

The Creek
Sidney Gould

The creek was the first place we'd run to after school. Whether it'd be to escape the stress of middle school girls, low grades, or the widespread fear of growing older, it was the one place where time seemed to stop. After years of being forgotten, the streambeds flocked with long stems of wildflowers and unwelcomed branches snatched by the current. Daylight would sneak through the small cracks between the branches, warming our faces with the light of the evening sun. The musty smell from the clogged drainpipe downstream became the emblem of a simpler time—a better time. It was just Teddy and me.

I never knew too much about him, hell, I never even knew his last name, but I always knew he was running from something more than just school. More than just girls and detention. I never wanted to admit it because, after all, we were only twelve. Some days Teddy would show up with a dark bruise around his eye, sometimes around his neck. Sometimes, when I'd race him into the cold fall waters, I'd crack the surface and sink into the murky creek, only to look up and see his reflection staring down at me; there'd be a flash of lifelessness in his eyes before he'd jump in seconds after. The smile would return, but parts of Teddy would not.

He eventually grew more and more distant, to the point where cans of beer seemed to be the only tie between caring for himself and letting go. His eyes grew darker, so dark that I couldn't recognize them anymore, and I became scared. Scared of the person I once called my friend, and scared of who I may turn into if I stayed. After all, I was only fifteen.

So I stopped going.

They found his body three weeks later, washed up like a stick at the end of the creek.
Suicide.

Despite never talking about it, or acknowledging the past childhood I once adored, that guilt never left my conscience; it haunted me, rather. I never wanted to admit it, but God did I miss him. Blinded by ignorance- blinded by age- blinded by the thought that if I cared, if I truly cared, he'd hook me like a fish and we'd drown together. I knew he didn't know how to swim, yet my selfishness left my hand clutched around the rope that would pull him to safety. I was young, but so was he. So why did I let the creek swallow him whole?

I guess that's why, two years later, I find myself at the doorstep of his parent's house with my fist hovering over their door. Not necessarily for forgiveness, but for the truth that I was too blind to care about before. I never knew anything about his family, or even where he lived, but I feel I owe it to him to change that. I take a deep breath, not even knocking twice before the door slightly creaks open.

"I've been waiting for yeh to knock the past five minutes." It was a woman's voice, scratchy like sandpaper.

"O-Oh- sorry miss." I give an awkward laugh as I rub the back of my head. "I uh... I was just wondering if you knew anyone named Teddy?"

The eyes between the crack stare at me for a while longer, then shut the door; rattling is heard from the other side before the door reopens, revealing a small, frail woman, almost like a much older version of Teddy, except for a red scar reaching across her cheek.

“Yer a few years too late, boy.”

“Yeah- I know... He uh... He used to be a friend of mine. I never got to say goodbye-”

“Yeh was the drainpipe boy, weren’t ‘cha?” Her stale lips grow into a bit of an amused smile.

“Drainpipe... boy? You mean the creek?”

“Yeah. The reason Teddy always came home smellin’ like shit ‘n piss. That you?”

Is that what that smell was?

“Uh- yeah. Yeah, I was.” When the woman looks me up and down, her eyes begin to dim and she turns her back away to hobble into the kitchen.

“Never showed up for the funeral.” She calls as she makes her way to the stove, flipping the switch on; I slowly step in and shut the door, freezing at that familiar smell. Teddy... “What kind of friend don’t show up to a damn funeral?” She’s looking directly at me. I guess I forgot to respond.

“Well... The kind of friend who feels guilty, I guess..” My heart feels like a lit candle melting into my stomach. The woman gives a light scoff as she fills a kettle with water, placing it on the stove.

“Why do yeh feel guilty, boy?” I make my way into the kitchen, stopping in the corridor— I feel like if I take another step she might chase me back out of her house.

“I left him... alone... back when he needed me the most... I ran away.” My eyes fall to the ground in hopes she won’t see them water. I can’t cry. Not again. “I was the reason he died.”

Only a moment goes past before I hear the woman let out a small chuckle, forcing me to look up at her as she leans her back against the counter.

“We all thought that, boy. A mother’s guilt, a sister’s guilt, a friend’s guilt. We all think we’re the reason.”

“But I left him-”

“For the first time since yeh were- what? Ten? Friends come ‘n go- don’t give yerself too much credit.” She gives a huff as the teapot starts to whistle, turning to the cupboards to pull out two cups.

“I wasn’t there for him.” I stare at her in disbelief. How can she not be mad?

“Yeh existed. Ain’t that enough?” She reaches up high to grab the sugar. The teapot begins to fume with steam.

“B-But I never asked? I never asked what happened!” I begin to yell over the steam, not only frustrated at its screaming but the fact that this woman seems to have no regard for who her son was.

Without looking, she flips the cap up on the teapot, slowly lifting it up and pouring the hot water into the cups. The room falls silent for a while. “... Life happened, kid.” She sighs as she adds a small spoonful of sugar to each, then a teabag, before bringing them over to the table

nearby. She sits down, pointing to the chair in front of her without a word. I reluctantly sit, and for a while there is more silence.

She finally speaks again. "Some kids are born lucky. They got a family that loves 'em, 'n a roof over their heads, while other kids are born with a drunk for an old man 'n a lazy ma who just smokes all day." She reaches over for a cigarette at the end of the table, putting one into her mouth and lighting the tip. "But," she puffs out a cloud of smoke, "we can't change what happn'd. We can't breathe him back to life or ask why he did what he did. We only have the memories with him... and the chance to pick up our own pieces." I slowly lean back in the chair as I listen, raising my eyes to find hers looking right at me. "He never blamed yeh, boy... Even if yeh never really offered any, yeh still helped him through some hard times... I'll always be grateful."

I give a small smile. Grateful? For me? I never thought I did much other than splash around in an old creek with him.

"In the end, it's the small things. The small things that mean the most." She nods, puffing another cloud of smoke as she watches the table. I glance around the house, finally noticing both the emptiness and silence around us.

"Uh... About his dad?" I look back at her. "Where is he?"

She gives a big grin as she puffs out her last cloud of smoke. "Gone." Chuckling, she smothers the butt of the cigarette into the ashtray. "Like I said, we all need to pick up our own pieces."

I slowly nod. What does she mean by picking up the pieces? Fixing what we did wrong? I left the creek. I left Teddy. How can I fix what's already been done?

I carefully pick up the cup of tea and take a drink; the fresh aroma of sweet peppermint bites my tongue as I watch the woman across the table. She too takes a sip of her tea before looking out the window. The evening sun hits her blonde hair just like it did when Teddy stood on the rock just before he was about to jump. Her eyes have the same sadness and wonder that both plagued and blessed him up until the day I left. She then turns her gaze to me, tilting her head a bit.

"What's yer name, drainpipe?" She takes a sip of her tea. I take another sip as well.

"Most of my friends call me Walter."

"Hm... Walter." She slowly nods. "Call me Rosily." I nod and set my empty cup down. She gives it one glance before smiling. "Want some more?"

"Yes please." I smile.