

Lost Summer Sample

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 greenery had no season and mosquitoes liked to play. It never mattered the time of day, the stickiness from heat even sent the ducks waddling to another town. Summers blended into winter with short, gradual changes while the sun nodded off early during cooler months. Her parents embellished their parts of the story to make her birth more magnificent than anyone else's. Riley remembered her mother, Beth, explaining the day.

"You were my only child, so I had no idea what to expect. My body was covered in 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 up with her, 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 tell 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 softness and gentleness of her mother's hands. They felt foreign to Riley—cold and rubbery. She laid the hand back on the stomach and stared down at the last image of her mother she'll remember 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 curly 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, the air tightened. Riley couldn't recall a time when her mother lost her 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 looking down at 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 up to her, mouths moving, but pain muffled the sounds. Every once in a while she would look up to find 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 his 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.

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