

Lost Summer

Riley McDurbin remembers the first time her parents collectively sewed the details of her birth, which took place on a steamy morning on July 30, 2000. She decided to claim this world in the backwoods of Pinewood, Tennessee, thirty miles from Chatanooga. A small town where mosquitoes like to play and it never mattered the time of day, the stickiness from heat even sent the ducks waddling to another town. By the end of summer, folks pleaded for winter, waving goodbye to the heat while the sun nodded off early during cooler months. Her parents embellished their parts of the story to make her birth more magnificent. Riley remembered her mother, Beth, describing the day.

“You were my first child, so I had no idea what to expect. My body stuck to the sheets with sweat from head to toe as you made your way into this world. For several minutes, you remained silent while daddy and I just stared waiting to hear you cry.”

Riley held onto every word and then asked, “Did I stare back?”

Her mother smiled, wrapped a loose strand of hair around Riley’s ear and said, “Yes you did. With red, puffy eyes, you strained to see us—your eyes moving from daddy’s to mine. But I wanted to hear you cry to make sure you were fine, so I gave your thigh a slight pinch and the sound that came out was as loud as a steam engine.”

Her mother tickled her making Riley laugh more, then she cuddled close, took her mother’s hand in hers, and said, “Mommy, you’re funny. I wasn’t that loud.”

“Oh yes you were. You wanted the entire town of Pinewood to know you arrived.” Her mother would kiss Riley’s head and then rest her cheek against it.

Afterwards, Riley sat there tracing the lines and bones on her mother’s hands—puppy soft and gentle—memorizing them. She closed her eyes to the quiet giggle that escaped her mother before asking her to hear the story again.

Seven years later, her mother ran out of time. Riley looked down into the casket and took her mother’s hand in hers. Gone was the gentle touch she remembered, replaced with a bitter cold. She laid the hand back on the stomach, staring down at the last image of her mother that she would be stuck with for life. The thick form in an unrecognizable dress, tucked tight under her chin, laying in a white casket. Her mother’s face was red as if blush could hide death, and crimped hair covered the pillow. This wasn’t her mother. Her mother had shimmery, straight, long brown hair that waved from constant movement. She had a natural beauty, skin like butter toffee, rich and sweet, which allowed her to get away with a fresh face. People would briefly stop talking when Beth entered a room, and when she left, it was as if she took the oxygen with her. Riley couldn’t recall a time when her mother didn’t wear a smile, or had a bad word to say about anyone. Similar to a kite, Beth floated in life without a care in the world and brought happiness to those around her.

While Riley stood by the casket, feeling the separation already seeping in, she felt an arm wrap around her shoulder guiding her to a row of chairs. She fell into a seat with her chin resting on her chest. Her best friend, Mason Daugherty, took her hand in his and quietly sat with her. She recalled people coming over to her, mouths moving, but pain muffled the sounds. Every so often she would look at her father, Michael, talking to someone. His movements were robotic—cold and stiff.

Riley silently thought, “Who will take care of us? Who will wake me with kisses? Who will tell me the story about when I was born?”

When the wake and funeral were over and people returned to their lives, Riley and her father sat in the stillness of the rooms thinking about where to go from there. They both had buried a part of themselves, so they had to figure out how to semi-live. Michael began to live for his work, forgetting about his loss along with responsibilities to his daughter. Owning a small store made escape easy for Michael; he could filter his anger and loneliness through paperwork. Riley on the other hand, struggled alone with the loss of her mother, battling adolescence and dealing with the changes in her body.

One morning, Riley stood in front of the mirror wearing just her underwear and training bra. Her hand traced the top of the bra as memories of shopping with her mother to buy a few bras flooded in. It had been four months ago when she saw her mother's radiance as they walked hand-in-hand throughout the stores. Beth was infectious and never showed any signs that cancer was nibbling away at her insides. Through misty eyes, Riley looked at her body—touching her breasts—frowning at what little remnants there were of them. Since she had gotten her period this year, she had hoped they would stretch and shoot out to show she was becoming a woman. Instead, they sat on her chest, two pancakes high, with little depth and texture. She grabbed a hold of the band on her underwear pulling it out to see if hair existed. It was still smooth as childhood. Beth had explained menstrual cycles and changes to a girl's body, and only now did Riley wonder if her mother did that because she knew she wouldn't be around.

Her arm moved across her face removing the accumulated tears and mucus. When she turned toward the window, she jumped to find Mason with one leg in pulling the rest of him inside. A quick squeal came out, and then Riley grabbed the covers from her bed to cover herself up.

“What are you doing here? Don't you knock?”

Confused, Mason said, “I've always come in this way and you've never complained before.”

“Well things have to change. We're getting older. I'm becoming a woman now and—”

Mason laughed and said, “A woman? Let me see.”

“No! Don't laugh at me, Mason. I am. I'm changing, so we have to change.”

He fell on his back on the bed and let out a sigh. “I don't want anything to change. Why does it have to change?”

“Because that's life. Life changes. Babies are born. People die.”

Riley's tears streaked her face. Mason rose to embrace her but she pushed him away shaking her head no.

Barely above a whisper, Mason said, “Riley. Talk to me.”

She wiped her face with the sheet and said, “I can't. I can't talk to you about things I should be talking to my mother about.” Her head shook to unravel thoughts so they would fall and disappear into air.

With pleading eyes, Mason said, “You could try. I promise I won't laugh at you again. I won't make fun and I will listen.”

Aggravated by his intrusion, Riley locked eyes with him and said, “I'm not talking to you about my body, changes, and things like that. That's not something you talk about with others.”

“Yes it is. You talk to your friends about all kinds of things. Girls do it all the time.”

“Yes! With other girls!”

Mason sat on the bed and looked down at his dirty hands—hands full of cuts and bruises from the adventures of boyhood. He knew Riley deserved better... and he knew Riley's body was changing. For him their friendship changed long ago. Mason loved Riley. He knew it was love because she was the only one that made him feel worthy. She's been there through tough times.

Mason couldn't imagine being with anyone else. But he kept this secret for fear of finding out she didn't feel the same way.

He picked at his hands, nonchalantly saying, "Well I can listen just as any girl."

Riley realized she hurt his feelings and sat next to him. She put her hand over his that rested on his leg and said, "You're a great friend. I didn't mean anything by it. It's just..."

Mason hated seeing Riley in pain, wishing he could take it all away. Her eyes bubbled with tears, the softness of her skin, red plump lips from Riley sucking on them. It all seemed too much. Without thinking, Mason brought his hands to her cheeks, lifted her chin, leaned forward and kissed her on the lips. A soft brush against, enough to feel the warmth and then they moved a breath apart. Riley's hands wrapped around each of Mason's forearms and then their foreheads pressed together to avoid looking at the other. She closed her eyes trying to figure out how they got here. All she knew was things felt better.

With her mind racing, she thought to herself, "Do I like the fact that he kissed me? Do I love Mason?"

A smile caressed her face when she answered aloud, "I do."

Mason was watching her, gauging to see how she would react, and forced out a raspy, "You do what?"

Riley's eyes opened and found Mason's face waiting for some kind of positive response. She moved her hands to his cheeks, and without answering, kissed him again. This time their lips locked longer and their mouths opened a bit to taste and explore. Even though neither of them ever kissed anyone before, it was comfortable and natural. They had been friends for as long as they could remember. He was the only one who had been there for Riley, and the only one she could count on. When their lips were wet and sore, they parted and smiled at one another.

Mason's fingers glided along the soft skin of Riley's cheeks when he asked again, "What do you do?"

Riley didn't want to admit what she had been thinking earlier, so she shrugged and said, "I do like the way you kiss."

"I like the way you do too."

They were about to kiss again when Riley's father knocked on the door and asked, "Riley? You in there?"

She jumped as Mason ran to the window. With one leg in and one leg out, she leaned over and kissed him before he disappeared.

Riley held the sheet round her and said, "Yes. But I'm not dressed."

"Well hurry up. I have to get to the store and drop you off at your aunt's house."

She ran to the door, opened it an inch, and said, "Can't I stay home alone? I'm thirteen years old, dad. I don't need a babysitter."

"I told your aunt I would drop you off so she could spend some time with you."

"Please, dad? I promise I'll be good. Please?"

He looked at her, then his watch and back to her and said, "Fine. I can't waste time arguing about it. Call your aunt and let her know."

Michael left before she said "Thanks."

Riley loved her Aunt Elizabeth, but today wasn't a day she wanted to go anywhere. Too many feelings had surfaced and she needed to be alone to sort it all out... or sort it out with Mason. She called her aunt to let her know she was staying home because she didn't feel good. Her aunt offered to come over, but Riley convinced her she would be sleeping most of the time.

She showered, ate something, and found herself laying on top of her comforter thinking about Mason.

Many questions swirled around her mind. When did her feelings change? Should she tell him how she was feeling? What would happen to their friendship? Riley didn't want to compromise the one thing that meant the world to her. During her self-questioning, she heard Mason climb through the window, then his body touched hers on the bed. Their arms were at their sides, so they held hands while emotions surged through their veins. Their stomachs had the fluttering of lightening bugs, a warmth radiating through them, lit by certain thoughts.

Finally, Mason decided to take a chance and tell Riley his feelings. With a light squeeze to her hand, he opened his eyes, looked at the ceiling and said, "I love you, Riley."

She faced the same direction and responded, "I love you too, Mason."

They rolled onto their sides, facing one another, using their arms to prop up their heads.

Riley asked, "Now what do we do? Please tell me it won't end our friendship."

Mason's face grew pink, laughed, and then said, "I have no idea, but it won't end our friendship. You're all I got."

They held each other for most of the afternoon until Riley's body protested. She started to sob in agony. She clamped her head, pressing hard to stop the pain.

Mason sat and asked, "What's wrong, Riley?"

She rolled from side to side with short, desperate breaths. "My head. It hurts!"

Riley began to cry. Mason tried to rub the sides of her head but she wouldn't stay still. The pain went as fast as it came.

She stopped moving around. Mason moved away and Mason said, "Your nose is bleeding! I'll get a towel."

Riley's hand went to her nose, feeling the sticky warmth. She held her head back while Mason put a towel over her nose.

"What happened, Riley?"

She began to shake, tears mixing with the blood. "I don't know. I'm scared, Mason."

He was worried too, but remained silent, holding the towel and caressing her arm. "It will be okay. I'm here."

And he was right. Riley calmed down and her nosebleed ceased.

She pulled herself up and said, "That was so weird. I saw flashes, pictures, when I got the pain."

"Pictures? Of what?"

"I don't know." She wiped her face, her eyes on the bed, concentrating on the images. "Some woman. She had, like, olden day clothes on."

"Huh. What else?"

"There was her alone, her with two other women, and then another woman embracing a man."

"I bet it's because you've have had a lot on your mind. You know, with your mom and everything."

She agreed and asked, "Would you be mad if I asked you to go? I'm tired. I should take a nap."

"No, I wouldn't be mad, but are you sure you don't want me to stay with you?"

"I need to think about our *new* relationship alone. And the pain and those flashes were weird. I think I should sleep."

Mason leaned over, kissed her on the cheek, and said, "Okay. You relax and I'll call you later."

After an hour, the pain kicked her in the head once more and Riley woke crying and moaning for it to go away. She held her head tight as she saw a flash of a woman with ruffles around her slender neck. Hair parted in the middle, pushed to the sides exposing a determined look with wide

eyes, high cheekbones, and a long straight nose that darted straight and curved down at the tip. The next flash was of the same woman with two similar looking women. Another flash to paper, old paper with words written on it.

After the writings appeared the pain subsided. She ran to the washroom, dry heaving into the toilet, and blood droplets. Riley put another towel against her nose, slid to the floor with her knees bent in front of her, placed her head on them and cried until the pain evaporated and her stomach stopped crooning.

When she finally managed to rise, she searched for her journal to write down the words she had seen. *Writings: "On a sunny ? alone I lay, One summer afternoon, marriage of May, young lover*

She sat searching her memory for the words. Unconsciously, her hand began to move as she wrote:

*"On a sunny brae alone I lay
One summer afternoon;
It was the marriage-time of May,
With her young lover, June."*

She thought, "Where did that come from? No one talks like this. Who wrote it? What does it mean?"

Riley booted up her computer and typed the first line in the browser search box. She clicked on the first link, *Emily Bronte's Poems—a list of her poems*. Browsing the page, Riley found the poem, *A Day Dream* (March 5, 1844) and read it. The page didn't have a picture of Emily Bronte, so Riley clicked to the next link, but there weren't any. In the search area, she deleted the first line of the poem and typed 'Emily Bronte' and there it was, the same image that had flashed in her mind was staring back at her. She saved the picture to enlarge it and stared at all the details; ruffled collar, hair off her face, wide eyes. The exact woman she kept having flashes about.

She spoke aloud, "But why am I seeing pictures of her? Why am I getting headaches and nose bleeds when it happens?"

The next day, Mason climbed through her window to find her asleep at the computer with a picture of Emily Bronte on the screen.

His hand glided along her arm. "Riley. Hey sleepyhead, it's time to get up."

Her body ached from the way she slept; keyboard markings on her cheek. Through red, narrow eyes she asked, "What time is it?"

"Almost noon."

Riley rubbed her eyes blinking a few times to wake stir them.

Mason jutted his head toward her computer and asked, "Who's that?"

Turning toward her computer, she said, "Emily Bronte."

"Kinda ugly, huh?"

She laughed, looked back at him, and said, "Yeah."

Mason went to kiss her, but Riley turned her head and said, "Wait. Let me brush my teeth."

When she came out of the washroom, Mason was sitting on the edge of her bed and her father stood by the open door.

Michael looked at Riley and said, "What's going on? He shouldn't be in your room."

"He just stopped over to see what I was doing today."

His eyes narrowed and said, "I didn't hear him knock." Michael turned toward Mason and said, "I don't want you in my daughter's room. As a matter of fact, I think you two are seeing too much of each other. I want you to stay away—"

In unison, Riley said, “No, dad. He’s my best friend” and Mason said, “Sir, I love your daughter.”

Everyone threw their words around but it was Mason’s proclamation that dangled in front of them.

“You love my daughter? What do you know about love?”

“I know lots. Like your daughter is the only thing that gets me out of bed, and thinking about her helps me fall asleep.”

Riley’s body released the tension when she smiled at Mason and then turned to her father. “Dad, Mason has been coming here for years. Why are you being like this?”

“Because. You’re not kids anymore and I don’t appreciate Mason sneaking around by climbing through windows.”

“But he—”

Michael held his hand high to stop her and said, “No buts. Mason, leave.”

“Dad! This isn’t fair.”

Mason surrendered. “Okay, I’ll go.” He turned to Riley and said, “I’ll call you later.”

“Yes, call, Mason, because her window is no longer available to you.”

Riley and Mason’s eyes begged each other for forgiveness before Mason vanished out the window.

After he left, Michael turned to Riley and said, “What were you thinking? He does not belong in your bedroom let alone on your bed.”

Before she could respond, he left her room, but she was furious enough to follow him downstairs.

“Why are you doing this to me? Why all of a sudden do you care that Mason is coming here?”

He spun around and said, “I don’t need to explain myself to you. You’re my daughter and as long as you’re living in my house you *will* abide by my rules.”

“Your rules. Since when do you care about me? You’re so absorbed with the store that you haven’t cared about me at all since mom died. I hate you!”

Michael smacked Riley forcing her to stumble back. She saw the sting in his eyes—the regret, but it didn’t matter to her. Covering the left side of her fiery face, she went back to her room. He didn’t apologize or attempt to follow her. The damage was already done. They went back to their separate lives to coddle their own grief and continue to act as strangers.

Riley left to go for a walk. At a nearby park, she sat on a swing and began to push off the ground with her feet, straightening them before tucking them under and swaying her upper body for momentum. Within a few kicks, she was soaring. Following a few more movements, she leaned forward from the punching pain in her head, until her swing slowed and she fell off. More flashes of Emily Bronte and writings, but this time each flash remained longer. Pounding the ground to rid the pain, she saw blood dripping, so she squeezed her nose to stop the blood. A few adults and children circled around her. Someone took a hold of her arm to help her stand. Embarrassed about it all, Riley jerked away and raced home.

Her nose had stopped bleeding by the time she arrived although her shirt was a different color. Scrambling around her desk, she opened her journal and began writing down the words she saw.

“My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I AM Heathcliff! He’s always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being.”

She couldn't write the words fast enough and then read them to hear the sound of each word and piece them together regarding these episodes. Over and over, she repeated the words, and each time the volume rose.

"Is my love for Mason the same? Or is this text factual?" she asked herself.

A heated desperation came over her so she climbed out of the window in search of Mason. Mason's home life was in despair—his father an alcoholic and his mother lived in fear. There were many times when Mason left home to find comfort in Riley's bed away from the screams and crashing of furniture. He'd have cuts and bruises from trying to defend his mother, and usually wound up with a black eye or split lip. Sometimes, when he thought Riley was sleeping, he'd scoot close to her and cry himself to sleep.

Riley followed the trail Mason and she made years ago into the woods toward a small shelter. Against a hill stood a torn cloth draped over uneven poles pushed into the ground. The cloth hung to the ground half eaten by the forest's occupants. Under the cloth laid a large wooden board covering a portion of the floor and two small stools and a table that suffered to stand. Abandoned for years, Riley and Mason had claimed it for themselves. When they left it, they would cover it with long branches.

It was here where she found Mason—reading. He jumped to his feet when Riley entered then relaxed and hugged her tight.

"I'm sorry, Mason. I had no idea my dad would react that way."

He hugged her and said, "I know you didn't."

Riley's breathing increased. A hand on her chest, she began to recite, "*Hope Was but a timid friend; She sat without the grated den, Watching how my fate would tend, Even as selfish-hearted men.*"

Mason held her at arm's length and asked, "What was that?"

She dug her fingers through her hair, scratching and rubbing to end the spell.

"I don't know! What's happening to me?"

He took her in his arms and rocked back and forth.

"I don't know, Riley. I wish I did, but I don't know. You're scaring me."

She began to cry against his chest and said, "I need you, Mason."

Her head shook from left to right as she continued, "*Oh, don't, don't go. It is the last time! Edgar will not hurt us. Heathcliff, I shall die! I shall die!*"

As soon as she completed the sentence, she covered her mouth with both hands.

Mason looked confused and said, "Who is Edgar? And Heathcliff?"

Riley stepped back. "Something's happening to me" and then fainted.

If interested in a beta read, please send an email to Denise Baer at denise@authordenisebaer.com, and she will submit the entire story for your input. Thank you for your time.