. The gentle woman had smiled, and three days later had given her a book about four children who had found a country where trees walked and animals talked. She still had the book, ragged now from her love of it, carefully placed in the locked box where she kept her few treasures.

But the camp had been almost six years ago, when she was only eight – when her short, weak leg had simply made her feel miserably different from the other people who drifted into and out of her life. She had been too young then to realize that her lameness was a curse, the reason she was always alone, always alone and hated.

“Marylee!” Mrs. Watson called sharply. “For heaven’s sake, are you going to get up?”

Marylee’s lips pursed as familiar hatred drove the old memories away. Resentfully she pulled herself up and finally lurched out of bed. She was hungry. Might as well get up and eat.

But first she paused to examine the pale green flower shoots in the plastic pot balanced on the narrow window ledge. Marylee had filled the pot with earth from the garden

as soon as the ground had thawed, almost a month ago. Before long the small shoots would bud and then flower.

A slight smile, stiff because it so rarely appeared, hovered on her lips. She loved small, growing things, things she could care for and make blossom. Once someone had said that she had “a way” with her. Marylee still cherished that stray compliment.

The kitchen smelled good when she finally limped downstairs. Pancakes and sausages, she noted with a tinge of pleasure. Mrs. Watson was a good cook, and as people went, she wasn’t too bad. She talked too much about Marylee’s limp, but at least she didn’t look away or drip sickening pity over her, as most people did.

Once Marylee had thought the people cared and had been merely embarrassed by their reactions. But as little incident had piled on little incident over the years, her naive hopes about people had been worn away, leaving only a cynical hatred of them all.

“Good morning,” Mrs. Watson said, too brightly.

Marylee sat down wordlessly and helped herself from the heaped plates on the table.

“There’s something I have to talk to you about, dear,” Mrs. Watson began after an uncomfortable pause.

Marylee looked up at her for a moment and clenched her jaw slightly. She hated that false word, “dear.” When people called her that, they never meant it.

Nervously Mrs. Watson wiped her hands on a towel.

“Mr. Watson and I have talked about this a lot lately, so I don’t want you to think it’s a hasty decision. Or a personal one either,” she added, with an embarrassed titter that was foreign to her normal manner. “But we feel we’re really too old to continue parenting as we have in the past. We want to live our lives more for our own enjoyment now – travel a bit, get prepared for our retirement. So I’m afraid we’ll have to give you up. We’ve already told Mrs. Wojansky of our decision, and the Children’s Aid are trying hard to find a new home for you. I hope you understand our position, dear....”

There was a long, cold pause as, fork suspended halfway to her mouth, Marylee stared at her foster mother.

“Yeah, sure. Why not?” she said loudly, indifferently.

Deliberately she resumed eating, trying to ignore the sick feeling of fear churning in her stomach. Another home – another set of people to discover how much they really didn’t like her.

I hate them. I hate them.... The words ground through her mind. But she had to seem normal. She had to go upstairs, brush her teeth, collect her books and sweater.

She found herself counting everything – the number of times the toothbrush slid over her teeth, the number of steps she took to cross the hall and enter her room, the number of papers she flipped through to find her homework page.

One, two, three, four, five... one, two, three... one... one...

Fiercely she bit her lip and forced her mind away from the monotonous drone of the number counting – her instinctive refuge from the searing hurt that was boiling up in her throat.

Oh, how she hated them....

“Time to go to school,” Mrs. Watson called up the stairs. “Don’t forget to take a sweater. It’s not summer yet.”

Numbly Marylee picked up her sweater and backpack and left for school.

The spring sun shone at an angle through the broken window of the warehouse, making Marylee’s shadow strangely long and distorted on the debris-strewn floor. She didn’t notice, however. Her eyes were shut, her body hugged

to herself as she tried to raise memories of that beautiful warm forest and stream.

*Aspens shiver, red maples wave,
While I and my enemies lie
Still
In the grave.*

She shivered with melancholy pleasure at the poem she had made up. But she would have to go soon. They would all be looking for her.

“So who cares!” she whispered, tossing her head so the straight strands of brown hair slid over her shoulders for a moment before they drooped back around her face. She hugged herself tighter, relishing the feelings of hate that had soared through her that morning at school.

The sun, unusually hot and bright for the last day of March, was beating down on the asphalt of the school yard. Marylee leaned back against the wall of the school so that the shadows shrouded her slightly.

A group of girls had organized a game of skipping. Normally they would have felt themselves too mature to indulge in such a childish game, but the sunshine and the fresh

air had raised their spirits. A hint of wistfulness grew in Marylee's mind as she watched them. Angela had a new outfit – another of the many things her parents showered on her curly blonde head. She was in the center of the girls now, laughing merrily.

As usual, they ignored Marylee.

She wondered what it would be like to be included in everything the gang did. Well, maybe she'd give it a try. A week or two more – a month at the most – and she'd be gone anyway.

She pulled herself upright and stared at the other girls. Taking a deep breath, she limped toward them, chin lifted. In a moment Marylee stood beside her giggling classmates, waiting stiffly for someone to acknowledge her presence. No one said anything.

“I want to play,” she announced loudly.

The other girls looked at her in embarrassment. One of the gushy ones regarded Marylee's leg with obvious pity. “Do you think you should?”

“I want to play!” Marylee repeated in staccato tones.

“You can't just barge in where you haven't been invited. Jeez, are you rude!” Angela remarked, placing her hands on her hips and glaring at Marylee.

“It’s a free country,” Marylee said defiantly, breathlessly. “If I want to play, I can.”

There was a cold pause. Miserably, Marylee realized she had done it all wrong – but there was no way to back down or to smooth over her presence.

“All right, if you want to play,” Angela snapped, “then play!” She threw one end of the long skipping rope to another girl, so that Marylee was in the center. Then she began turning the rope.

Desperately Marylee hopped, trying to keep her balance despite her bad leg. Once, twice she managed to jump the rope. But Angela twisted it faster and faster and the rope began slapping Marylee’s ankles as it turned first one way and then another.

“You wanted to play,” Angela taunted. “Well, play then!”

Marylee stood still, frozen, as the rope snapped painfully across her skin. The circle of giggling girls closed in on her, snickering louder and louder. Marylee’s hate churned up, pounded in her head, and finally broke loose.

She grabbed the swinging rope, jerking it out of the girls’ hands. Then she shoved Angela, hard. Angela staggered slightly and Marylee pounced on her, pushing and shoving, finally tripping her.

“I’ll show you!” Marylee shouted wildly, bouncing heavily onto Angela’s stomach. “Have some dirt! It suits you!”

Gleefully she rubbed handfuls of dirt and gravel into Angela’s clothes, all the while jabbing at her with her knees.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Angela shrieked. Her eyes were streaming with tears. The other girls stood in a circle, openmouthed and unmoving.

“Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!” Marylee screamed in glorious, roaring hate.

Then suddenly she felt someone pulling on her arms. The roaring died slightly. A teacher yanked Marylee roughly to her feet.

“What’s going on here?” she demanded furiously, shaking Marylee’s arm. “Who started this?”

“Marylee did!”

“Marylee started it! She shoved Angela down!” “She called her a bitch!”

“She rubbed dirt all over Angela and we couldn’t stop her!”

“Marylee!”

The sun was low now, the shadows almost melted. Marylee’s shorter, weaker leg had begun to feel numb. Cautiously she flexed her toes, waiting for the pins-and-needles feeling of returning circulation.

I'll take another look at my garden, she told herself. No way she would run home for them.

The garden was a patch of sandy soil where the concrete had broken up. Marylee had spent long, painful hours carrying the heavy chunks of cement to where she could dump them into the sluggish green water of the stream. Her limp had become worse from the strain.

But she had a garden all her own. No one else knew the feel of that coarse sand-dirt, or the rich smell of good peat moss and fertilizer worked into the soil. In her mind she could smell and feel every particle of the ground she was making come alive. Soon there would be flowers – something beautiful left behind even after they sent her to a new foster home.

Well, she could spend lots of time nursing the ragged patch of earth now – the principal had suspended her. There was a lot of talk which had floated by her exhausted indifference. Telephone calls, too. Everyone was informed – Mrs. Wojansky, her case manager, and the Watsons, her soon-not-to-be foster parents.

There were many solemn words, heavy pauses, and meaningful noises from the principal's mouth. Marylee paid no attention;

it didn't matter. Then he told her to go get her things and wait on the bench in the outer office.

She just shrugged at him and tried to saunter casually out of the office. But instead, she limped, her weak leg making the harsh *shuuing* sound she hated. She limped down the empty halls, hearing lonely echoes of other kids in their classes. Once she had retrieved her backpack and sweater, she had slipped out a back entrance and walked to the warehouse – her warehouse. No one knew she came here.

“Who would care anyhow?” she muttered defiantly as she limped across the floor toward the small window. Who cares about *anything*, she thought as she put her head out the square, glassless hole. She folded her elbows on the sill, peered down at the worked soil of her garden below and then out at the smelly stream only a few yards away.

Maybe once you were a real brook, she thought, not all poisoned and crippled by the cement. A real brook....

A shrill bark pierced the quiet. A dog! A dog had trotted up and was digging at her garden, ripping out her seeds!

“Stop! Get away!” Marylee shrieked. She beat her arms, trying desperately to slap the dog away. But the window was too high.

Frantically, she looked around for help. A boy with a lean face and uncombed hair was standing a short distance away, grinning and sipping on a carton of milk.

“Stop him! Please!” she pleaded.

But he just shrugged and stood by indifferently while the dog tore into her seeds.