



SUMMER STORY

By Bryon Cahill

The shenanigans were in full swing at a quarter to 3.

Mikey was ripping the pages of his notebook into long, thin shreds. Jimmy was leading a small group (myself included) in a lilting chorus of Green Day's "Wake Me Up When September Ends." Even Jeanine, the Goody Two-Shoes of the class, couldn't control herself. The overwhelming sensation that swept through the classroom on the last day of school was forcing her to bounce and sway in her chair. Our teacher, Mrs. Dennis, had given up on us. Everyone was anxious to get out.

Then there was Sam. Poor Sam. He sat at the front of the classroom staring into the void outside. He knew what was coming. I stopped singing and

remembered Sam's sad story.

After he was born, the doctors had run some tests and discovered that Sam was allergic to cauliflower and summer. Luckily, Sam was born in November. If he had been born during a summer month, his tiny immune system wouldn't have been able to handle it. He would have whispered away after just a few short breaths.

His parents consulted specialists all over the world, but there was no known cure. Sam was destined to hibernate through the summer months. His tightly sealed bedroom was on the second floor of his home. It was built especially for Sam, with no windows. Windows were too dangerous. Even the tightest seal

could leak. Even the strongest pane could break. Sam was too fragile to gamble with glass.

When visiting Sam, you first had to enter the sanitizing room. There, you showered with a superstrong, government-issued brand of soap. Next, you moved into the depressurization room, closed the door, and hit a large red button on the wall. A vent opened in the ceiling and sucked any remaining traces of summer from your clothes and shot it out into the fresh air, where it belonged.

Sam and I had always been the best of friends. Every year when the summer came, though, I was constantly surprised to remember Sam's terrible ordeal. We had some great times in the fall, winter, and spring. The fact that Sam was missing out on the best season of the year always broke my heart when it came around. And I know it broke his too.

But every year, June was inevitable. We would usually finish up school around the 15th. That gave us at least five or six days to squeeze every ounce of freedom in before Sam would be locked up in his cage. But this particular year we had had an unrelenting winter. I remember an image clearly: Sam on his sled, perched at the top of the hill. He had this far-off look on his face—like he was fighting something in the future that none of us could see. It was the same haunted face that was staring out the classroom window back at the end of eighth grade.

Because of our many snow days, this was not just the last day of school but also the last day of spring. Winter had

robbed us of our few days of freedom. The reality of the day thrust itself into my heart—and the singing stopped as the last bell rang.

"Enjoy your summer, kids! Behave yourselves!" Mrs. Dennis said, but few kids heard her. They were all scrambling for the door like wild monkeys fighting for the last banana. Even Mrs. Dennis rushed out.

Poor Sam just sat there, glued to his seat. I approached him slowly. "Hey," I said. What else could I say? There were no words. There never were.

"You know what tomorrow is, Devon?" he asked without drawing his eyes from a passing flock of birds in the sky.

"Yeah, Sam. I do."

"There's never enough time, you know? Each year it gets here quicker and quicker."

"I know, Sam." I did know ... but then again, I didn't. I'd tried to put myself in Sam's position. When I was 8, I refused to

leave my room on the first day of summer. That lasted all of about five hours. I felt terrible, like a sinner who couldn't repent. I always knew I wasn't enjoying my summers as much as a kid should. But I never dared cry about it. Not when my friend was locked away with a fatal allergy.

"I'm not going to do it anymore, Devon." He looked up at me, and his eyes glazed over. "I can't."

"Sam ... come on, man. We've talked about this before."

"I'm dead serious this time." He stood up and faced me. The pain in his eyes was gone. It had been replaced with sheer determination. "I'm going to do it

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with or without your help."

"Do what, Sam? You'll die out there!"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I just know that I have to try. Please, help me try." He stuck out his hand for me to shake. It hung for a second or two between us in the clean spring air. I didn't want to shake it. I really didn't. But I knew I had to. He was my best friend.

The next morning, it was summer. I rode my bike to the corner of Sam's street, ducked into the bushes, and called Sam's house on my cell phone. His mom answered the phone. I hesitated for just a moment, and then I let it all pour out.

"Mrs. Freed? Is that you?" I blurted, pretending to be in shock.

"Devon? What's wrong, hon?"

"My mom's not answering the phone. I don't know where she is and—Ow! It hurts!"

"Devon, where are you?"

"I ... I don't know. I fell down a cliff, I think ... I think I broke my leg!"

"You what? Oh, you poor thing!" I went on to give phony details of where I had supposedly fallen and begged her to come get me. "Mrs. Freed ..." I paused. "I'm sorry."

"I'll be right there. Don't move, Devon! I'm coming!" Less than a minute later, that dear, sweet woman emerged from her house. She peeled out of her driveway and blew right past me. She never saw me.

As soon as she was out of sight, I ran to the house. I burst through the front door and took the steps four at a time. I bolted through the sanitizing room and ignored the rules of the depressurization room. When I yanked on that second

door, a huge rush of air came gushing out of Sam's room and knocked me off my feet. From the floor, I looked up into my friend's face. He was smiling a smile I had never known. And once again he held out his hand to me.

"Come on, man. Let's go play." He helped me up, and we were off.



Stone/Getty Images

We rode down to Grover's Pond and caught a few frogs. I'd never done that before. It was pretty gross—slimy, you know—but it was a hoot. Sam held a big bullfrog up to his face and kissed it smack on the lips. He was laughing so hard that he loosened his grip, and the frog jumped right out of his hands and landed on his head. We lost it. We were two kids screaming happily. It was life, unrehearsed and wonderful. Seeming less amused, the frog jumped down into the pond with a splash.

Then we rode to the ice-cream store and stuffed ourselves silly with pecan sundae surprise and all the rainbow sprinkles we could handle (a lot). From there, we pedaled down to the lake and spent a good hour splashing each other in our inner tubes and cheating at Marco Polo.

We didn't have towels, but it was hotter than I'd ever known it to be on the first day of summer, and it didn't take long to air-dry. We put on our shirts and jumped back on our bikes. "Race you!" Sam shouted, and took off.

"Race me? To where?"

"Wherever!" he screamed, and I pedaled hard to keep up with him. He really was doing fine. I was beginning to think that his summer allergy was just a big, cruel hoax and that we were on our way to exposing the ugly truth!

Sam won the race to "wherever," and I hadn't even let him. I had always been the stronger athlete, but that day was Sam's, and nothing could beat him. As it turned out, "wherever" was the town park. *Just as good a place as any*, I thought, and then wondered what *that* meant.

Exhausted, we collapsed on the grass. It was green, soft, and perfect. The word *heaven* crossed my mind, but I didn't dare breathe it.

We lay there, hands linked behind our heads, staring up into the deep, deep blue forever. "How you feelin', Sam?" I asked.

"Honestly? Never better. Never better."

"Good." I let out a relieved breath. And then I heard the sirens.

I sat up. The parking lot was too far to see, but I knew an ambulance was there, and Sam's parents, and probably the cops too, just for good measure.

Sam coughed weakly, and my attention was all his again. "It's OK, Devon," he said calmly. "This is where I want to be. It's where I've always wanted to be." He coughed again, and this time it sounded worse. He rolled onto his side.

"No! Stop kidding around, Sam. You were doing so good!" He rolled onto his back again and stared at the sky.

"What time is it?" he asked. I looked up at the sun.

"I dunno ... maybe 2 o'clock."

"Heh." In his eyes I saw our entire short life together. "Summer started at 1:07."

"What?" I was crying now.

"Almost made it an hour." He looked at me, and through his smile I swear I saw our entire short life together.

"Sam! ... Sam!" Both his mother and mine were running toward us. They wouldn't get there in time.

"You know what, Devon?"

"What, Sam?"

"I think summer is my favorite season." And then, with his last breath, he gave a funny laugh ... and was gone.

That summer came and went as if it were never there. I locked myself in my room through most of it. It was the only thing I could do.

Throughout the next year, I did the best I could. I got decent grades and pretended to have fun, but mostly I thought of Sam.

When the first day of summer came, I went to that spot in the park and lay there on the grass, looking up into the sky. It was as deep blue as it had been the previous year, and the day was just as hot. I stayed there for a long while and made peace with the season. When I finally stood up and got on my bike, I rode off and had the best summer of my life. ■

Write About It

How can you tell that this story is a fantasy? Did Sam make the right choice? Did Devon? Why or why not? Write a short persuasive essay defending your position.