

Something Like Summer © 2010 Jay Bell

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Cover art by Andreas Bell

Chapter Two

There were only two days left before school started and Ben hadn't caught sight of Tim once, despite having walked by his house almost twice a day. In his recent attempts, he made sure to use Wilford as camouflage. He was simply walking his dog, just like any other chump in the world. This had made Wilford very happy but hadn't done anything for Ben except increase his sense of frustration. He blamed the ungodly hot August weather that had everyone closing their blinds and cranking up the ACs.

Narrowing down where someone might go jogging was especially difficult in The Woodlands. Countless paved bike paths ran through the entire town, most of them winding around the plentiful number of trees that hid away building facades. Biking across the city without seeing anything more than woods was completely possible. Tim might have stuck to the same path between his house and the small lake when he first moved here, but now he was probably exploring in different directions. Even so, Ben began worrying that Tim was only in Texas visiting family for the summer and had already gone back to wherever he came from.

Hoping that his luck would change, Ben passed once again through Tim's neighborhood on his way home. Thanks to a squirrel with a death wish, Wilford was straining against his leash so hard that Ben didn't even notice the commotion until a voice yelled out with enthusiasm.

"Oh wow! I can't fucking believe it! Oh, sorry mom. It's just so fu-freaking awesome! Thank you!"

Ben gave one last desperate tug on the leash and looked up. Tim was in his driveway jumping up and down around a gleaming, black sports car. A scattering of people watched him, amusement on their faces. Ben took in the balloons taped to the garage doors just as someone said, "Happy birthday." Wilford chose this moment to circle a piece of grass before squatting, bless him, allowing Ben to stand there and gawk openly.

“Thank you so much!” Tim beamed across the car at a man who was the right age and build to be his father before opening the door and diving inside. A second later and the engine exploded into life with a roar. It revved a few times before the passenger window rolled down. “Wanna go for a ride?”

Ben almost said ‘yes’ out loud. There was muttering from the family as they debated who would go or the importance of driving safely. Ben couldn’t hear any of this and had run out of time anyway. Wilford was already dragging him away down the street.

He should have felt happy. He had finally managed to see his dream guy again, but something felt wrong in the pit of his stomach. Ben considered the feeling and realized that it felt akin to having lost a game. The sports car sped by, much too quickly for a final glance, before it tore around the corner. To get a car like that for your birthday! His parents must have been rolling in it. The unease in Ben’s stomach increased.

That was it. Someone like Tim had looks, a perfect body, and a rich family. He was probably a jock and would instantly be popular, despite being new to the area. The chances of Tim even noticing a scrawny outsider like Ben were zero to none. The fantasy had been fun, but Ben abruptly felt as though reality had burst in and crashed the party.

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The first day of school was not going as planned. Allison’s car had broken down the same day that he had witnessed Tim getting the ultimate birthday gift. Ben surmised that there was some cosmic harmony in this. One vehicle had left the world as another was born into existence. Did cars reincarnate? He doubted it. He was being dramatic anyway. Allison’s car wasn’t dead. It just needed a new radiator line. Or was it a sparkplug filter? Ben didn’t have the slightest idea what was wrong with it. He just knew that the car being out of service meant he had to share the bus with a bunch of nervous freshman and immature sophomores. He didn’t even have the comfort of Allison’s company, since her father had insisted on driving her to school.

Ben felt as though he could easily be mistaken for a freshman as he disembarked from the bus. He was slender and short for his age. Five feet nine inches wasn't bad really, but it was becoming apparent that he wouldn't be growing any taller. Alone and distracted, he probably appeared to be arriving at high school for the first time in his life. A disoriented freshman confirmed this, sidling up to him and asking, "How do they expect us to find any of these classes? What's 3E2 mean anyway?"

Ben only shrugged and looked down at his own schedule, even though he knew that the '3' referred to the floor, the 'E' to the east wing of the building, and the final digit indicated the room number. His own first item was 1W0. He didn't need to read the class description to recognize what that was—P.E., or physical embarrassment as he preferred to call it. He swore under his breath and started toward the gymnasium where he would be miserable for an hour every morning for the rest of the semester.

Ben searched for any sign of a familiar face as he pushed through the crowded hallways, but the fates were against him today. He saw many people he recognized, but most of them were the jocks and snobs he despised. The bell rang as he stepped into gym, the hallways still full of baffled new kids. Ben took solace in this. The coach would have to wait until all of them found their way to the gym, the rest of the period hopefully being taken up with issuing uniforms and other trivialities.

He eyed the bleachers with apprehension as he neared them and almost laughed with relief when he saw Leon's tall, stooped form sitting in the highest row, idly toying with one of his dreads. Ben made a beeline for the one person who had made last year's P.E. classes bearable. He made it to the top row of benches unscathed—even though some idiot tried to trip him along the way—and sat down next to Leon, enjoying the aromatic scent of marijuana that surrounded him like cologne.

"Hey, what's up, big guy?" Leon croaked in his all-too-typical stoner's voice.

"Nothing much. I can't believe we have to do this first thing in the morning. It's child abuse."

"At least it's the last year. There's no P.E. for seniors."

"Lucky bastards," Ben muttered. "Hey, maybe the coaches will be too tired to bother making us exercise."

Leon would probably still be too stoned to exercise, Ben realized. That meant Leon would be relaxing on the sidelines instead of participating in whatever idiotic sport was the choice of the week. There were a few times last year when Leon's stash had run dry, leaving him sober and transforming him into an active and capable athlete. Ben hated these times, because it meant he was left alone and defenseless, when he usually would have been hiding behind Leon's magical aura that allowed him to get away with anything. Ben wasn't sure what it was exactly, but the coaches seemed to genuinely like Leon, despite him being a modern day version of the people who protested against the Vietnam War.

Ben let out a sigh as one of these former servicemen came marching into the gymnasium, a handful of nervous-looking freshman trailing along behind like ducklings. There were four different coaches who taught P.E., but the only way to tell them apart was their hair. They were all stocky with limbs as thick as tree trunks. They might have been hot back in their youth, but a war and way too many beers had graced them all with tired faces and prominent guts.

This coach, the one with thinning red hair, took attendance by bellowing out each of their last names. Leon talked all through this, eagerly describing to Ben his uncle's collection of Laserdiscs that he had access to all summer. Film was Leon's topic of choice. If you knew your movies, you were his friend.

"Bendly?" coach repeated.

Ben sighed, knowing that if he corrected the man it would only make him a future target. "Here," he droned.

"I see Steyer managed to graduate from summer school," the coach bantered, sending a pug dog's smile Leon's way.

"Hey, Coach!" Leon answered happily. "They wanted to send me back to junior high but I told them I'd miss you too much."

Coach smiled and continued the roll call. How did Leon do it? If Ben had tried that line he would have been called a queer and told to go run a few laps.

The rest of the period crawled by. Forms for the gym clothes were passed out for them to fill in and bring back the next day. To Ben's despair, the mint green uniforms that always smelled of body odor no matter how many times they were laundered were passed out too, but thankfully there wasn't enough time for them to get changed and play anything. Instead he spent the period listening to Leon talk about the Star Wars movies that he took so seriously. When stoned, he treated the events of the movies as if they were happening in the present along with the rest of the world's events.

"Yoda *has* to know that Luke isn't going to be able to best Vader. He's totally just playing the emotional card and hoping to make Vader break down and cry or something, right?"

Ben didn't have time to respond before the bell rang. He practically dived off the bleachers in a single leap in his eagerness to reach the hallways and look for Allison. Or Tim. Another new period meant another chance for them to be in the same class. Neither of his targets were spotted in the hallway, nor were they in his English class. The next period was his first elective, Spanish, which also failed to contain either of the people he was looking for. There was at least an amusing conflict between the teacher and a kid from Mexico who was looking to earn an easy A.

Lunch period brought relief in the form of Allison. He found her at their usual meeting spot, next to the vending machines in the large cafeteria that linked both wings of the school. They had their choice of seats since they both brought their lunches, while most of the other kids were lining up to buy hot food. As much as Ben was tired of white bread sandwiches, they were better than any of the food choices that the school offered. There were legends of neighboring school districts that allowed the fast food giants to cater for their students, but this district wasn't one of them. This "healthier" food was soggy and flavorless. Even the soft drink machines were filled only with sugar-free lemonade and some

sort of chocolate drinks that didn't contain one grain of cocoa powder.

"Ronnie Adams!" Allison sang out as they sat down at their table.

"Who?" Ben started unpacking his lunch from the brown paper bag, wondering why the name sounded familiar.

"The fine black brother from driver's ed?" Allison prompted. "He's in my home ec class."

Ben snorted and spit the juice box straw from his mouth. "Are you telling me because you think he might be gay?"

"No!" Allison protested. "There's always straight guys on the prowl in home ec. Lord knows that's the only reason I'm taking it. *Anyway*, the nutty old teacher has us sitting alphabetically, and by some miracle he's the only 'A' and I'm the only 'C' with no 'B's' in the middle."

"See? It's good that I refused to take that class."

"You are forgiven," Allison said gracefully. "So how goes it with your 'T'?"

"Technically, it would be 'W' if we are going by last names," Ben corrected. He had long ago scoped out Tim's mailbox and discovered that his family name was Wyman, although thus far he had resisted scrawling *Ben Wyman* on any of his notebooks. "Unfortunately it isn't going anywhere. I was hoping you had seen him."

"Nope," Allison said, swapping her Cheetos for Ben's sour cream Pringles without having to ask. "Maybe he goes to a private school or something."

"Maybe," Ben said, glancing around the cafeteria. There were three different lunch breaks, so there was a fair chance Tim wouldn't share one with them anyway. Ben was glad that he and Allison still shared a lunch period for the third year in a row. He decided to turn his full attention to her and put the whole matter out of his mind as much as he could. Like so many other things in life, maybe what he wanted wouldn't come to pass if he thought too much about it.

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Fourth-period was math and started out promising. There was an attractive guy in class named Craig, who looked vaguely like Zack Morris if Ben squinched his eyes up just right. Ben hadn't talked to Craig since junior high, after spending the night at his house.

What had come between them was a fairly common story in Ben's sordid history. It all began in the seventh grade, when a routine sleepover at a friend's house was transformed by a pilfered porno. Watching the video together led to trading hand jobs. This act was repeated during more sleepovers until the time his friend claimed to be too tired to mess around and insisted that they go to sleep instead. This confused Ben until, after some less-than-casual tossing and turning, it became obvious that something was expected from him. Ben happily went down on his friend that night, for the first of many times, although the favor was never returned.

Eventually, word of Ben's noble deed began to spread around the school, and guys he barely knew were inviting him to stay over. The same routine was played out over and over again, with his hosts usually pretending to be asleep. On their backs. With their pants down. It was, needless to say, a very exciting time in his life. The demand for his services came to a screeching halt when he decided to come out of the closet halfway through the school year. Suddenly none of the boys, including the friend he first started experimenting with, wanted anything to do with him. Craig was one of the last guys he had messed around with before going public, and they hadn't spoken since.

Until today that is. Instead of refusing to make contact, Craig greeted him warmly and even chose a seat next to his. Hope began to burn in Ben's chest that Craig had come to terms with his own sexuality, which turned out to be true but not in the way he expected. Craig soon began ranting about the girlfriend he found over the summer. Obviously their relationship had confirmed his heterosexuality and made it possible to deal with the experimental phase that was now behind him. No doubt getting laid regularly

helped with this. Ben was mildly disappointed, but happy to have a friend to make an otherwise boring class more entertaining.

Fifth-period choir meant not only being with Allison again, but being surrounded by people he had known for years. Choir was made up of either weird artistic types or religious sorts who also sang in church. Despite the two different backgrounds, everyone got along and the atmosphere was always relaxed.

Their teacher, Mrs. Hammond, had enjoyed minor success on stage earlier in her life and also taught drama. She took singing and acting very seriously, but was also a very disorganized person who rarely bothered to direct the class. Today she seemed as reluctant to start the school year as her students and was fine with letting the hour pass without her interference. Ben and Allison spent this time catching up with everyone they hadn't seen since spring and exchanging juicy bits of gossip that had occurred over the summer.

The final class of the day was science. Ben walked to it slowly, feeling like Charlie from the *Willy Wonka* movie. This was the last possible chance to have a class with Tim, his last shot at a golden ticket and the amazing behind-the-scenes factory tour that came with it. In his mind he was pulling back that candy bar wrapper as slowly and carefully as he would like to undress Tim. He stepped into the door just as the bell rang and stood there, waiting for his dreams to become reality.

"Hello?" complained someone who had watched way too many valley girl movies before pushing past him. "I swear!"

That left one desk for Ben. He took his seat, still looking around for any hint of silver eyes and dark hair. Nothing. Nada.

Ah, well. At least he still had the chocolate to enjoy. The teacher of this class, Ms. Hughes, was the same he had last year. She was one of those rare teachers who were considered cool by her students. Some teachers tried too hard by putting up posters of the latest music bands and ineptly interjecting slang into their lectures. Ms. Hughes wasn't like that. She was just herself--a middle-aged spinster who had a passion for science and managed to transfer her enthusiasm to those she was teaching, usually

through innovative and fun experiments. The topic of the day was pheromones, which had most of the class laughing, but not Ben, whose thoughts were on the scent of sweat on the evening air as Tim ran to him.

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