

It Was Summer

By Amanda Mesa

His name was Zachary Albert. I met him the summer I turned eleven in a little retirement town called Naples on the west coast of Florida. I'd been spending my summers there for years—my parents owned an apartment complex on the beach—and I'd been the only *kid* within fifty miles of the place. Until that summer.

It was the middle of July. My skin was as brown as my cinnamon cornflakes, and the sea water had turned all my hair blond. We had constant sunshine, with highs of 100 degrees Fahrenheit and lows of 97. It was the hottest summer I can remember, but having lived in Florida my whole life, to me the heat was just another fact of life.

Zach was from Pennsylvania. His parents had just bought one of the apartments in the complex to use as a summer place and were planning on staying in Naples until August. They made a living developing state-of-the-art hairpieces, which was ironic considering that the Alberts all had the thickest, blackest, curliest hair I'd ever seen. I used to wonder if it helped business any.

I remember the day I met Zach because it was the day I got my period for the first time. I was sitting in the shallows in a big, wide hole, catching sand fleas and watching them scramble back into the sand.

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Then I heard someone snuffle. I looked up and there was a boy standing there, squinting down at me with a very puzzled expression. He had bone-white skin and a pinched, narrow face. Definitely not a local, I thought.

Neither of us spoke for a good long while, and it probably should have felt a little awkward, but kids don't feel awkward about that kind of stuff the way adults do.

"Hello," I said, finally breaking the silence. He sniffed again.

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"That," he said, pointing at the hole.

I explained to him about the sand fleas, and he just kept staring at the hole, sort of chewing on what I'd said, so I asked him if he wanted to help me. He shook his head and pointed again.

"I think one of them might have bitten you," he said. I looked down and, lo and behold, a thin vein of pink had slowly snaked its way toward my ankle. At first I thought something really had bitten me, but then I traced the tell-tale trickle up my leg and, finding no wound, realized the source. Mortified, I glanced back up but he was already walking away. Forgetting the sand fleas, I ran back to my apartment, and locked myself in the bathroom.

That night, my mother explained to me how to deal with my "problem," and within a few days I was back on the beach. The boy was there, sitting tight-lipped under the shade of a lemon tree. He was wearing thin, black, wire-rimmed glasses, and the most ridiculous swimming trunks I'd ever seen: orange, with flamingo-pink elephants.

"I like your shorts," I said, suppressing my laughter. He glanced down at them and grimaced. "You're not from around here, are you," I ventured.

He shook his head. "Scranton. Pennsylvania," he added, when I didn't say anything.

"Is it hot like this *every* day?"

"Pretty much. It's not so bad when you're in the water."

"But there are *things* in the water."

I giggled at his tone of disdain. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Zach."

"Lily. Nice to meet you, Zach. Would you care to go for a swim? I promise there's nothing too terrible in there."

It took some convincing, but I finally got him in

the water. “Does it always move this much?” he complained, struggling to keep his head above the waves. With his hair wet, he looked a little like a sheepdog. “In PA we have lakes, and there aren’t any waves. This is impossible,” he whined.

“You’ll get used to it,” I said.

Over the next month and a half, Zachary Albert became my best friend. I introduced him to the art of drippy castles and the magnificence of Florida key lime pies, and he in turn told me about snow, the mountains, and his brother, who was a professional skier. I giggled when his skin turned lobster-red after only an hour in the sun and applauded when, after about two weeks, we discovered the beginnings of what could possibly be a tan. I never mentioned the sand flea incident, and to this day I don’t think he ever suspected a thing.

The last week of summer we made a promise not to write each other: “That way, when we see each other again, we’ll have lots of stories to tell, and it’ll be like meeting again for the first time,” he said.

So for the rest of the year, I forgot Zachary Albert. I went back to Fort Lauderdale with my family, I turned twelve, got braces, and won second place in a district-wide youth swimming competition. My tan faded and my hair turned dark again, and when June came around and it was time to go back to Naples, I figured he’d forgotten me.

Yet, sure enough, within a week he was there: a little taller, a little less pinched, but still my dear, peculiar Zachary with the goofy elephant trunks. In the shade of the lemon tree, over fruit punch and sandy Cheese Nips, I showed him the braces and told him about the swimming competition. He talked to me about the middle school he’d started at in Dunmore, about the uniforms they had to wear, and I giggled at the thought of him in a tie and slacks and clunky brown loafers.

And then he said I looked pretty. I stared at the sand and watched it sift through my fingers. Neither of us spoke for a little while after that, and the silence pressed against my ears, which I felt were beginning to burn.

That summer we pretended we were too old for drippy castles and too cool for key lime pie. Instead, we taught ourselves how to glide along the shoreline on the little wooden skim-boards we bought at Duffy’s Surf ‘N’ Turf. When it rained in the afternoons, we played video games in his apartment, or watched oldie game shows on GSN in mine. Whenever he’d beat me

to an answer, he’d toss back his hair and flex his biceps like Hercules. It always made me giggle; his arms were just barely beginning to show definition, but it looked sort of nice in a way I couldn’t explain. He didn’t look so much like a sheepdog anymore.

Sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I’d catch him looking at me. It wasn’t obvious or anything—like, if I made a joke or told a story, he’d look at me like it was the most fascinating thing he’d ever heard. But then when I’d look away, his eyes would become faraway and dreamy, like when he used to tell me about skiing and the mountains. It made me feel kind of funny, but in a good way, like when he’d told me I looked pretty.

On my last night in Naples, we went for a walk along the shore. It was late August, and the heat had already started to lose its grip on the town. It wasn’t too cool out, but I had goose bumps all along my arms

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and legs. Zach was quieter than usual, and I thought about our promise not to keep in touch while we were apart. Then I started thinking about school and my friends back home, and it made me kind of sad for some reason. Suddenly, ten months seemed like an awfully long time.

I felt something warm against my hand and looked down to see Zach’s fingers sliding through mine. We walked like that for a while, occasionally making small talk, and I knew he was thinking the same things I was. The moon sat low on the horizon, like a giant paperweight on a plate of glass. I felt a sudden tugging at my hand and stopped.

Zach stood facing me, chin jutting out awkwardly, eyes mashed shut, lips puckered like he’d swallowed a lemon. I didn’t mean to, I swear I didn’t, but he looked so *goofy* I couldn’t help myself. Laughter rose in my belly and exploded past my lips like a stream of butterflies, carrying all my previous apprehensions.

His eyes snapped open and I clamped a hand over my mouth. Even in the pale glow of the moonlight I

could see him blushing. The color spread like wildfire across his white Irish skin all the way to his ears and I immediately wished I hadn't killed his mojo.

"Oops," I managed to say, but he only shoved his hands into the pockets of his cargo shorts and slumped off toward the complex, looking so downtrodden it nearly broke my heart. I stood hugging myself against the breeze for a moment; then I took off after him, sand flying behind my feet, until I'd caught up to him. Zach turned his face away but I caught his arm and held on stubbornly when he tried to shake me off.

"I didn't mean to do that," I said gently. "I just wasn't expecting it, is all."

He snorted.

"Please don't be angry."

We crossed the plank bridge over the dunes and into the courtyard of the complex. We paused there on the central island of pavement where all the little pathways to the individual apartments meet. Zach kept

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his gaze fixed firmly on the ground, his hands balled into fists at his sides.

"I . . . I'm not good at this stuff," he mumbled.

"Me neither," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "So what?"

He glanced at me and I saw the glimmer of a smile in the darkness.

"I mean, I've never . . . you know . . . kissed a girl before."

I took his hand and pried open his fingers. I'd never kissed a boy either, but I had a pretty good idea of how it was done.

Smiling, I inched forward until I could smell the sea on his skin. He kept his eyes open and as the distance between us closed, his mouth parted just the tiniest bit. I hesitated just before our lips touched, fascinated for a second by the soft whoosh of his breath against my face. For just a moment, that old funny feeling started up again in my stomach. And then, like a summer storm, it was suddenly gone,

leaving behind a nice cozy quiet in its place. I closed the gap and we were kissing, and it felt as natural as the day.

When I pulled away, he was staring at me through those dark eyes in the most curious way. He looked long and hard, like he was trying to memorize something. Suddenly I wasn't worried about the next ten months.

"See you next summer?" I asked, and he smiled in that quiet winter way of his.

"Yeah. Same time, same place."