

Summer

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The cold dry air is in stark contrast to the shimmering heat outside. He stands just inside the door, feeling the tingle of his skin, arm-hairs pricking reflexively. Money clatters as the cashier tends to the one other person here. He steps aside as that low-rent fellow pushes past, his fuzzy blue slippers shuffling and flapping on the floor. Sunshine burns the air as the tinted door opens and then sighs closed on tired hinges.

Walking to the back of the store he opens a door, exposing ice cream, a burst of frozen air greasy on his skin. No. In the next door are things that might banish the summer misery, that might mask the heat and numb burnt skin. Reverently, he reaches in and lifts a single aluminum can of malt beverage from the rack and carries it to the register.

The attendant scans the can's code, not looking, and her register clicks and dings. He is the only other person in the little store. The attendant doesn't count: she isn't really here, having left in spirit long ago. In her dreams she is outside, burning in the sun; laid out like meat on a grill, absorbing the fiery heat, basting and turning until done. What a fantasy, what a foolishness. He sees her future, darkly tanned and wrinkled like soft leather, made up to cover up, dreaming of surgery and a lost youth that never was.

He picks up the small sack with its small can and nods with his "Thank you". She looks at him blankly.

He touches the handle of the door. Push or pull? This door goes both ways, and both options lead out to the blistering pavement and shimmering fumes of summer. These tinted doors are no less magic than Alice's looking glass; to step through them is to leave one world and enter another. All doors contain magic; passing through their boundary we become something other than what we were. He chuckles at the thought. People don't

notice, but it's true. Walk through the door at your office and what happens? Step into your car and who do you become? Into your bedroom, into your closet. He notices these things.

He pushes the door and crosses into another world.

The heat rolls over him and the clarity of the sun pierces through him; the hairs on his arms curl in response, his irises snap shut, and tears wash over them. The cold can weeps, its tears darkening the corners of the bag. Weary bushes sag in defeat to either side of the path. The ice machine laughs to itself, content in its private frozen world. Cars whoosh and trucks rumble, dust dancing in their wake.

He walks past his parked car to the burnt lawn bordering the store. There were flowers here once, and grass, but now it's pale dirt shaded by windblown papers; discarded bottles take root in the sterile soil. Dead stems crunch under his shoes as he skirts dog shit that might be centuries old. The sun burns in the sky, implacable, immovable, eternal.

Summer. It creeps through the pores of your skin and dries you out from the inside. Spring is a time for growth, for healing rains and joyous sex, with flowers and birds and grasses bursting into fecund life. But spring fades, its flowers fade and crumble, falling back into the brown dust, sinking back into the earth. The grasses that had leapt up to the sun, praising it, are burnt back to the ground by it, Icarus cast down.

Without the sun there would be no life. It is our life-giver, our most ancient deity, both dreaded and worshipped. Too much sun burns away its gift of life. Is it any wonder our gods always give with one hand and take with the other, capricious, whimsical.

Dangerous. Was Prometheus truly our friend, stealing the power of the sun and putting it in our hands? Did he know what seeds he planted? Could he see how that fire would simmer and spread until it burst forth into conflagration, teased and breathed into full fury, fed by human ingenuity?

At the beginning of Summer, people rejoice. They remember the carefree happiness of school vacation and the lazily wasted hours of youth. They remember the first warm days, the cool breezes, the busy nights, the brief love affairs, the freedom from responsibility. They forget the steam and the heat, the sweating sleepless in bed, the gasping desire for a return of the clouds.

Endless Summer, the ballads of old.

In this endless summer

We will be together

And I don't want this feeling to ever end

He peels the dew-damp bag off the can, casts it aside where it dries in the sun and blows under a leafless bush. Clearing a patch of dirt with his foot, he sets the can down. Fresh dew runs down its side, only to be burned away before it is swallowed by the thirsty earth. He feels the earth straining for the moisture, straining to lick the cool moist sides of the can.

There can be too much summer.

He stands and turns in place, eyes drifting along a burnt horizon. Too much. Poor choices have led us to these excesses. The nouveau powerful, the overly clever, the short sighted, the simple minded; children with powerful toys and no guiding conscience. Prometheus had given his flaming gift to the retarded child down the street and now the neighborhood burned to its foundations.

There is a form to be followed, a rhythm.

His feet scabble in the cracked dirt, his canvas and rubber shoes the color of age and regret; ashes to ashes, dust to dust. He ignores a rustle of grass behind him, but not the whispered chuckle that follows, dry and quiet. The sun scrapes along his neck as his

shadow squeezes into a ragged puddle at his feet. Dust billows in a stately waltz, the lifting breeze bringing no relief.

“If not here, then somewhere else,” he answers the unasked question. His words are absorbed by the sounds of traffic; tumbled and broken they fall into dust.

“I’m not here to stop you. I’m here to watch.” The voice was smooth and cool, curling with laughter. “Who are you to fight this? It’s what they asked for, it’s what they wanted.”

He turns to face the voice and sees a man with fluffy blonde hair and sparkling green eyes, whose posture spoke of idle ease, and whose cool white shirt, buttoned to the top, would not have dark stains in the armpits. The man’s light grey suit looked cool and fresh; the dust of the earth danced respectfully away from his polished shoes. “No it’s not. Not really.”

The pale man laughs; his fingers dancing a quick ballet as he lights a cigarette. He makes shooing motions with it. “Go on, I want to see this. Really.”

He looks down at the frayed cuffs of his once black jeans, kneels by the can. The ground crunches, rough and hard and prickly. Dry. With his right hand he taps the pull-tab, the doorway into the can; and again; and a third time. Dreams stir within, refreshing thoughts; cool spring water, the prancing of great horses, bikini-clad beauties dancing in the surf. How could twelve ounces hold so many dreams, mean so much?

He listens. The earth around him holds its breath and listens too, as the blonde man taps ash from his cigarette.

With thumb and ring finger holding the top of the can, his middle finger curls down and catches the tab, lifting until the door cracks open and dreams foam out in a flood.

When you toss a ball into the air there is a moment when it is suspended in the sky, weightless. If you blink you can imagine it floating forever, released from the implacable

pull of gravity, free. In your mind, time stretches thin, stringing that one magical moment into an unearthly experience.

The released beverage sprays out and soaks into the thirsty earth, its spring coolness and pure mountain water flowing out into a parched and desperate world. Dreams spin suspended, glittering, and then splash to the dust.

A breeze teases trash in the gutter, bringing a hint of relief. Swirls of dust and paper follow the corners of the building. Clouds curl, casting wraiths of shade and shadow. A bird twitters in hope.

A quiet tapping sound, rhythmic and steady, as the blonde man golf-claps, sparks bursting from his cigarette at each beat. “Nicely done, very elegant. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen that done with lite beer before. Very creative. Bravo.”

He turns to nod his acceptance of the blonde man’s sarcastic praise. “I wonder, though, if it will work?”

The blonde man executes a graceful shrug as dreams continue to spill into the earth, their foamy white geyser evaporating into the sky. The sun’s light stumbles and falters, caught in a tangle of cloud as a new breeze dances in relief.

He looks out past the blonde man, watches the horizon darken and flicker. A flash and rumble communicate between newly formed clouds as the dust splashes under a heavenly tear. The air crackles with tension as hot winds struggle; dust devils corkscrew into the sky carrying trash and litter into heavenly ascension, the rapture of the garbage. His clothes whip against his body.

The blonde man stands in a bubble of calm, grinding the stub of his cigarette into the curb with his perfect shoe. “Well, good luck to you.” He waves once and turns away, stepping into his clean white car.

He leans against the growing wind, shielding his eyes to watch the blonde man glide off into the storm. Dark pock-marks fade around him, sucked into the earth or evaporating in the still-oppressive heat.

The Eastern sky darkens, the horizon now lost in a grey blur. Trees bend and power lines ripple as hot winds drive across the landscape; they pour over him, filling his ears with dirt and catching sand in his mouth, grinding it into his eyes. The metal can tips over into the mud.

The cleansing wind passes to the darkening West.

The sun burns down onto his head, sears his shadow into the ground, curls the dry grass. He looks at the building. The bird is gone.

Under the relentless sun he returns to his car and climbs into this rolling oven. The engine coughs and starts, rumbling and stuttering asthmatically. The steering wheel is hot under his hands as he bounces out of the parking lot and onto the dry arterial roadway. Soon he is swallowed up by the horizon, just one more transitory speck, while the attendant in the store dreams her dreams of lazy quiet days in an endless Summer.