

In These Our Salad Days

When Ethan steps out the door, Jerome's waiting for him, bouncing a basketball off the side of the house to hurry him up, even though he knows he's only been waiting there two minutes, probably less, even though Jerome always takes his sweet time getting ready, which is the real reason they never meet at his house, although the distance is about the same. He would point this out, rehash an argument they slide into like a well-worn groove, but the heat is hitting him in waves and the sun is screaming in his eyes. Turning around, his vision whites out, and when it clears he can make out the red letters on Jerome's baseball cap. Faded—he plucked it off a fire hydrant one day. Because, he said, what kind of person comes back for a dust-stained old hat, already crumpling in the sun? *Thwack, thwack, thwack*, the ball slaps the wall, wearing patches in the faded paint, Ethan's already out and locking the door.

"Stop doing that," he tells Jerome, "My mom'll freak out if you chip it."

Jerome shrugs, flashing his stupid grin, and pushes up the kick stand on his bike. He has a head start, but Ethan chases after, fast enough to cut in front of him as they skid into the road. There's only one puddle in the street, a measly paint-jar brown pooling in a pothole. Jerome takes care to splash through it, spraying them both. Even the muddy water is lukewarm.

They pull up to the curb in front of the drugstore, their usual spot. It's not like they have any money, but the vending machine is old and rusty and takes so long to work that sometimes people think it's broken, curse and walk away. They can recover the Coke or candy when it finally comes tumbling out. They slouch on the curb, squeezed under the half-hearted shade of the one, sickly tree. Even there, the pavement sears their palms, and Ethan scoots forward so that only the shorts-sheathed parts of his thighs are touching it. Jerome, for some reason, is fully clothed, though it must be a hundred degrees out. The collar of his green bomber jacket is already darkening with sweat. It's early yet—by the end of the day, their hands will leave stains on each other's clothes, like bloody prints in the thriller they will watch that night.

Jerome's already squinting down the street, anticipation in his chin, because that's what they come here for after all: people-watching. Already, a kid in running shorts is loping by, music leaking from the headphones resting around his neck, sticky on his skin.

"*Gonna take my horse to the oldtown road*," Jerome sings along obnoxiously, bumping their shoulders together.

"Don't *touch* me like that, it's too hot."

They both sit up a little straighter when a harried man in a suit and tie walks towards them. This is what they have been waiting for. He's balancing a tray of Starbucks coffees in one hand, clutching a cell phone to his ear with the other, strained hums of curiosity, agreement. His shoulders shrug and squirm, uncomfortable in stiff, itchy cloth. They hold their breath as he approaches the pavement crack—watch with sadistic glee as—he trips, coffee splattering, curses flying from his lips and into the phone. They pretend to look at the street as he ends the call with desperate apologies, stumbles on his way. Out of infinite courtesy, they wait for him to turn the corner before sprawling into laughter.

When they quiet, Jerome crinkles his eyes at Ethan, a familiar expression. "Hey," he says, like an impulse he's been brooding on for ages, "Let's run away."

Ethan laughs, and Jerome shrugs his shoulders, like it needed to be said. This time, it's Ethan who reaches out to pinch the thick fabric of Jerome's jacket.

A woman with a small dog and a minidress ambles by them into the drugstore. She's in her mid-thirties at least, but Jerome still makes a show of trying to see up her skirt. They squint to watch her through the window, dog in arms, its crumpled face pressed against her skinny bicep. They wait as she moves around, out of sight, and perk up as the door chimes and she emerges again, blinking in the light. Her dog yaps and whines, and she sets him down, dripping with coos and sickly endearments. Ethan looks towards Jerome, raises his eyebrows and moves his jaw to indicate his revulsion. Jerome nods slightly, an emphatic agreement.

"I want a dog," Ethan says anyway, as the woman sways away, dragging the creature behind her.

"Not a fluffball one like that, though," Jerome replies, wrinkling his nose.

"Nah, I want a real, proper dog. Like a big one, to wrestle with or whatever. I don't know."

Heat rises from the pavement like steam now, and the air ripples with mirages. An oil spill across the street glistens with lazy colors. A man drags two melting, slouchy children into the store, and Jerome loses patience with the day. He unfolds himself and jumps to his feet. "Let's go," he says, already picking up his bike. Ethan joins him, palms rough and red with gravel indents from the sidewalk. They don't discuss where they're going. There aren't many places to go.

At the public pool, they know better than to leave their bikes in the racks without locks, so they hide them around behind the changing rooms, tucked against sloppy concrete walls, shoes tossed aimlessly beside them. This time of day, the pool is clogged with screaming children and wilting caretakers. Deflated rubber ducks rot and mold in puddles on the pavement, goggles litter the borders of the tile, kids squeal as they bob on noodles and parents groan and coddle crying babies. They hate it here, but it's the only place where they can swim for free, and they are cheapskates even when they do have cash. Ethan kneels, cups his hand in the water. Warm, disgusting. He warns Jerome, who rolls his eyes and shoots a disdainful look at the pool. A father is yelling at a little boy drinking the chlorine; they both scrunch up their faces.

The tile is burning under their bare feet. Even callous-hardened by a summer of gravel-roads and misplaced shoes, it feels like the nerve endings are aflame. Still, Ethan beckons Jerome over his shoulder as they hop and slide around the edge until they're standing above the deep end. This is where the old people swim, their heads slick with swim caps and bug eyed with goggles. It incites a certain nausea in both of them, a repressed repulsion they will release in subtle giggles to each other. There is a straggling line for the flimsy diving board, so they just stand at the edge, looking down at the blue bottom of the pool through half-hearted waves. The air seems to press like a weight at their backs.

One, two, three, and then Jerome jumps, wild and flailing, smashing the water. He resurfaces, shaking his head like a dog and snorting. Eyes open and stinging, he grabs Ethan's leg and pulls him crashing down alongside him. They splash and swear at each other in the water. The life guard yells at them, voice swallowed in the distance. When they quiet, they float upright, looking at each other with blurry eyes. Around them, shouts echo, and the air is thick enough for the sound to bounce off it, once, twice, before being absorbed. The heat is pressing down upon them, and the sun smirks like it knows a secret. The birds are gone, hiding, but Ethan knows they're somewhere—watching them, maybe, like they're coming out of a drugstore. Jerome shakes his head again, and water twinkles on his face. It's hard to feel their feet, sliding around below them, ghostly in all that blue. They stare at each other, and it's quiet in all that noise.

"Hey," Ethan asks. "Want to run away?"

Jerome looks at him, slides into his wide grin. "Okay," he says, "Where do you wanna go?"