

Sunflowers

*“I know where you go,
When you want to fall,
Why do you want to be broken?”*

*I remember you happy,
I remember it all,
I remember you painting
Sunflowers in your room.”*

-Everclear, “*Sunflowers.*”

You know how there’s at least one girl in every class who seems to change overnight? One day, she’s right there next to you, sitting in the dirt playing trucks. The next, she comes to school wearing a low-cut top and make-up. You can’t seem to recall when she started to change. You can’t fathom *why* she would change. The one thought that runs through your mind, along with everyone else’s, is ‘what happened?’

That girl is Katie McCullough.

She had been my best friend *forever*, the result of our super-close parents. We had been in each other’s classes every year in school.

Sure, I knew she was a girl, even if everything we did together had something to do with dirt. That’s why I got the shock of my life in grade nine.

She pranced into class wearing skin-tight blue jeans and a navy tank top with a light yellow sweater. The guys, including myself, were drawn to her.

See, I had tried to stop that from happening. Not that I didn’t like her dressing like that, because I did, and it scared me.

We had made it through junior high without her becoming like *that*. She had made clear to me how she felt about it.

There was hope. Or so I had thought.

In one class, she was assigned to sit next to me. I leaned toward her.

“Katie!” I whispered to her.

She glanced up at me. “Hey, Luke,” she said hesitantly.

“Uh ... what’s going on with you?”

“What do you mean?” she questioned.

I awkwardly gestured at her clothes.

“Oh, um ... listen, Luke,” she started sympathetically, “I just thought that I could make some new friends this year. I mean, we’ve been hanging around forever, and I just thought I could use some difference.”

Yeah. Difference, that she got by becoming the same as everyone else.

“Oh,” I replied.

“Maybe you should clean yourself up, too,” she said.

I looked at what I was wearing. Old jeans that had definitely worn out a long time ago, with a plain green t-shirt. My hair was in its usual messy state, with short brown hairs poking out from all angles.

I was still in shock from what she had said, though. Had she implied that I needed more friends? I was a nobody all through junior high, someone who stuck to himself and stayed out of the way. I was just me, Luke Thompson.

But, maybe she was right.

“Yeah, uh, I was thinking about it, actually,” I said.

She glanced around before picking up her pencil and doodling on her notebook. “Cool,” she replied, with a bit of a monotone. It was almost as if she had *dismissed* me.

During that class, I had tried to talk to her again. She brushed me off. It was clear she didn't want to speak to me. Why, I didn't know.

I saw her sitting with the basketball team at lunch. She was giggling at something, and the boys were all staring at her.

It made me sick, and I made the quick decision never to change.

Since then, I haven't had much to do with her. She's your stereotypical popular girl. She treats the losers like dirt, uses her friends as servants, and ignores nobodies.

Then, the summer before twelfth grade, I got a job at old Mister Perry's farm. He grows everything from azaleas to zucchini. The best part of the farm, however, was the sunflowers.

Every year, since 1978, old Mister Perry has planted sunflowers at the beginning of June. Almost magically, they're all around seven feet tall by August, which is when the provincial fair takes place. And every year, since 1978, he wins a prize. This year, I was helping him. Old Mister Perry didn't like people seeing the sunflowers before they were ready, but he trusted me, and that's how I got the job in the first place.

My part was simple. Every morning I had to walk down to the field and water them.

In order to get to the field, I had to walk for five minutes along a trail. The trail went up a hill about mid-way, and from the top you could see the ocean. It amazed me every time I saw it. Most days, I looked at it alone. But on one day, July 28th to be exact, I found Katie McCullough standing beside me.

That morning, as usual, I reported to the farm at 8:30 am, sharp. I watered the vegetables and fertilized the plants. Then, I started down the trail.

I never look at the ocean on my way there. I like to take a minute or two to enjoy it, and I can't do that when there are thirsty sunflowers depending on me.

Now that I think about it, I knew something was off about the trail. The dirt looked like it had been freshly scuffed. There were light sandal prints on the ground. I kept on walking towards the sunflowers.

When I got to the flat field, my eyes immediately went to the giant plants that towered over everything. My gaze drifted downward, only to see shiny blond hair that reflected the hot sun.

I slowly made my way over to the sunflowers. Who was it? My heart nearly stopped when realization hit; Katie was standing back on before me, looking up at the flowers in awe while tears glistened on her cheeks.

Of course I had seen her cry when we were little. She'd done it all the time. When I broke her toys, when someone teased her, when she had to take baths. But this was different. We were seventeen years old. She didn't have any toys. People were too scared to tease her. And, well, I assumed she didn't mind taking baths anymore.

I guess that she'd heard the crunching dirt beneath my feet, because she turned around to face me. When she recognized me, she started to run. I easily stopped her by grabbing her arm and pulling it toward me. Surprisingly, she didn't pull away.

"Kates ...?" I began, using her childhood nickname. "What happened?"

She began mumbling incoherently.

"Katie, calm down. Take a deep breath, and tell me what's going on," I said.

She looked up at me with a desperate, lost look in her eyes. "Um ... well, uh, everyone hates me."

Her voice echoed in my head. Everyone? How could *everyone* hate her?

Sure, most kids at school didn't like her, but only a few said anything about it. Y'know, the bold, audacious ones. The rebels. They weren't afraid to make their thoughts about Katie McCullough known. But they were a small percentage. The majority were just too intimidated of her. We couldn't say what we felt, for fear of a lousy high school career.

So what had happened? Had people finally cracked from fake niceness? Was there hope for something different?

Of course not. This was, after all, Sunny Shore, Prince Edward Island. Nothing was different. Conformity ruled.

"Why?" I questioned.

"Because I wouldn't do it," she managed to choke out. "I wouldn't take the drugs."

I didn't know how to comfort her. I'd heard about people doing drugs. I'd even heard about the preps doing drugs, but I still couldn't picture Katie doing them.

"You did the right thing. If they hate you, then they're probably not your real friends," I told her.

“But they’re all I’ve got!” she burst out unexpectedly. “I don’t have any other friends! I need them!”

“No you don’t. Friends that make you do things like that aren’t your friends!”

“Well you wouldn’t understand anyway!” she yelled.

“I’m trying to! You’re not making it any easier!” I yelled back, just as loud.

I dropped her arm. She stared at the soil below her. Out of nowhere, she said, “It crossed the line.”

Before I could say anything, she continued, “Ever since grade nine I’ve done what they’ve wanted me to do. I bought these stupid, tight clothes. I put down other kids. I just went along with them. But, drugs?”

“You mean, you don’t like wearing those clothes?” I asked.

“Oh, God, no. Do they look comfortable?” she replied, grinning.

I grinned back at her. “So, why do you always go along with them?” I cautiously asked.

As I had expected, the grin fell off her face. “Why? Because I need to fit in. They hate different people.”

“It’s called being unique, not different. And, they wouldn’t hate you. They’d be afraid of you,” I told her.

This caught her attention. “Why?” she questioned.

“Cause what’s more intimidating than a beautiful, unique, confident woman?”

The grin was back, along with the silence. Again, she broke it.

“You know, I still come here a lot, whenever I need to just get away. I come and see the sunflowers. Remember when we were little, and we were always a bit scared of them? It was because they were big, and free-standing. They looked dangerous and delicate at the same time. Is this how I look?”

I didn’t want to answer her question, so I avoided it. “Yeah, I remember that. We used to wait until we were about five feet away from them, then run away screaming.

“And old Mister Perry would tell us to stop ‘making a bloody racket!’” she said, doing a fairly-decent impression.

I laughed with her. We hadn’t laughed like that since, well, I couldn’t really remember. It felt good.

We sat there in the dirt for what seemed like hours, reminiscing our childhood experiences.

I looked at my watch; it was lunchtime. ‘Time for my break,’ I thought humorously.

“Hey, Kates? Wanna see the ocean?” I asked her.

A smile graced her features as I took her hand and pulled her up.

We walked up through the trail, all the while pointing out to each other little things, like the green trees and the bright wildflowers.

At the top, I could feel my breath hitch in my chest. The warm sun reflected off the cool water as if it were a piece of metal. The waves crashed lightly onto the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. It was like a scene from an old movie, where the hero rescues the damsel in distress, then whisks her off to some paradise.

Katie leaned slightly into me. “Thanks, Luke. This year, I’m going to be Katie McCullough, not just another popular girl. And if people don’t like it, then that’s their problem,” she said stubbornly.

I chuckled and put my arm around her shoulders. We started to walk the rest of the trail.

There was hope.