

A Shared Summer

That summer, I lost my money.

When school let out for the summer, the house grew smaller. With all five of us kids home from school during the day, chaos became the rule instead of the exception.

To be clear, the chaos belonged to my three younger brothers, not me. I was conscious of the dignity required from a girl who had just finished ninth grade. Aside from occasional thrift store mornings with Mom, I spent my time reading my way through books, and then through shelves of books.

Mom said I was “quiet as a mouse,” which meant she appreciated my calm personality. But some days, when three boys ran wild through the house, I wished my personality commanded more respect.

I tried my best. Once, I hid every nerf gun I could lay my hands on. My brothers began shooting each other with rubber bands.

I guess Dad got tired of returning from work to a derelict home, because over dinner one night he put down his fork and gave us each a job for the summer. Jack and Philip, who were twins and in seventh grade, would take over all yard work and declutter the shed. My older sister, trying to save for college, held down shifts at both Hobby Lobby and Panera Bread, so Dad let her off at helping Mom with cooking responsibilities.

That left me and James, the youngest and just out of kindergarten, still without a project. Dad looked across the table at James, who generally resided in a world of his own.

James put a forkful of spaghetti in his mouth, opened his lips, and let the spaghetti drop back onto his plate. “Red paint,” he said, to no one in particular. In a house of five children, no one heard the youngest.

Dad looked at me, and then back at James.

The spaghetti I had already eaten began to feel like red paint in my stomach. I could see the direction Dad's brain waves were heading: I knew in an instant that my summer project would entail nothing more than enhanced babysitting.

"Leigh," he said to me. "Leigh, the project that comes to mind is the garden. We spent all that money to put in raised beds—I want to eat *something* out of the garden this year."

He raised his eyebrows at me, asking me for my opinion.

I nodded after two inner breaths. A more interesting job than I had expected. I liked plants; I had succeeded in raising three stalks of corn last year in my school's garden.

"Alright, then. Any ideas what you want to grow?"

I knew without thinking. "Sweet potatoes."

Jack and Philip made gagging noises at each other's faces.

"Working in the garden every week will be the minimum requirement, but if you harvest any sweet potatoes, I'll pay you a bonus."

I sat up a little straighter, and Jack and Philip stopped gagging. "Will you pay us too?" they asked. "You can pay us too!"

Dad looked at me with faith in his eyes. "And James can help you with the garden."

The bomb had dropped.

A week later, Mother bought me sweet potato slips—twenty-five of them. Dad and I had ironed out a flat rate of 50 cents per edible potato harvested at the end of the summer. I wanted to make a hundred dollars this summer, if I could.

The catch would be James.

That afternoon, James sat in his room, talking to a corner of stuffed animals. From outside his door, I watched his small back bend over as he whispered something in the ear of one animal, and then another, and then another.

I stuck my head inside his door frame but kept my feet outside. “James, you ready to go plant the sweet potatoes?”

His head tilted to one side, and I knew he had heard me.

I waited. He bent over and whispered in the ear of another stuffed animal.

Starting off on the right foot mattered. I walked to him in the corner. “Maybe one of your animals can come help us with the sweet potatoes—which one do you think wants to help?”

He looked at me twice, then reached for a stuffed puppy whose ear hung sideways from a tear in its fur.

I waited for him, although my hands folded and unfolded in my lap.

But he stood and came with me. The brown curl hanging at the nape of his neck looked up at me as he gripped the banister of the stairs.

The sun warming the backs of our hair, we poked through the milk-brown soil with our shovels. The dirt hadn’t hardened into clay, like I had feared, but it had dried into dust.

I unwound the hose and watered the first bed. The spray from the hose curved up and then down again onto the dirt, bridging from my hands to the ground.

James watched the water spraying out of the hose.

When I moved on to the second raised bed, James stayed staring at the first, his stuffed puppy puckering under his arm. I watered the last bed and rewound the hose.

The sweet potato slips would drop into a hole in the ground, and then be covered over again. I dug one hole and lowered the roots of one potato slip. When I patted dirt around the

roots, the stalk of the potato plant stood up. I could already imagine the leaves on the stalk bobbing, happy to feel the sun over their heads and the damp dirt under their feet.

I picked up my shovel to dig the second hole. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see James and his dog watching me from the side of the first raised bed.

I looked at my brother.

“James.”

His head tilted, but his eyes looked at the dirt.

I held my shovel out to him. “Can I show you how to plant a potato?”

After two breaths, James put his puppy down on the side of the raised bed and took the shovel.

When we had finished the last potato slip, Mom called us in for dinner. James slipped his hand in my hand. I felt the dirt on his fingers rubbing against the dirt on mine. Looking down at the hair that curled on the nape of his neck, I smiled.

Every morning, James came to find me. I would wake up when his hands found mine and would push my sleepy-slow feet into flipflops.

His ever-present puppy under his arm, we would go together to check the sweet potatoes. When I unwound the hose, he could water each bed of plants if he held the hose nozzle with both hands.

We weeded in the afternoons. James scouted for weeds, tiptoeing around the upright spines of each raised bed. In Mother’s gloves that were twice the size of his hand, he pulled sprouting weeds from the ground wherever he found them.

The sweet potatoes grew tall, and we waited for the day when we could dig them up and count them.

School also came closer. Before I knew it, the last week of summer had come to James and I—and our garden. Soon, I would return to spending my days at school and volleyball practice, and James would start first grade.

Our garden would lie empty.

James and I counted the potatoes. Or, I counted while he sat beside me, his stuffed puppy on his lap. We counted twice: 202 potatoes.

I had made one hundred and one dollars. Dad paid me, and we put the sweet potatoes in a canvas bag in the pantry.

I talked to Mom and Dad for half an hour that night. I had done my homework already, and I thought I had found solutions to their objections. They listened to my proposal.

In the morning, James came to wake me, as he had done all summer. “Can we plant more potatoes?” His hands slid into mine, and my heart sank even as I sat up in bed.

I shook my head. “I have a new project for us—can you help me with it?”

James looked down at my flipflops.

Mother drove James and I to the animal shelter. At first, the noises and smells scared him. James shrank behind my legs when we passed a cage of snakes. He grabbed the side of my jacket. I held his hand, and we soon found the puppy: small and quiet, with brown curls in its fur.

The new project flourished under the attention of three boys. James said the name of the puppy was San Francisco, and the twins called him SanFran for short.

The puppy cost all the money I had—one hundred and fifteen dollars.

Looking back at that summer, though, I would say that I came out ahead.