

## **The Last Summer**

By

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It wasn't until summer vacation started when Colette and I came together. She called me one day and said she wanted to come over and talk. We were neighbors. She lived on the next street over, and getting to her house meant trekking through the woods and crossing a dam at the end of a large duck pond that separated our streets.

After she called I raced around the house, picking up various clutter and changing my clothes in a panic. Beyond just being an honors student, Colette was probably the most popular girl in school. She had an uncanny gift to transcend all high school cliques—to be accepted and liked by everybody. Why she wanted to talk to me was irrelevant at the time; she was on her way over, and my excitement bubbled over in teenage exuberance.

It was late afternoon when she arrived—that time of day when the sun seems to hang in the horizon not really setting but not hot enough to scorch. This is my favorite time of day. The light seems to have mystical quality—a golden glow that excites all the senses, when shadows are longest and dusk begins to creep in like a mellowing, purplish

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haze. Seeing Colette in this light made me want to take her in my arms. She was a year younger than I, but her big, blue eyes reflected an innocence that was simply captivating. She smiled at me when I opened the door and gave me a warm hug. Her athletic figure rippled sensuously beneath the light, cotton top she was wearing.

We went out to the back porch and sat down in overstuffed, wicker furniture and looked out over the lawn. My nervousness made me feel more awkward than ever. Not having any experience in these situations, I wondered if I should make a move on her. I was deeply attracted to her, but I didn't have the self-confidence to even try to touch her. Instead, I tried to seem worldly and aloof.

“So, how's your summer going?” she finally asked.

“Good, good,” I replied. “How about yours?”

“Good,” she said. After a slight pause she looked at me seriously and said, “I've been spending a lot of time alone this summer just reading and relaxing.”

I was puzzled. Colette always had people around her and was the life at all the parties. Her friends were among the most chic and admired people in school.

“Have you been going out much?”

“Not really. I just need to get away from everybody for a while. I want to get to know new people. You seem pretty interesting, and I never really got a chance to know you. I thought this summer would be a good opportunity for us to get to know each other better.”

I was flabbergasted! Colette wanted to get to know me? I was skeptical of her intentions. After all, I was probably the most unpopular person in school. Colette was always rallying for some social cause, and for a moment I felt as though I were one of her

causes. But, inside, I knew Colette was offering me a gift I could never refuse. My isolation was killing me; she was my ticket out of my loneliness.

With that, we simply made an unspoken pact to spend the summer together. I was ecstatic. Self-doubt, however, crept into my consciousness. I pushed it back. We talked until dark. It was a warm night and a soft breeze tousled her hair. The fireflies were thick and we delighted in their soft glow as we walked across the lawn. I talked about my dreams of becoming a writer, bragged about my exploits in Europe, and spoke teary-eyed about the beauty of dawn in the Swiss Alps. There was zaniness to my personality then, as if I were poking fun at all that was conventional and mundane. Beneath my zaniness lay an insatiable need for attention. She understood that too, and seemed to have an infinite amount of patience.

As summer progressed, Colette and I grew closer. We spent our days together at the beach in Sandy Hook, and at night we'd talk about everything. One evening we sat in her room and she burst into tears. I took her hand and held it tightly.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“It’s my father. He’s dying of cancer.”

“Oh, Colette! I’m so sorry,” I said, taking her in my arms. She trembled slightly, and I felt her tears moisten my shoulder.

“I never got to know him. He always worked late, and on weekends all he did was watch sports.”

“Now’s the time to get to know him better.”

“He won’t let me in. He just wants to be left alone,” she sobbed.

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I stroked her hair and held her until her sobs turned to heavy sighs. After that we developed a bond forged of pain—our own invincible world filled with laughter and adventure. I awoke each morning looking forward to seeing her. Eventually, my old lifestyle had no meaning for me. I stopped going to the beach club and tennis club. The fact that I had no friends aside from Colette didn't bother me.

One hot night, Colette and I sat together on our back porch, both of us sweating and lethargic in the sultry night air. I could see the outline of her nipples beneath her thin cotton shirt, and could barely contain my desire for her.

She saw me looking at her and smiled. “Why don't we go skinny dipping?” she asked.

“Okay,” I replied, trying my best not to sound too eager.

I felt a sense of anticipation and danger, as if we were about to do something neither of us was ready for. We walked up to the top of the street where there was a huge house with a large swimming pool. The people who lived there were new in the neighborhood, and they made it very clear that the neighborhood kids were unwelcome.

Colette and I cut through their yard and hid in the bushes, scoping out the house. It looked as though everyone was asleep. We hid behind the pool house and slipped out of our clothes. The only sounds were that of chirping crickets and the excitement of my breath. I tried not to watch too intently as Colette slipped off her shorts and pulled off her t-shirt. She stood in front of me completely naked and unabashed. Her breasts were perfect, and my body began to shake as I pulled clumsily at my clothes.

She giggled and then took my hand as we went down to the pool. The air was still and quiet. Without a whisper we slipped into the water. The cool water rippled over my

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skin as I moved through it. Colette came over to me and pressed her body up against mine. As she put her hands around my waist and pulled me down to kiss her, my whole body throbbed with excitement.

Just then, all the lights in the house seemed to come on at once, and we heard somebody yell, “You goddamn kids get the hell out of my pool!”

We jumped out of the water, gathered up our clothes, and ran naked across the lawn toward the street. I thought I heard sirens in the distance.

“We’d better split up,” I said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said, kissing me on the lips. I watched her run naked down the street toward her house, and then ran home. That night I lay in bed thinking about her strong, supple body. The memory of her naked breasts pressed against my chest gave me an erection that wouldn’t go away. I masturbated three times before falling asleep.

The next morning I was awakened by the sound of my mother calling. She sounded angry, and her words were already beginning to slur from an early start on her usual gin fizzes. I went downstairs groggy with sleep and fearful of the tone in her voice. A cop was standing at the front door with my underwear draped over his index finger as if he were waving a flag. He flicked them in my face when he saw me.

“The next time you go skinny dipping, make sure you take your name tag out of your underwear,” he said, snickering. I was mortified. I must have had on an old pair from my summer camp days. My mother thanked the policeman for his time. No charges were pressed.

After he left she slapped me across the face. “You were with Colette, weren’t you!”

I simply looked at her. I knew what was about to come, and I wasn’t about to encourage her. She grabbed my hair with both hands and shook my head violently back and forth. “Goddamn it!” she screamed. “I will not have you running around sullyng the reputation of nice young girls and ruining the reputation of this family!”

I glared at her with so much anger I could hardly contain myself. “Don’t worry about the reputation of our family, Mom. You’ve already ruined it.” The anger in her face told me I’d better run. I heard her screaming something, but I was already at the end of the driveway. I ran down the street and through the woods to Colette’s house. She and her mother were sunning themselves by the pool when I emerged from the woods at the edge of their property, all sweaty and out of breath. They looked up at me with surprise and bewilderment.

I did my best to calm myself down and walked over to them. I was intimidated by Colette’s mother; she always looked at me as though I were some sort of curious stranger from another world. Colette knew something was wrong. She took me inside. I was shaking, and she held me in her arms to calm me down. I told her about the cop, skipping the part about the fight with my mother. She thought the whole thing was hilarious, and she laughed so hard that I eventually had to laugh, too. Apparently she hadn’t been found out. I thanked God. If Colette’s parents knew about what happened, we’d be through.

We spent the day at the beach, laughing and playing among the dunes at Sandy Hook. It was a beautiful, cloudless day. Colette and I held hands as we walked along the water. The tide was low, and the waves rolled into shore with perfect form. I bodysurfed

while Colette read on the beach. We didn't talk about what happened last night, but I had the feeling she was much more experienced than I. Being ashamed of my virginity, I told her stories of sexual conquests with various European women, drawn mostly from my fervent, adolescent fantasies. Colette listened and smiled, remarking how lucky I was to have so many unusual experiences.

By the end of the day we were both pretty sunburned. Colette drove me home. As we turned into my driveway, I could see my parents through the kitchen windows. My mother was leaning against the counter with a cocktail glass in her hand. She looked pretty drunk. I saw my father glare at me as Colette leaned over and kissed me good-bye. I went inside with a feeling of dread, preparing myself for the bloodbath I was about to take.

Colette honked as she drove away, and I stood in the doorway, waiting. My father walked up to me and slammed his fist into my nose, knocking me against the wall. I felt my knees buckle, and I collapsed into the corner. I tasted blood as it ran down my nose and across my lips.

“Get up, goddamn you,” my mother hissed, kicking me in the leg. I staggered to my feet. I was cornered, with nowhere to run.

“If you ever talk that way to your mother again I'll beat you within an inch of your life,” my father said. He stood at least four inches taller than me, and the anger in his eyes terrified me.

“What's this about you and Colette skinny dipping?” he asked.

“We were just swimming.”

“She's only sixteen, for Christ's sake!” my mother yelled.

“You may think you’re a big man running around the neighborhood with Colette, but in my book, you’re only about this high,” he said, gesturing with his hand at his hip.

“I don’t know who you think you are,” my mother yelled. “Colette is an honors student and you’re nothing but a goddamn loser. You’ll ruin her life if you get her pregnant.”

“We were just swimming,” I protested.

“Shut-up!” she yelled. “From now on you are grounded!”

“And tomorrow you’re going to do some yard work around here. I want the grass cut and the hedges trimmed.” Cutting the grass took two days, and trimming the hedges was a never ending battle.

“Now get out of my sight. You make me sick!”

I went upstairs and looked in the mirror. My face was smeared with blood, but my nose wasn’t broken. Colette called later that evening. I told her that I had to do yard work for a few days. She understood. When I was punished yard work was what I had to do. My parents considered it akin to hard labor, and considering the size of our yard, that wasn’t far from the truth. She never asked why I was being punished. Most of the time, it was too complicated to explain. We rarely talked about my parents. Perhaps if I had tried she would have listened, but the subject remained in the closet, both of us knowing it was too big to handle. She had seen my mother drunk and had watched my father when some mysterious rage would well up in his eyes, making me cringe from him in fear. Colette knew there was pain in me, but I did my best to hide it out of guilt and shame. Besides, Colette was my happiness, and I wasn’t going to let my family situation take that away. I

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spent the next few days dutifully mowing the lawn and trimming the immense, overgrown hedges that threatened to overtake our property.

My parents fought with each other more often as summer progressed. By August, my mother was drinking so heavily I wasn't sure she'd live to see the end of summer. My father hardly came home at all anymore. I was relieved; he wasn't around to terrorize me, although I knew it was just a question of time before he didn't come back at all, leaving me alone with my drunken mother.

My curfew was a joke. Our house was so big they could never monitor my movements. Besides, my mother was dead drunk by nine, and my father was usually out. Even so, Colette and I saw less of each other. Her father had taken a turn for the worse and had to be hospitalized. Most of her days were spent with her family at the hospital. Somehow she always seemed to be smiling, as if she were determined to overcome her pain. Colette and I watched the summer slowly wind down. She wanted to do something special before it ended. I agreed. We decided to go camping Labor Day weekend at the Delaware Water Gap. We drove for hours into the woods. Her family owned a cabin at the edge of the river.

We finally arrived at a beaten-down, old shack at the end of a bumpy, dirt road that seemed to wind endlessly through the woods. The place hadn't been touched in a couple of seasons and was in complete disrepair. We opened all the windows and spent the morning cleaning the place out. That afternoon we went tubing in the river. The water was cold and moved at a pretty good clip.

We were shivering when we got out of the water. I started a fire in an old Franklin stove. Without warning Colette took off her bathing suit and stood in front of me naked. I

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stood there, still wet from the river, shivering. She took my hand and led me over to the bed. I was too nervous to do anything. She took off my trunks and we lay on the bed together. I fondled her body—clumsily at first, but she showed me how I should touch her. Slowly, I began to relax, and I felt my body meld with hers. When she was ready, I got on top of her and felt my virginity slip away.

Afterwards, we lay in each other's arms in the soft warmth of the fire.

“John,” she asked. “Do you love me?”

Her face had such a radiant glow of happiness and well-being. Suddenly, I felt a wave of shame wash over me. This girl was too perfect, even if I loved her with all my heart.

“I'm not in love,” I said, “But I definitely love you as a friend.”

Her face suddenly changed. The hurt in her eyes was unmistakable. We didn't make love again. When we arrived at home, I discovered my father had moved in with another woman. I wasn't surprised. My mother was in a drunken stupor in the kitchen. I don't think she realized I was away. I went upstairs, locked myself in my bedroom and sobbed.

Colette's father died during my senior year of high school. Years later I ran into her in California. She had just finished medical school and was about to be married. She looked happy, and her face still had that same radiant glow. She seemed glad to see me, although I was ashamed of what a mess my life had become. I had dropped out of high school and bummed around the country, avoiding work and drinking hard. I still couldn't talk about my parents, although seeing Colette again made me realize I had better start.