

Summer Friends



Mia Dalia



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For Chelsea...

I was twelve the summer I killed my best friend. And yes, we weren't friends for long, and I know that everyone said it wasn't my fault, but none of those things mattered. Then or now. I had relived it every day since, regretted it every day since. But the thing is, I'd do it again if I had to. In a way, you see, I never really had a choice.

That summer started like any other—with my birthday. I hated having a summer birthday; everyone I knew always seemed to be away. My parents tried to put together a small party that back then I would have described as sad and now, with the perspective and vocabulary of intervening decades, as desultory. A few kids came, some family members showed up. There was an unmemorable selection of tone-deaf presents that had nothing to do with me at twelve.

My family was always big on aspirational gifts—things one can evolve into, from oversized sweaters to hobby-specific objects I never developed an interest in. That year, it was a microscope. What I wanted was a telescope. Maybe a pair of binoculars. To look at far away things, not focus on minute details of the ones at hand.

The cake took a beating on the ride home from the bakery and, as a result, sagged on one side like old Mr. Reynolds' face after his stroke.

I didn't express any of my disappointment out loud, of course. I was a well-mannered kid, a proper Midwesterner in the making. I thanked my parents, ate the saggy, soggy cake, and smiled like a game show host. Went to bed sugar-high and downhearted.

The next day, Arms moved in. First, there was a motorcade comprising a giant moving truck, a wood-panelled station wagon, and a black sedan. Then, a procession of cardboard boxes was hauled into the house next door by large sweaty men. Were they family or hired help?

Eventually, I got tired of watching them and returned to my book. I had discovered King the previous summer and was steadily working my way through his back catalogue. It gave me nightmares, but I didn't care—the stories were too thrilling. My parents didn't approve but prided themselves on being too liberal minded to raise objections. "At least, he's reading," they'd sigh.

And I was. Books offered me the sort of companionship I had never quite found with other kids. I wasn't an oddball, not really, but I didn't fit in and was all too aware of it. Not athletic enough, not funny enough, not brazen enough. Not even a proper nerd. No clique would have me.

Ever since Jake, my neighbour and pal since age six, moved away two years before, I'd only had casual friendships, nothing of any meaning. Jake's parents got divorced, and, when his mom remarried to a lawyer in New Jersey, he went with her. We promised each other we'd write and visit, but the communication died out slowly and steadily over six months, and that was that. He never visited. Neither did I.

New Jersey felt unimaginably far. Almost as far as Florida, where my grandparents had retired. From an early age, when

people I knew moved away, my parents would stand me in front of a large world map that hung in my father's study/library/guest room and point to the place they went and then spanned the difference with their fingers.

"See," they'd say, "not so far."

The trick had the opposite effect on me, magnifying the distance. Making our home and, consequently, me feel smaller than ever. A speck in the grand scheme of things. When I resurfaced from an intense re-read of *Salem's Lot*, the movers were gone. So were the boxes. In their stead was a tall skinny kid about my age with giant ears and a bad haircut, kicking a soccer ball around. That was the first time I saw Arms.

Our fence was short back then, more of a suggestion than a proper divider of land. Enough to stop a small dog, maybe, but that's about it. So, I could see the kid, and he could see me watching him.

He sauntered over and threw me a casual, "Hey."

Approaching the fence, I replied in kind.

"I'm Arms," he said. His smile was uneven, one corner of his mouth doing most of the lifting.

"What sort of name is that?" I asked, forgetting my manners.

"Short for Armstrong. A family name."

The kid's arms jutting out from his worn-to-see-through T-shirt were stick-like, making the name sound either mean or ironic or both.

"Riley."

"Nice to meet you, Riley." He shook my hand across the fence, wrapping his surprisingly strong, spiderlike fingers around mine. "So, what is there to do for fun around here?"

We got to talking and, it seemed, never stopped. It turned out that the most fun thing to do around here was hanging out with Arms. He was full of stories, he seemed to have lived all over. He was funny and outgoing in a way I wasn't, he invented games where all I saw were trees or rocks.

Arms was a strange-looking kid. I couldn't put a finger on it back then, but, if I had to describe him now, I'd say he looked like someone drew him, having never seen what a kid looks like. Describe a kid to an alien with limited artistic talent, and he'd put together someone like Arms: gangly, disproportionately limbed, his eyes too large, his nose and ears too pointy, his hair forever sticking up every which way, with broad shoulders and oddly small feet. He looked like a sprite, like a character out of *Peter Pan*. Had similar energy too. If our sleepy suburb was suddenly invaded by pirates, Arms would fight them.

He read too. Freakishly fast. I'd give him one of my beat-up King's paperbacks, and he'd return it in a day or two, finished. At first, I thought he was lying, but I'd test him, and he always proved well-versed on the various plot points.

We'd stay past curfew, debating the logistics of vampires and resurrected pets. The books provided a comfortable safe distance, I didn't tell my new friend about that. I wanted him to see me as an equal, as bold and brazen as him.

Arms' parents never seemed to be around.

"They're always working," he'd say, waving his hand dismissively.

They always left him money. Their kitchen was pristine, with blindingly white cabinetry and mirror-like stainless steel surfaces, with a collection of takeout menus prominently displayed.

The house was clean too, but in an unloved and unloved way I couldn't quite describe. Too quiet, too many empty walls.

My house had dust motes floating around, and pictures covering every wall, photos, framed posters, a large world map. But Arms' house had a giant TV, the latest game console, no parental supervision, and all the pizza we could eat. It wasn't even a competition.

I don't know if I genuinely appreciated it back then, the uniqueness of a connection we shared. When you're a kid, you think that sort of thing is easy enough to find.

As an adult, battered by a series of personal disappointments, you come to see it as rare. A flash in a pan sort of thing. A true meeting of minds and temperaments. Someone who really sees you, really gets you.

That was what I had that summer. That and so much fun.

It was as if I suddenly got promoted from being the quiet observer of my story to its proper protagonist. I loved it. The upgrade, the newfound agency. We were inseparable all summer, Arms and me.

Like most intense friendships—like most intense relationships of any sort—it felt like we had a world for just the two of us. Everyone else existed on the periphery.

In the books, specifically in King's books, friends usually came in larger groups, anywhere from four to seven seemed to be the magic number. Even back then, I didn't know how anyone managed to balance that out. Hanging out with Arms was taking up just about all of my free time, and I was glad of it. I think even back then, as a kid, I had a very strong sense of my emotional limitations. I tended to dedicate myself to manageable, smaller-scale pursuits, establishing and maintaining a limited set of connections.

I imagined myself pedalling down a small-town street in Maine, my friends in tow, shouting playfully at each other, racing downhill, but in reality, I knew, I'd probably always be something of a loner. One of those solitary characters who may or may not be a total weirdo, but no one knew for sure. In Arms, I had found someone who broke through my walls and made me feel less alone.

I didn't even register the missing pet posters at first. Not very observant by nature, I was also in the habit of getting lost in my thoughts, of looking down when I walked, establishing meaningful eye contact with the once-white rubber toes of my beat-up Converse shoes. It was only when my parents talked about it during the mandatory Sunday supper that I came to be aware of it.

There was indeed a surprisingly large number of pets, cats and dogs, and even a ferret, who went missing in our neighbourhood over the past months.

"Weird." I shrugged, picking at my meatloaf, wishing to douse it in ketchup but knowing full well that doing so would offend my mom. I couldn't wait to discuss the disappearances with Arms, see what his take on it might be.

Arms didn't shrug. Instead, he looked at me with a peculiar glint in his eyes and told me he might know a thing or two about it.

"Oh, yeah?" I challenged him, ready to call bullshit. "What do you know?"

He wouldn't say. It was uncharacteristic of Arms, this reticence. I didn't like the idea of him keeping secrets from me, but I didn't push. Instead, I waited, comfortable in the knowledge that Arms wouldn't hold out for long.

When I was a kid, I thought secrets were like poison ivy.

You couldn't keep it to yourself, the itchiness would drive you mad.

Later, I learned differently, coming to regard secrets as a bag of bricks you dragged around with you. You couldn't show anyone inside it, and you couldn't ask anyone to help you with the terrible weight of it. It was all yours and yours alone. Forever. Back then, we went on with our summer fun, business as usual. We were the heroes who rescued Mrs. Albertson's cat from the tree. We were the villains who let the air out of the bike tires of the bullies who hung outside of the arcade and pretended to enjoy smoking. We were the explorers who followed the local creek downstream the way you were supposed to and managed to get lost and come home late enough to warrant getting grounded.

The praise we shared; but the guilt Arms shouldered alone. He'd speak to my parents, as polite as a teacher's pet, taking all the blame, looking a perfect picture of remorse, his natural recalcitrance nowhere to be found. The kid could have been an actor.

I had all but forgotten about the missing pets and what my friend might have known about it, by the time he brought it up again. Guess the secret got too itchy for him, after all.

"Remember I told you I knew a thing or two about it?"

I nodded, eagerly, in anticipation of what Arms might come up with this time.

That's when he showed me the shack. Said he'd been waiting until I was ready, but waiting sucked so...

The shack sat at the very edge of his family property, abutting the local woods. It looked so ramshackle, I figured no one had any use for it. I was wrong.

Arms had definitely been putting it to some use.

There were no windows there, no overhead light, just candles. A small space, about the size of the eat-in kitchen in my house, it featured four dilapidated walls that were unenthusiastically holding up a patchy ceiling. The smell was like roadkill on a summer day. There was some random debris in the corners, but the main attraction was the sculpture.

That was how Arms described it then, and that was how I had thought of it ever since, though it was unlike any art project I had seen then or after.

Sometimes, a person is confronted with the things the mind doesn't readily provide a description for. Understanding and contextualizing it comes later. If ever.

Arms' sculpture was tall, stretching all the way to the ceiling, and hideous in a way that stopped your blood. Made entirely of bones, small and large, and tiny skulls, and decorated with bloody animal hides. The end result was an approximation of a human or humanoid figure, but Arms wasn't that much of an artist, and so it looked off. Really off. The way Arms himself looked like only an approximation of a boy.

Its head was too large, a conglomeration of animal skulls with luxurious white fur that I, horrified, recognized as Fuzzball, Mrs. Anderson's missing Persian kitty. The white fur was bloodstained. The sculpture's torso was hidden from view, clothed in a toga-like outfit of yet more fur. The arms and legs must have been easier to assemble, though they appeared to have too many joints. The fingers were long, too long.

I didn't scream. To my credit, I didn't scream. I shuddered and almost pissed my pants, but I stayed quiet. Deep down, I still cared about Arms' opinion of me, still hoped for a reasonable explanation.

“What do you think?” he asked proudly.

“What ... what is it?” I stammered.

“It’s what I’ve been working on. My parents gave me some instructions, but largely I’ve been improvising. See, I’ve always wanted a sibling. Being an only child sucks.”

What about me? I thought stupidly, childishly. Aren’t I enough? I had never really wanted siblings, but over the summer I’d come to think of Arms as a weird brother I never had.

I felt like the statue was breathing. Like it was sucking all the air out of the room. But no, surely, it was just my imagination. Just my fear. I hoped my voice wouldn’t betray it.

“Is it ... is it finished?”

“Almost. It just needs one more thing to bring it all together.”

“And what’s that?”

“Trade secret.” He winked and playfully hit me on the shoulder. “You’ll see.”

More secrets? I almost shook my head, but I didn’t care that much about it then. I only wanted to be away from that terrible sculpture, from that claustrophobic shack, and, for the first time, from my friend.

Arms was right. I did see. When, after about three days of hiding from him and pretending to be grounded for a made-up infraction, I heard that the Walkers’ baby went missing.

The Walkers were a nice young couple at the end of our block. They held hands everywhere they went, an affectation I had never before associated with adults. Their baby was objectively cute in that Gerber-baby way, big blue eyes and pink cheeks.

Everyone was upset, terrified, outraged. Police came around and interviewed all the neighbours. Posters were made. A TV crew arrived to shoot an emotional plea from the parents.

In the midst of it all, I seemed to be the only one who knew what happened. At least, I had some idea of what happened, one I was nearly too scared to contemplate. Still, I had to know for sure what kind of monster my new best friend was, and so I worked up my courage and did the brave thing.

I went to see Arms.

He was kicking a ball in his yard and looked happy to see me.

“Done being grounded?” He greeted me.

I nodded.

“Just in time. Have I got something to show you.”

He ushered me toward the shack excitedly.

On sneakered feet that suddenly weighed a ton each, I followed.

The shack was as awful as I remembered. If anything, the smell might have intensified.

There was an object inside, on a small wooden table surrounded by candles, and it took me a terrifying moment or two to recognize it. Human hearts, you see, in real life look nothing like they do in cartoons and greeting cards. In real life, human hearts look like messy bloody fists.

“I got the last ingredient.” Arms beamed at me proudly. “All set now. Just waited for you, thought you’d want to be here.”

I didn’t. I wanted to be anywhere else but there. The last of my resolve, of my hopes had crumbled and I was left with nothing but the sheer terror of the monster before me.

The last drop of courage had evaporated from my fear-scorched heart, and I ran. I ran out of that shack like the devil himself was chasing me. But not before knocking over

the lit candles.

The fire behind me blazed into life with a whoosh straight out of an action movie. Or, more appropriately, a horror movie.

And sure, knocking over the candles could technically be dismissed as a random act, but I did pause on my way out—while Arms was busy trying to save his precious sculpture—and latched the door from the outside. That was, by anyone's standards, a deliberate act. A murder, some might say.

There was an investigation afterward. The police came, asked me questions. Barely anything, really. Everyone was still too preoccupied with the missing baby, too ready to commit to the 'terrible tragedy, no one's fault' narrative about the fire. I don't know if any of Arms' sculpture survived, or if anyone ever questioned all the bones found. Perhaps, they simply burned down in the fire. I didn't know; I wasn't told, and I didn't ask. It was the one time I was grateful for how overbearingly protective my parents were. I mostly stayed in my room until school started, reading. Never King again, no horror at all. I'd had enough to last me a lifetime.

By the time I emerged back into the world, Arms' parents were gone. Whoever they were. The house had a "For Sale" sign in the front yard once again. The people who bought it next had no kids. That was okay by me; I wasn't looking for more friends anyway. I was done with all that, done with summer friendships for good.

