

Something Like Summer © 2010 Jay Bell

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Cover art by Andreas Bell

Chapter One

This is not a coming-out story. I put all that behind me two years ago, at the tender young age of fourteen. I'd known I was gay since I was twelve and my best friend Kevin moved away to Utah. I was heartbroken, which I suppose is considered normal behavior for most kids. After he'd been gone for two weeks I decided to take a Greyhound bus to see him. The guy at the counter wouldn't sell me a ticket so I tried passing myself off as the kid of a boarding passenger. That didn't go well. The bus driver made me get off and the station manager called my parents. Their reaction to my little plan is what tipped me off that my feelings for Kevin went way beyond the norm. Well, that and how I got a hard-on every time I thought of him.

Ben's fingers hesitated above the keyboard of his laptop as he reread what he had just written. He took a deep breath, the ozone smell of the slowly overheating machine filling his nose before he sighed. Why did it always sound so trite when he tried to write about his life? He wanted to write something that was different and real, but it always ended up sounding like the porn stories in his small stash of magazines.

Next time he swore to write with old fashioned pen and paper. At least then he could enjoy crumpling the displeasing results before throwing them in a little metal trashcan, like they always did on TV. The most Ben could do was to carefully save his document, close the program, and drag the file to the recycle bin. As he right-clicked to empty the bin, he wondered if the problem wasn't that he couldn't write, but that the porn stories in his magazines were just really well-written. He was beginning to wish he hadn't deleted it when the clock in the bottom right-hand corner caught his eye. Ten minutes until seven. Almost time for Mr. Blue Shoes to go jogging.

Ben struggled with himself for a moment. Part of him recognized just how creepy his behavior was. He wasn't sure if it qualified as stalking, but it was dangerously close. But what else was there to do? Writing hadn't worked and there was nothing on TV but summer reruns. What harm was there in an innocent stroll

through the neighborhood, and if he happened to see Mr. Blue Shoes, then so be it.

Switching off his laptop, Ben tried to remember the last time he had done this. Was it yesterday? Surely it was the day before. How many times this week already? Since they appeared to be about the same age, Ben was sure that Mr. Blue Shoes would be attending his high school and he didn't want to be obvious. Being out at school led to enough taunting without the added ridicule of being criminally desperate.

Ben slipped on his shoes and quietly closed his bedroom door behind him. The sound of MTV's *Mega Summer Beach Party* or whatever they were calling it this year drifted from the direction of his sister's room. For once she wasn't hogging the bathroom. Ben rushed across the hall and flipped on the light, knowing that time was running out, that he only had a brief moment to check his appearance.

His blond hair was due for a cut but was still passable, he decided as he tried to smooth it into shape. His chestnut brown eyes regarded themselves momentarily, making him wish that his parents had bought him the colored contacts he had asked for last Christmas. Green, blue, purple, anything but brown. At least the braces were off now. He smiled wickedly, scanning for any sign of the spinach soufflé his mother had served for dinner. If there were more time he would have brushed his teeth. Just in case life played out like one of those porn stories. If only.

He was happy to see some remnants of sun on his face from camping last weekend, but not as pleased to note the dopey Smashing Pumpkins T-shirt he was wearing, which wasn't his kind of music at all. The shirt had mysteriously turned up in a stack of fresh laundry one day. His sister's boyfriend had left it during one of his nocturnal visits, and once Ben figured that out, he wore it just to torture her. This wearable blackmail was a few sizes too large for him and draped off his ramrod-thin frame like a tent. Ben bit his lip and decided against digging through the hamper for something better. At least this shirt was clean.

Flipping the light switch, he took the stairs two at a time, landing at the bottom with a thud that was sure to trigger a yell from his mother. He paused but the only sound he heard was prerecorded studio laughter. Thank god for the hypnotizing properties of television! Ben slipped out the front door, undetected by all but Wilford, the family dog.

The August evening was still bright, but not as much as it had been last month. Ben pondered the symbolism of the earth growing darker with the approach of a new school year as he jogged down the street toward the end of the block. Behind the row of houses here were woods that connected with a large public park. He chose the yard whose owner was least likely to complain and crossed it. With the house and unfenced backyard behind him, he was faced with one of the finest forests in modern suburbia.

The mix of pine and cedar trees was disturbed only by a single dirt path that disappeared into their midst. The trail, eternally marred by the crisscrossing grooves left by countless bike riders, snaked back and forth through the trees, causing ten acres of woods to feel like a limitless wilderness.

Ben turned to the right and walked up a slope toward a more civilized path, one paved and dotted with benches and trashcans as it wound its way around a small man-made lake. He scanned the horizon for his quarry. At first he saw no one except for a middle-aged couple walking hand in hand, but then the thump, thump, thump sound of running attracted his attention.

There he was. Mr. Blue Shoes. He could more aptly be named Mr. Neon Electric Blue Shoes. Oh, how Ben had searched for a pair of those shoes after seeing them for the first time. Not only did he think they looked awesome, but they would have been a potential conversation starter. *Hey, you have the same crazy shoes that I do!* Despite tagging along on all of his mother's shopping trips, he never found them. Ben wasn't even sure what brand they were. Some sort of exotic Italian brand that Mr. Blue Shoes had preferred before moving here to the States, he fantasized. Not that

he was necessarily from Italy, of course, but it would explain the deeply tanned skin and jet black hair.

Ben snapped out of his reverie and realized that the object of his desire was jogging directly toward him, and all the while he had been standing there staring. Usually Ben made at least some attempt to act like he was out for some exercise. His muscles froze as he tried to decide what to do. He should probably turn to the right and walk away, so as not to appear obvious. He started to do this until he realized that he wouldn't be able to get a look at Mr. Blue Shoes, and so Ben turned back to the front. Unfortunately his confused brain didn't trigger the muscles needed to actually begin walking. Ben was left standing, just as he had been before, except now he was facing Mr. Blue Shoes and it was too late to do anything but stare.

Lust brushed away any remaining self-consciousness. Ben looked up from the oddly colored shoes, his eyes taking in the black hairs on the finely muscled legs before darting up to check out the package bouncing away behind maroon gym shorts. Not wishing to press his luck he continued upward to the considerable pecs. The evening wasn't hot enough that he was running shirtless, but the grey tank top was minimal enough to reveal muscular arms with a sexy swirl of black hair under the armpits. Ben looked up at the handsome face, ignoring the sweaty strands of dark hair stuck to the broad forehead or the well-defined cheekbones, choosing instead to look into the silver-grey eyes that haunted his fantasies.

He noted, with a mix of relief and abhorrence, that those eyes were locked onto his T-shirt. His blatant gawking had probably gone unnoticed, but at the price of Mr. Blue Shoes noticing the worst thing about his appearance today. As he jogged past Ben, the silver eyes rose to meet his. Mr. Blue Shoes raised his eyebrows and nodded in a way that unmistakably said "Cool!" before flashing a smile.

And then he was gone, followed a second later by a blast of sweaty, musky air. Ben inhaled this scent and, after a dramatic moment of euphoria, found the strength to continue walking. He

sauntered around the park before heading home, feeling as if he just gotten back from a dream date. He realized it was probably pathetic, but he didn't care at this point. The hottest guy in the world had just acknowledged him and all because of some band Ben had never bothered listening too. He made a mental note to ask his sister to borrow one of their CDs that night, but not before locking himself in his room and beating off furiously while thinking about that smile.

* * * * *

Shopping with Allison! Was there anything better? Not only did she understand the glory of the shopping mall and share his reverence for it, but she knew all manner of back-street stores that carried things you wouldn't find anywhere outside of the weird shops in downtown Houston. Ben didn't know how she found these places. Sometimes he wondered if she hadn't gone downtown and talked the owners into moving their stores north to the suburbs of The Woodlands, where Ben and Allison lived.

"Home?" Allison asked, peering into the visor's small cracked mirror. Her expressive eyes tracked the glossy coat of plum-colored lipstick as she applied it to her lips, the shade a perfect compliment against her ebony skin. Then she pressed her lips together, flipped the visor up, and turned to Ben. "We can always hit more shops tomorrow. I think we did well for ourselves today."

Ben nodded. They had managed to find not one but two pairs of pants that actually hugged his waist tight instead of having to be cinched to death with a belt. Shirts he wasn't so lucky with, but there was still another couple weeks before school started and he hadn't checked the secondhand shops yet. Ironically, they always seemed to have more stylish and hip clothes than the retail stores.

As the Ford Escort chugged away in an effort to get them home, Ben considered just how lost he'd be without Allison, how her broad smile and the mischievous glint in her eye always kept his spirits high. He loved too the jealous glances men gave him when they were out together, mistaking the tall, thin beauty on his arm as being his girl.

"Shit!" Allison shouted as the tape player sputtered and squealed.

Of course those jealous guys probably didn't suspect that she could cuss like a sailor as well.

Allison jabbed repeatedly at the eject button with total disregard for the road until the player spit up her most recent mix tape. Spools of magnetic strip dangled from it as she held it up. "I stayed up all night listening to the radio to make this stupid thing!" she cried, braking just in time to avoid running a red light.

"You need a CD player," Ben said.

"I need a new car," she countered.

As if on cue, a sports car full of teenagers pulled up to the stop light, the music pounding from their car so loud that it shook the Escort's rearview mirror. Even though the summer was almost over, the car still had "Class of '96" written all over it in white shoe polish.

"I hope we're not that lame when we graduate," Allison said when the light turned green and the car sped away, "but at least they can listen to music."

"There's still the radio," Ben suggested.

Allison pointed through the windshield at a broken stub of metal where an antenna should have been. She raised her eyebrows and bobbed her head side to side in the way some black girls did when making a very good point.

"Ah, right," Ben conceded.

Allison returned her hands to the wheel and her attention to the road before she raised her fine, arched eyebrows and smiled.

"Sing for me," she said sweetly.

"What do you want to hear?"

"Uhhh... What's that one called? 'Take a Chance on Me.'"

"You mean by ABBA?" Ben asked, failing to hide the disapproval from his voice.

"Yeah, the one with the comic strip video and the hot singer."

"That's 'Take on Me' by A-ha," Ben corrected, feeling relieved.

"Just make with the music, pretty boy."

Ben smiled, cleared his throat and began to sing. His voice was his favorite thing about himself. When talking it sounded as average as could be, but when he sang his voice flowed like honey. Ben loved to sing. Every since he was a little boy he crooned along with his mother's country music while she cleaned and his father's oldies while he drove. When he was singing, everything in the world felt right to him, as if it magically placed the world in a temporary state of grace.

From the gleam in Allison's eyes, he could tell that she felt the same way. She listened to half the song, laughing when he interjected new lyrics for the ones he didn't know, before joining in with him on the next chorus. Her voice was leagues ahead of any other girl at school, the sugar to his honey. Nobody could out-sing the pair of them, which they had proven more than once in choir class last year.

Allison stopped singing suddenly and took a sharp right. "Oh my god, have you been down here lately?"

"No," Ben said, wishing that they could have at least finished the song.

"It's so different now, you won't believe it!"

Outside the window was a neighborhood full of newly built houses. They were just three blocks over from where Ben lived, but he hadn't paid attention to this housing development at all. He vaguely recalled his parents complaining about how these houses were just bigger and better enough to send their own real estate values down. Or up. He couldn't remember which. Either way, they did look nice even though the yards were bare, aside from the spindly new trees injected into the ground.

"This all used to be fields when we were kids, remember?" Allison sighed. "We always used to play here."

He did remember, although it was actually Allison and his sister Karen who had played together. He had tagged along a couple of times, but always against their will. A small age difference had ended that friendship. Once Karen was in high school, she felt being friends with a junior high kid would be social suicide, and so Ben was automatically promoted to Allison's

best friend. Allison tended to rewrite history, giving all of her memories with Karen over to him, which was flattering in a way.

"Shame about the willow tree," she said, pointing to a tennis court and a small children's playground. "Still, I wouldn't mind living here."

"It's all right," he said as he eyed the three-car garages and facades with yawning windows that revealed two-story-tall entryways inside. There was something about a new subdivision that Ben found both off-putting and alluring. What he didn't like was how the houses were too new to have any character. None of them had been personalized yet by basketball nets, daring color schemes, out-of-control bushes, or curious lawn decorations. That there were only three or four cookie cutter houses in the neighborhood was all too apparent. This was the case with most neighborhoods, but the uniformity was obscured as individual touches over time changed the houses into homes.

What Ben liked came directly from what he disliked. The generic template was like a blank sheet of paper, and made it easier to imagine living in any of the houses he might like. In his mind Ben could choose what color he would paint it, how he would decorate it inside, and even what sort of job he would have and who he would live with. The idea made him yearn to be out of school so he could finally start a life of his own.

The buzz of a lawnmower matched the unhealthy sound of the car's engine as they turned a corner. A familiar figure was pushing the machine across a yard that had barely managed to sprout grass yet.

"Pull over!" Ben yelled. "No! Not here!" he shouted when Allison headed for where Mr. Blue Shoes was mowing. Thankfully he wasn't facing them and didn't notice the car jerk away from the curb and back into the middle of the road.

"What the hell?" Allison complained. "I thought you were going to puke or something!"

"Sorry." Ben fidgeted in his seat as he turned to glance out the rear window. "Just drop me off at the end of the block."

"All right," Allison said, peering suspiciously in the rearview mirror. "You know that guy?"

"Not yet," he said with a smile as the car slowed.

Allison gave a surprised laugh. "You're feeling brave today! Come by my place and get your things later then. If you aren't busy, that is."

"Shut up." Ben grinned as he hopped out of the car. He waved at her as she drove away before walking in the direction of his infatuation.

Ben was used to this little ritual taking place in the evening. Being in broad daylight was making him nervous. He worried that he would stand out too much just walking down the road without any clear purpose. Ben wished he had... What? A clipboard or something? He could at least be out walking his dog.

Ben cursed himself mentally. Wilford! He could have been walking his dog all those nights he had oh-so casually passed by Mr. Blue Shoes. Magazines always claimed that dogs were good ice breakers. Maybe Mr. Blue Shoes was an animal lover. He probably was and would have stopped to pet months ago. Was it too late to start bringing the dog with him?

The rumbling of the lawn mower was close now but Ben didn't dare look. What was he thinking? This was too obvious! He kept his eyes instead on the row of houses to the right and pretended to seek a specific address. *I belong here, I belong here*, he kept repeating in his head. *Nothing odd about me being here, pay no attention.*

The lawn mower buzzed to his left, then faded behind him as Ben kept walking. A risked glance over his shoulder revealed Mr. Blue Shoe's sweaty back turning to continue mowing in his direction. Ben whipped his head around, hopefully without being noticed, and increased his pace. God, how he prayed that Allison had actually driven home and not turned the car around to watch him. Otherwise this pointless exercise would be humiliating. She expected that Ben was being all suave and chatting up a hot guy when in fact he could barely bring himself to look at him.

At least it was over now. Ben reached the corner of the street and turned, hearing a female voice yell something unintelligible. The sound of the lawn mower died and the voice repeated itself. "Tim, telephone!" Ben dared another glance back and saw Mr. Blue Shoes heading for the front door as a woman held out a cordless phone for him.

Once the coast was clear, Ben took off running down the street, laughing. Not only did he now know where he lived, but now he knew his name!

* * * * *

Allison was all grins as she tossed the shopping bag at him from across her waterbed where she sat. "Well? What happened?"

"His name is Tim." Ben flopped down on the bed, creating waves that sent them both bouncing up and down.

"That's a good start. So what did you say?"

"Well..."

Allison's face dropped. "You *did* talk to him, didn't you?"

"The lawnmower was running. What was I supposed to do, flag him down just to say hi? Besides, his mom came out of the house too."

"So you hung around and eavesdropped?" Allison snorted. "I'd call you pathetic if I wouldn't have done the same thing."

Ben smiled and reached across to the headboard shelf where she kept her CDs in vinyl wallets. He chose one randomly and began flipping through. "So what do you think I should do?"

"I dunno. You'll have to invent an excuse to talk to him." Allison hoisted a sarcastic eyebrow. "Maybe go to his door and say you are selling Girl Scout cookies."

"Don't tempt me," Ben replied. "Hm. I could always say that my cat's gone missing."

"Sure, except you don't have a cat and what would it be doing inside his house anyway?"

Ben tossed the CD wallet aside and flopped on to his back with a groan. "There has to be something."

"Well, there's school in two weeks. Maybe he'll end up in one of your classes."

"Two weeks? I don't want to wait that long!"

"You'll live." Allison glanced at the digital display of her alarm clock. "Dad's home in ten minutes. Want to head back out and find those shirts?"

The two sentences weren't unrelated. Allison's father hated him. The feeling was mutual, but Ben dreaded there ever being a confrontation. The man was wound tighter than a spring, the bulging veins on his neck and temples beating out a warning every time he caught Ben visiting. He never spoke to Ben, even when greeted politely. In fact the only thing he had ever said to Ben was "cracker faggot" as he was leaving the house one day.

"Shopping it is," Ben said with an uneasy glance at the clock. "But let's go to the mall this time. There's more people there."

"Just in case?" Allison asked.

"Just in case."

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