

Warm Enough to Melt Winter

The scuffed toe of a sneaker passed the little gap. The little gap was in the grass under an overhang of rock imbedded in the bank. The best hiding place in the world, I thought, as any proud seven year old would. The long, blowing grass was turning the yellow of fall.

The sneaker was Cara's; purple and white in its better days, now a worn grey all over. I lay on my stomach breathing fast, feeling my heart in my chest. The sneaker passed again. I waited with adrenaline coursing through me. Suddenly I felt a cold, slimy, damp hand grabbing my ankles, pulling me deeper into the hole. I dug my fingers into the earth, white knuckled, until I felt my body move back the most infinitesimal amount into the depth of the gap.

And I was gone like a shot from that hole, flying, banging my head on the rocky ledge, tearing my pants on a jagged stump, a scream clawing its way from my throat viciously, then fading into the vast silence of the quiet cove.

As the ringing of my ears subsided, the sound of laughter floated about in the air. Cara, Sam and Jill stood behind the bank. Cara's sleeve was rolled up past her elbow, her hand purple from having submerged in into the icy ocean waters, chilling it until it was hard and cold and deadened. She had a glint in her eye, tears running down her cheeks like crystalline rivers caressed by the rosy riverbed of her smiling face.

The tears on my own cheeks lay there with much less enchantment, freezing in the bitter autumn wind, hidden a little by the burning blush creeping from my neck, tiptoeing to the tips of my ears. My breathing ragged, I stood gasping, concealing with difficulty my fright and relief, relief that the grabbing hand had been Cara's

"Joey, it was a joke..." she said with a little concern, dregs of laughter still hovering over her face. Her own breathing was being controlled with the same difficulty as mine, spurts of laughter spewing from her mouth like smoke from a fire as the warmth of her breathing formed white wisps of clouds in the air.

Meanwhile my mind was racing, deliberating. I could laugh with Cara, letting her ease and confidence take over me. Or, I could embrace this as an opportunity, using her guilt to my advantage.

When Cara's laughter evaporated and her smile turned, for just one instant, to a frown of anxiety, I decided that the moment was perfect. What was left of the day was fading quickly into dusk, and the air of fall that was really a warning of winter burned bitterly in my throat.

Really I was too old to cry, being the second oldest, a year to Sam's senior, three years older than Jill, the baby. But Cara was Sam's older sister, not mine, and eleven. And I admired how wonderful she was, me being stuck with Jill, whose age made her barely able to keep up as she waddled behind us.

Cara, however, ran with grace and magic. She was spirited. And although Sam was my very best friend, I sometimes envied him her.

So, I allowed my lower lip to quiver, and as Cara stooped down and hugged me I buried my face in her jacket. I let out one convincing hiccup, with little difficulty, and she drew back, her smile comforting and guilt-ridden, mesmerizing and filled with warmth all the same.

"Hot chocolate?" she said, smiling a smile warm enough to melt winter, and I nodded, my pretense perfection as I swallowed and wiped my eyes. I felt not a shred of remorse at my dishonesty, as Cara took me by the hand, wearing Jill on her hip, and leaving Sam to walk behind us on the road. How could I feel anything less than wonderful, having won Cara's attention to myself for once?

The autumn wind blew fiercely as we came to the open road. The town was not big enough to be called a town, nor a community. It was Lead Cove, just outside of Old Perlican.

It was a long dirt road leading in from the highway straight to a cove, adorned by two small houses, one on either side of it, right in the valley of the cove, nestled snug and cozy. Cara's and Sam's house was closest to the water, not a hundred feet away from where Jill and I lived on the same road.

As we turned to walk up the drive Cara's dad sang out to us in his booming voice.

"Howdy y'all" he joked, tipping his hat to us.

"Miss Cara" he said, "Miss Jill" with another tip of his hat, "pleasure to meet y'all"

Jill giggled with pleasure. Cara rolled her eyes and grinned as her dad, tall and broad, bent down to kiss the top of her head.

"Me too" shrieked Jill, and giggled again as he obliged.

"Joey had a little scare." She explained in her wonderful voice, tainted a little by guilt that remained completely concealed in the rest of her face. "I'm making some hot chocolate" she told him, and he nodded, his eyebrows raised.

"What scared him?" he asked.

Cara shrugged shamelessly, feigning bewilderment.

Her dad chuckled knowingly and smiled after us as we continued to the door, and headed straight for the kitchen where Cara's mom was cooking a chicken with jigs dinner.

I sat down next to Sam and an empty chair. Cara boiled the kettle, working alongside her mother. Sam and I were the same height in our chairs, our feet kicking one another's as they swung back and forth; Jill's head was barely above the table, the ends of her long white-blond hair brushing the table top.

Cara sat down between me and Jill, laying the mugs on the table and sloshing hot chocolate over the rims of them all.

We sat around the table sipping at the drinks until dad showed up, carrying with him a bowl of mashed carrots and potatoes, and a pie pan smelling sweetly of lemon meringue. Everyone always teased my dad for making the best pies, him being a man. But to Jill and me he was not only the best father, but a mother, and all we'd ever needed.

When the grown-ups laid the food down on the table, we barreled up over the stairs to the room Sam and Cara shared, divided in half by a sheet tacked to the walls, parting in the middle to give Cara's half access to the door. We sat on the floor in a circle and Cara led us in a game of duck-duck-goose played by her own rules.

After dinner my father and Jill left; Jill cried and protested until Cara whispered something in her ear.

"I can't tell you what I said, it's a secret between me and Jill" she said, and when we nagged she held her head high and repeated herself.

We shunned her for a half hour until we crowded around the television in the basement to watch Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.

Later that night, I woke up on the floor next to Sam's bed, and crept over to Cara's side of the room.

'I had a nightmare." I whispered, lying, and she came and watched me until I fell back to sleep.

I was mortified that morning to see that I had wet my bed, and knew what had happened the moment I saw Cara's bedtime cup of water on the ground next to me. She hadn't been subtle but she had been sly.

Seething but slightly impressed by Cara's nerve, I snuck to the bathroom to change and hide Sam's spare pajamas at the bottom of the hamper.

When the rest of the family woke for breakfast, I pretended nothing had occurred because being mad at Cara would mean admitting to what had happened. She smiled slyly as she acknowledged me, and when I left the house, I fought the urge to stick my tongue out at her, refusing to admit defeat.

I never did forget that day, as a normal day in all of our lives, even later when my world fell from beneath my feet, and I learned that I couldn't trust everyone I loved. I remembered Cara especially throughout all the times to come, from that day, not because she had treated me wonderfully, but because I had loved her and looked up to her despite everything she did. And that was the most important thing for me to know.

I forgave Cara for that day, even though I never did forget it. Throughout the next few months, everything that happened in our lives progressed in that same fashion. It was familiar and it was perfect in all of our minds. In fact, things were that way until pretty much the next summer, when we began to grow up in different ways. We all changed that year,

but the past; those times when we were inseparable always will exist, no matter what the future holds. With that in mind, we made it through okay, but we didn't necessarily make it out the same.

In late August we went swimming in Octagon Pond. We went alone, meaning without our parents. Jill and I both couldn't swim well, and that's why we were strictly forbidden to go to Octagon Pond. But Cara had an idea, and a stubborn streak solid enough to rival that of solid rock. She was feeling spiteful, so we ended up at Octagon Pond.

Sam and Cara were both strong swimmers and the day was hot and dry, so we asked to go swimming. My father said no. Cara's mother said no. Cara's father said he was outvoted either way, and made it a unanimous no. So Cara asked to go for a walk. She promised to be careful, crossing her heart. Her mother gave in out of guilt that we had not been allowed to swim. Her last words to us that day were "Cara, sweetie, I'm trusting you."

Cara had nodded solemnly while the words ran straight through her head, leaving as much of an impression as a shadow leaves in the ground. Its there, and then it's gone, and you would never know.

At this point Cara was twelve, I was eight, Sam seven, and Jill five. School was to start in two weeks and Jill was going for the first time, and Cara was off to the high school for seventh grade. We were generally allowed to do whatever we pleased if Cara was with us. So today she was bitter. And so, once we were on the trail, she led us around the road, doubling back, and to the pond. No one objected. No one argued. It was inconceivable for the thought to cross our minds to question Cara; our trust in her was so great.

When we reached the shore of the pond, Cara clambered upon a rock. She hauled off her shorts and jumped into the pond in an instant, in her t-shirt and underwear. Sam followed suit, tugging off all his clothes save for his underpants, and I nervously did the same.

When I jumped in, I sunk to the bottom like lead, and my eyes were open and stinging a little from the murky water, and it was clear that I was sinking, but I kicked with all my might, bursting to the surface, grabbing at air to try and stay afloat. Jill played by the shore in her underwear splashing her feet and shaking her hair upside down in the water, then letting the wet ends slap at her back as she jumped.

Within twenty minutes I was exhausted, and clambered ashore wearily, to relax in the sun. Laying my wet body on the warm, dry rock, I nodded off, dreaming of something cool, and green, a walk in the woods...?

I awoke to the sound of someone shrieking for joy. Cara had thrown herself off the rock again, flinging herself with all her might, into the center of the pond. Sam followed suit, singing like Tarzan.

I laughed as I watched them, one after the other, flying through the air, landing with a splash. Soon the sun was lowering into the horizon. There were about five hours of daylight left, making it around three o'clock. Everyone was exhausted now. As Sam and Cara were getting dressed, I heard voices in the wood.

Cara held her finger up. We all paused and listened carefully. "Caaaarrrrraaaaaaa.... Jooooeeeyyy..." voices called to us; our parents. "Saaammmmm..."

Now we were desperate to get as far away as possible. Cara turned to find Jill just in time to see her tumble from the jumping rock into the water below, and not reemerge.

My heart leapt into my throat. Cara shrieked at the top of her lungs. She took three running steps and threw herself into the water just as her father came to the clearing.

I saw him freeze for a moment in shock, as Cara did not resurface. He was at the rock in an instant as Cara's head burst from the water.

Now Cara's mother and my father were here too. They stood by Sam and me as Cara's father scooped Jill out of her arms, passing her to my dad. Jill's lips were blue, but immediately she threw up water and began to cry.

Now it was Cara, who, too exhausted to climb out of the pond, began to pant and gasp, slipping beneath the surface.

My knees grew weaker as Cara's father reached down too late to grasp her hand, or so it seemed, until, at the last moment, he pulled her out of the water by one arm.

She was not hurt. She was pale. Jill was still choking on water, but would be fine. Cara's mother began to cry. Cara's father looked as though he wanted to hit her. My father was crouched around Jill as though he was trying to protect her from some evil. His back faced Cara, Sam and me. Cara began to cry. I began to cry. Sam began to cry. My father cradled Jill in one arm, and grabbed me by the shoulder, marching me home. I went to bed without supper, dropping tired, though the sun still lit the sky.

I saw as I drew my curtains Cara looking out the window of her own bedroom. She was still crying.

Sam and I were both grounded for two weeks. Cara was grounded for a month. Dad had to drive two hours to the city to bring Jill to a hospital. She was okay, but dad was afraid, being always overprotective. Not that he could be blamed, having to be both parents for me and Jill.

Sam and I were un-grounded just three days before school started. We were outdoors every one of those three days, but we didn't talk very much.

Jill was with us too, but she never talked very much. She was to start kindergarten in a few days. I had never thought much of Jill, her being so young, but she never once said a bad thing to any of us after the accident.

And indeed, time in my mind was classified this way; before and after the accident; because that day changed many things. Not only did I begin to see Jill differently, viewing her as a person (I had developed a healthy respect and admiration for my littler sister) but I began to see Cara differently.

Cara had in a way, let us down. She had never promised to protect us, but we had expected her to. And she had never before given us reason to doubt her. Cara had always been confident and sure, and this made us sure as well. Nothing could go wrong. Cara had never blamed herself for anything, always shameless and unabashed. Now she blamed herself for everything. Thus, I think, in some corner of our minds, we blamed her too.

Or at least I did.

I'm not sure exactly what I blamed her for. Not the accident I don't think. But then what? I knew Jill didn't blame her. I knew Sam didn't blame her. But I blamed her. And I think I was the slightest bit angry at her. And maybe at everyone. If Jill hadn't jumped into the water, we wouldn't have lost Cara in the way that we did. But then again, it wasn't Jill's idea to go swimming. If only I had said something to Cara, *'I can't swim, Jill can't swim, I don't want to go, this is a bad idea..'* the possibilities were endless. But I didn't stop us. So it was a bit my fault that we lost Cara too.

Losing her is the best way to describe it though, despite the fact that she didn't leave.

The same body was there with us, just not as often, but the body wasn't Cara. And without Cara, I began to think of myself differently as well.

School started on Monday. Sam and I walked the fifteen minutes down the road and to the nearby school. We were in the same class, because grades were mixed, primary and elementary. There was a grade just for kindergarten too. Jill tailed behind Sam and me at first, but after five minutes, I gave up on whatever had separated us before, dropping back a half step in rhythm so that, without knowing it, Sam slowed down too, and Jill was beside us. When I picked up the pace again, Jill remained by my side, with an extra spring in her step. I smiled to myself.

Cara walked behind us, or at least the thing we called Cara. The stranger was wearing Cara's new school clothes, and had Cara's backpack over its shoulder.

Cara stepped onto her own bus without a word to us, even as we waved her goodbye. She never waved back. The gesture, which had been an honest intention to cheer her up, caused tears to pool in her eyes. She looked down.

We walked on in silence, Sam Jill and me, as the bus passed us by, feeling as though Cara too was passing us by. We had nothing more to say.

Summer, without warning, had turned to fall. Fall slid slowly into winter. Winter that year was the coldest, cruelest winter I had ever been through. Sam came home with Jill and me every day after school and stayed until dark. Some days he ate supper with us.

Cara never came over anymore. Half of the days, she didn't come home. She was at a friend's house; she told us when we asked.

This, for no valid reason, came to us as a shock. Cara had never needed friends other than us. Cara was special, magical even; Cara was different from all the other girls. Or she had used to be. Sam whispered to me one day during school that she had been caught stealing lipstick from a convenience store. I felt cheated, and confused. I didn't know this strange girl who had replaced my Cara.

Still, though, on the rare occasion that Cara would find us outside and decide to stop and play for a while, she seemed like Cara; the same but different. I didn't understand this at all. I felt betrayed, but not angry. I felt like maybe it was me Cara didn't like and that I should try harder. So when Cara came out with us, on those rare occasions, I felt pleased with myself, I felt that I had accomplished this. I tried to act more grown up, like Cara did.

Did it occur to me that Cara was the one who was doing something wrong? Never! Even the stealing, I remembered how she had put my fingers in water while I slept and made me wet the bed. It was just Cara, brash and bold. I didn't understand how she had changed, or why.

There was a time in the winter when Cara and Sam came to stay with us for a week. We knew only that their parents were having troubles they needed to work out. Sam and Jill slept in my room with me. Cara slept in Jill's much smaller room.

During those days Cara ate with us during every meal, and came home with us every day after school. Sam and Cara were both worried; worried about divorce, Cara had told me. She talked to me again now. I could see something familiar in her eyes. But some of the fire had been smothered too, the bright fire of her eyes. I assumed that it had been doubted by the constant presence of tears there. Friday morning, dad told us over breakfast that Sam's and Cara's parents had gone out of town. They would be back on Monday, and Sam and Cara could go home then.

Selfishly, I was worried. I was glad, but I didn't want to lose Cara again, when we were so close to getting her back. At this time I was eight. I was a child. And I still admired Cara with all my heart.

So, I decided that if I could impress Cara, maybe, when she went back home, she wouldn't forget us again. Thus, I tried to think of something daring, brave and impressive to do. Sam helped me, and we decided that the best idea would be to walk on the pond. No one dared to walk on the pond this early in winter, but it was iced over well enough.

We didn't go to octagon pond, of course, but we picked a smaller frozen bog hole on the road, so that Cara would have to pass us on her way home. Jill was our spy, making sure that no one saw us except Cara. I knew well enough to know that I would under no circumstances let Jill on the ice.

As we heard the bus approach, we stepped out onto the ice. When Cara came into view, we stood together and waved to her, grinning at the shock on her face.

Then, I slipped and Sam grabbed my hand as I fell. When my back hit the ice, it broke with a sharp crack, and Sam and I crashed through.

I saw Jill running back towards home, screaming as she ran. I treaded water as Sam and Cara had showed me when we had swum last summer. My legs began to feel stiff with the cold. Sam was struggling too. He was gasping for breath and trying to stay afloat.

I shut my eyes for a minute and thought. I heard Sam breathe in icy water, and then choke on it. This was my idea. This was my fault. "Help!" I screamed out, my eyes popping open.

Cara was at the edge of the hole now, beginning to reach out to us. Sam's outstretched fingers fell just short. His hand began to drop.

In that instant, I leaned as far as I could closer to Sam, knowing that a struggling swimmer would grab and push off from the closest object. I let him grab me. I felt Sam's hand on my head, and held my breath as the freezing water filled my ears. When I managed to get my head above the water again, I knew I was nearly out of time. I latched my mitten onto the only solid ice left as Cara hauled Sam out of the water. I reached out for Cara's hand and felt my mitten make contact with hers just as my dad appeared at the end of the path running full tilt. Cara began to pull me closer to shore as my Dad appeared by her side and reached for me as well. They stripped off my clothes and Sam's and together carried us home.

When I woke up I remembered. I opened my eyes to darkness and saw Sam lying on the floor next to the fireplace. He was asleep. I was on the couch. We were both swaddled like infants. My dad was asleep in the armchair. I could hear Jill from the bedroom breathing gently.

Cara poked her head in from the kitchen. She was standing by the stove, boiling the kettle. She saw me awake and poured me a cup of hot water. As she passed it to me my eyes met her own. Hers were full of concern. I looked away; she didn't know what I had done.

I sipped at the water with sudden understanding. As Sam too began to stir, Cara flicked on the light and handed him a mug. When he looked my way I made sure my eyes looked closed, although I could see him through my lashes. But I refused to meet his eyes. He knew exactly what I had done.

I felt as though I had let Sam down. I felt as though I had betrayed him. I felt as though he had trusted me and I had not been trustworthy. I felt as though I should stay away from him; as though I were bad for him. Because I loved him I thought he'd be better off without me.

I was mad at myself. I hated myself. I wanted Sam to hate me because that would be sufficient punishment for what I had done. I had done a bad thing. I knew though, in my heart of hearts that Sam would forgive me; unless I was unforgivable. Maybe if I didn't talk to him, he wouldn't talk to me. It would be easier like that. If we weren't friends anymore, I couldn't hurt him anymore. I felt as though I should feel guiltier than the guiltiest person on earth. I felt exactly like Cara had felt last summer.

And so even though I felt all of this, I knew that if Sam could forgive me, I could forgive me. I knew that there was a second chance if I would take it. I knew what would happen if I distanced myself from Sam. And I knew I didn't want that. So I closed my eyes and went back to sleep, and the next morning at breakfast, I looked into Sam's eyes. And I was hit with more guilt than I had ever felt in my life. Enough guilt and pain to destroy me if let it. But I held my gaze and the stab of the guilt became a dull ache, throbbing, and I felt a single tear run down my cheek. And Sam too, blinked back tears. And I was forgiven. I could see in Sam's eyes wariness, a bit of mistrust and doubt. But there was no hate, and no anger. There was forgiveness. And there always would be.

That year when school ended dad, Jill and I went to Sam's for dinner. After supper, we celebrated the long daylight hours by playing hide and seek. Cara joined in, and the four of us ran off. I stood with my back to a tree, feeling the warmth of the sun and the cool ocean air blowing up under and around my tee shirt. I counted to one hundred in rhythm with the pounding surf.

When I started to look, I saw Jill first. Then I saw Sam. But I left Sam for a while, pretending I hadn't. I had a brilliant plan.

It took me half an hour to find Cara, but when I did, she helped me. Together, Cara and Jill and I took great care in capturing a spider. With Jill on my shoulder holding the spider, we snuck up behind him, crouched between two rocks, and dangling the spider in front of his eyes, with the precision of threading a needle, carefully placed the spider on his nose.

I heard his breathing catch as he sucked in, then he let out a pleasing shriek that had a warbling vibrato. I laughed until my sides hurt. Cara laughed until she cried. Jill laughed like a maniac; tumbling from my shoulders into Cara's waiting arms.

When Sam turned and looked at me, his fear melted into laughter, and I could see the anger in his eyes dissolve away in his smile. He trusted me, and he forgave me, and forever it would be like this.

I turned to Cara and Jill. Jill was pink with pleasure and looked as though she couldn't believe what she had done.

Cara's face looked familiar again. I recognized her smile and laugh from long ago. I recognized the same girl who had scared me and comforted me and made me wet the bed, and I acknowledged that that girl and this girl were the same girl. And although we could never have the same relationship we had had before, it wasn't because she had let me down. It was because she had underestimated Jill and Sam and me and herself, and because she hadn't forgiven herself like we had forgiven her. But here, between the four of us now, no grudges exist.

And despite myself, I was pleased not only that I had made Jill and Sam laugh, but that I had made Cara laugh, laugh her beautiful laugh like tinkling bells; bright like the sun, warm enough to melt all the winters in the world.

Although many things can change, some things cannot. And so after all of the things that changed between Cara and me, I still looked up to her and longed to make her smile. I couldn't forget everything that had gone on between us, but I could forgive, and in the end, that was what mattered.

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