

Ashley Berthelot

Samoas

It was the summer of 1987, a summer of merciless heat and mosquito-borne fever, when Momma ran off with my Girl Scout troop's cookie money and my sixteen-year-old brother's friend, Curtis.

Randy, my brother, was so pissed off that he quit his after-school job and sat on the porch all day, every day, getting sunburned and waiting for them to show up. When he wasn't sleeping, he swatted mosquitoes he named after the couple and cursed them out loud.

My sister Ella, the oldest, had graduated the week before. She had stayed up late ever since, packing her few favorite things and making big plans. "Where are you gonna go, Ella?" I'd ask, hoping that she'd see how sad I was and never leave.

"Anywhere but here, Skeet," she'd answer, her tone telling me she'd never change her mind.

Then, Momma changed everything for her. Just a quick kiss goodbye after we caught her leaving because she'd forgotten that school let out early on the last day.

I decided to quit school, since Ella was done and Curtis made it clear he wasn't going back, but Ella broke my idea in half before I could finish the thought.

"I'm not about to watch you grow up to be trash like the rest of this family." She grabbed my arm, her fingers nearly stabbing straight through my bones. "It's probably just as good Momma left when she did. At least you'll have a chance."

Ella had done well in school, but not many jobs were around, especially for someone with our last name. If you needed a drinking buddy or wanted the crap beat out of someone, you called a Pellerin. If you needed a dependable employee, you called just about anyone else.

Her part-time job at the gas station around the corner didn't pay for much more than bread and canned meat, but she counted on the money lasting until the state could take care of me and Randy. Aunt Gray, Momma's oldest sister, came out every few days to bring us something she'd tried to cook. Aunt Gray's cakes were salty and bitter, her meat loaf just as sweet as blackberry cobbler.

At the end of that first month, when we were all trying to pretend nothing was wrong, the sheriff dropped by with some bad news. Turns out, there would be no foster care for me and Randy.

Ella just stared at him awhile, flush patches on her cheeks like slap-marks. I hated myself for thinking it, but she looked like Momma, just for moment, her jaw slack, eyes glazed over, tuned out from the rest of the world.

Sheriff Brown took off his hat and scratched his bald head, wearing a tiny smile at the corners of his mouth. "I understand your feelings, Miss Hunter, but you're eighteen, and as the state sees it, you're the rightful custodian of these kids."

His smile came out all the way. I knew what he was thinking and couldn't blame him. After all, it wasn't the first time he'd ever had to come to our house, just never for Ella. "We always like to see families stay together, you understand," he said, cooing as if she were a child instead of a grown woman.

"Randy won't listen to me." Her face was blank, and I wondered if she'd noticed the Sheriff's little smile.

"I'm pretty sure he didn't listen to your momma, either, but that'll work itself out in time. Now, you kids let me know if you hear from her. You never know what might make those newlyweds pop back in town." He reached out to ruffle my hair, but I ducked away.

"If he pops back in town, I'll pop him right back out," Randy yelled from his lounge chair, waving one sun-roasted hand.

"See, you're already getting the hang of it." The sheriff shoved his hat back down hard until little gray hairs splayed out around his old-man ears. With that, he left just as suddenly as he'd come, still rumbling that nasty, coughing laugh all the big kids made fun of.

Ella sat on the front steps without even sweeping off the dirt. She dropped her chin into her hands, staring after the twin tails of dust the sheriff's car kicked up as it got over the hump in the road.

I watched Ella watching him go, her body limp against the wooden stairs, and realized that this was it. Nothing was going to get better. Momma wasn't coming home. Ella wasn't going to move away, and she wasn't going to be happy that she had this responsibility dropped on her like a sack of commodity flour. Randy wasn't going to jump up from the porch and help out, either. This was it—just us.

"I sure wish Momma would at least have left some of those cookies," I said, putting my hand on my stomach and feeling it work.

"Jesus, do you ever shut up, Skeet?" Randy picked up a can of mosquito spray, chucking it at me so hard it left a bruise that went straight down to the bone and stayed for almost a month.

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My real name's Rita, but everybody's called me Skeet since I could walk. Ella says Momma would have friends over and I'd wander around by their feet. Once, when I was three, her girlfriend Darlene backed into me, tripping and breaking her collarbone. Momma sent me to my room because she said I was buzzing around like a little skeeter. The name stuck but never bothered me until the summer after she left.

Lucky for us, Ella had quit the gas station and managed to get a nice town job working at the big grocery store, Henry's. Ella said she liked the job okay, except that her boss, Mr. Henry, who was way older than her, kept after her about going on a date.

I was glad she seemed happier, but the thought of her spending time with Mr. Henry made me dizzy. If he was as aggressive in pursuing Ella as he was in chasing us kids out of the store after five minutes of not buying anything, she'd end up saying yes eventually. Every time I brought it up to her, she'd shush me and talk about the money she made. But it couldn't have been all that much more than she was making before, because she would only let us turn the air conditioner on for one hour a day.

At night, we left the windows open, but it was usually so hot I couldn't sleep. I'd look out the window and watch the bats zig-zag around the yard, made shiny by the moon. They gave me nightmares until I realized they were eating the mosquitoes that swarmed my room, finding me no matter how I suffocated myself under layers of quilts and frayed flannels.

I could see Momma's face as she called me Skeet for the first time; for some reason, that image was clearer to me than what she looked like on the day she left. I saw everything from her gray hairs, which were few and far between back then, to the little lines that spread out around her eyes like those cheap fans Mr. Wong's gives out if you get the buffet. I could even smell her breath, beer like overripe apples topped with stale cigarette smoke, and the plastic scent of cheap lipstick.

I didn't realize I was crying until the mosquitoes rushed me. They must've smelled the salt in my tears. I buried myself under the tent of torn fabric and rubbed my face against the mattress. I don't know why the memory upset me—Momma had never lavished us with loving nicknames. Maybe she really saw me, and probably all of us, like that, as insects, parasites intent on sucking the life out of her.

I could feel my anger reddening my face. Sitting up, I attacked every mosquito I could find, smashing ruthlessly until my hands were splotted with blood and broken bugs. The massacre stood out brightly against my skin. The rest of the mosquitoes must have gotten the idea and cleared out quick. That was good, because I wasn't going to cry anymore. If they wanted something salty, they could head over to Aunt Gray's strawberry pie sitting untouched on the kitchen table.

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The next morning my friend Brady came over and had to knock on my window because Randy slept like a dead turtle and Ella'd been gone to work for hours already.

"What?" After I opened the window, I started scratching my head. My hair felt like straw. I hadn't washed it in days.

"Why isn't your brother out on the porch yet?"

"Did you honestly wake me up to ask me that?"

"You wanna do something or what?" Brady wasn't looking at me, but I could tell by the tilt of his head he had something cooking inside that tousled sandy head. His hair had gotten ever lighter because of the summer sun.

"Do what?" Brady was famous for being flat-out crazy. But I hadn't left the yard in weeks, and sometimes craziness ended up being fun.

"Okay, you can't tell anybody, though." He picked at a scab on his elbow, watching my reaction from the corner of his eye. "Mr. Geffy left one of his old barges in the river, out past the island. It's pretty tall, and some of us are going out there to jump off it into the river."

I flopped back onto my bed, shoulders sagging. "We jump from the old rope swing all the time."

"This is way bigger than the rope swing, Skeet."

"Call me Rita."

He laughed, mouth open wide, and leaned farther into my room. "What, you got all grown-up since you don't have a momma?"

I stood up on my bed, pushing my sleeves back, feeling the course fabric scratch against the raw mosquito bites covering my arms like chickenpox. "Don't talk about Momma."

"My Dad says ya'll are better off without her." He shook his head, then pulled back from the sill. "Get your clothes on. I'll be waiting on the porch."

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It was August, that late part when the world feels like it must've stopped spinning and things never change. The time between the sun rising and falling could've taken up years. But time stopping didn't change the fact I'd managed to outgrow most of my summer clothes. Ella didn't have enough money to buy new ones unless she wanted to take up with Mr. Henry, and none of us wanted that. But she had stopped making fun of his shoes and slicked-back hair, instead telling us what a smart businessman he was and about his great ideas for the store.

"So, who all's gonna be down there?" I panted, trying to keep up with Brady. I kept my hands together in front of me, like I was praying and walking at the same time, to keep from fussing with the hem of my shorts where the fabric was biting my legs.

"Just the usual. Jesse and Kenny, Neil and Sarah."

I tried to hide my smile, embarrassed at how long it'd been since I'd seen anyone. I missed my friends. They lived closer to town—even Brady's crazy-ass family—in solid houses made of cypress and painted fresh every few years. Jesse and Sarah had been in Girl Scouts with me and I was sure their mommas didn't know they were going somewhere with me, daughter of the cookie cash thief.

Up ahead was the island. A real island, technically speaking, even though it was off the mainland by about ten feet. The water didn't reach over my knees. On the other side of the island, though, was a steep dropoff, where the water went cold enough to numb your toes. It made your heart skip, like when you're half asleep but suddenly know you're falling down with no way to stop.

“You ready?” Brady stopped, stripping his ratty shirt so fast at first I wasn’t sure what he was doing. I looked at Brady’s stomach and saw all the muscles he’d grown since last time we’d been swimming. I couldn’t stop looking out of the corner of my eye, scared to death that he’d see me but almost hoping he would.

Jesse’s screeching laugh echoed off the riverwall, breaking me out of my trance. “They’re already here.”

I slipped out of my shorts. My old swimsuit still fit, only because it had been too big last year. Momma’d bought things for me to grow into. For once, she was right. I tossed my clothes on top of Brady’s.

“You’re getting boobs.” Brady giggled, and I felt my face redden.

“You asshole.” I threw my shoes at this chest. That was the thing about Brady—even though we’d been friends longer than I could remember, these little moments kept popping up between us that made me feel uncomfortable, almost embarrassed.

I turned and stepped into the lukewarm water, feeling the mud slurp between my toes, filling every gap.

“Walk light.” Brady’s voice sounded funny as it came over my shoulder, cut short by the dense wall of trees surrounding us. He reached out and tried to take my elbow, but I shook him off, not sure if he was actually trying to be nice or just getting ready to dunk me into the mud.

I squinted down at the water. Even that shallow you couldn’t see to the bottom. Tiny little flecks of brown and green scum scattered every time I lifted my foot, like they were scared I’d step on them. Maybe that wasn’t scum but little minnows or bugs. Maybe every time somebody came through here millions of them died.

Then, I felt them, as if they were clawing up my legs, shimmying up and biting me with tiny teeth, and I took off, tried to run, but instead tripped over a clump of mud and fell face down in the water.

“Holy shit, are you alright?” Brady’s voice came muffled through the mud in my ears. The slimy riverwater coated my face like one of those gooey green masks Ella put on Thursday nights in high school, right before she had a big date.

I wiped at my face, wishing I had a shirtsleeve to really scrub with.

“Skeet, you alright?”

“I’m not deaf, Brady Monroe. I just tripped, is all. Must be a can or a bottle under there.” My hand tingled and I peeked into the palm. There was a cut there, a bloodless puncture wound playing deep, echoing chords in the nerves of my hand. I squeezed my fist tight, hoping Brady wouldn’t notice. “I’m ready to get out of here.”

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The barge wasn’t much to speak of except for its height. It had layers and layers of rust flaking down into the water, and it sat on an angle, tilted from being in water that wasn’t deep enough to keep it afloat.

Jesse, Sarah, Neal, and Kenny were sprawled out on the ground in front of it, just looking up.

“There you are!” Sarah jumped to her feet.

“We were wondering what was taking so long.”

“Yeah,” Neal sneered, elbowing Kenny, who always looked like he’d just woken up. “What were you doing, making out in the woods?”

“You know it,” Brady said, leaning into me and making smacking noises with his lips. “I was teaching Skeet a thing or two about love.”

“Yuck.” I shuddered and walked over to the girls, hating that I couldn’t keep from smiling at Brady’s comments.

“What are we doing?”

“Jumping,” Jesse said, nudging Sarah, looking away quickly. “Off the top.”

I felt something in my chest pulling at my ribcage. Everybody was acting so strange, and I wanted to keep looking down at my swimsuit every ten seconds to make sure nothing was hanging out.

“Let’s get up there,” Neal said, and took a running jump, skidding onto the deck of the barge. His shoes left a trail through the thick flakes of rust, the way our road looked when the parish came out and put a thin layer of new gravel down once every two or three years.

The rest of the boys followed, slipping and falling as they hit hard against the metal. Kenny skinned his knee. “Yeah!” he shouted, showing off his wound as the rest of us hauled ourselves up the side of the boat. “Maybe I’ll get tetanus.”

“That’s not funny.” I wiped myself clean of the rust and stretched, looking around at the empty red deck.

“I guess your mom leaving didn’t lighten you up any,” Neal said, flicking his blood at me like he used to do with boogers.

“You’re such a jerk, Neal.”

“I told you she wouldn’t be fun.”

The girls looked at me for a while, and Jesse shook her head.

“Hey, move your asses!” Brady shouted from the top cabin.

“Man, how’d you get up there?” Kenny ran around the edge, an abrupt drop-off into the murky water below, trying to be second to reach the top. “Stairs!” he called, his voice fading as he rounded a corner.

“How else did you think he got up there?” I muttered, kicking at the rust, trying to leave a trail like Neal had earlier. Sarah pinched me. “What?”

“Stop being such a baby. You’ll make the boys mad.”

“So?” To think, we spent last summer making fun of them. Sarah was already climbing the stairs two at a time and wouldn’t look back.

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The captain’s cabin, small and cramped already even though it was missing the big, sharp-spoked steering wheel, seemed to tighten around the corners when I found out what was really going on.

“No.” I wrapped my arms around my chest, walked over to the cabin’s main window and waved a hand through the opening to make sure there wasn’t any glass. “I won’t.”

“Well, we can play without her.” Neal spun the bottle.

“Okay, Jesse, you have to kiss me.” He puckered his lips like he’d just bit into a lemon that wasn’t even ripe yet.

“Not yet, Neal. Calm down.” She frowned, looking so much like her mother that for a moment I felt sure she’d grab me by my ear and drag me downstairs. “Skeet, it’s not a big deal. My sister used to do it when she had parties.”

“It’s Rita,” I said.

“No big deal,” Brady said. “You just put your lips on someone else’s.” He came up behind me, but I moved away fast, watching his hands, ready to swat if he tried to put them near me. It reminded me of the stories Ella told me during her first week at Henry’s; how he’d sneak up on her every now and then, putting his hands on her hips or touching her hair. I could see why it made her uncomfortable, because it made me want to jump out of my own skin.

"I thought we were going swimming."

"Later." Jesse's voice was thin. "I swear, girl, you ought to be glad you got people willing to hang out with you after what your momma did, much less kiss you."

"My momma's got nothing to do with me, Jesse Baxter," I walked toward her, my back turning white-hot and tense. "Maybe your momma would like to know how easy it is to convince you to kiss a bunch of boys." I stared hard, waiting for her to say something back. Everyone knew how strict her mother was. I felt taller all of a sudden, and I didn't even want to cry, not even a little. "I bet she'd love to hear all about it."

"You wouldn't." Her eyes looked down upon the peeling, pear-green paint covered floor.

"Yes, I would. I really would, but I'm not. I'm going swimming." Everyone had backed away, pushed into corners by the intensity of our fight, so I took advantage of the space and ran out of the room.

"Jesus, Skeet, wait!" Brady's footsteps sounded like they were right behind me, and I ran faster, nearly jumping up the stairs to the roof.

"Don't call me that anymore!" I turned to face him, tears warming the backs of my eyes, and saw that they were all there, crowded together at the top of the stairs.

"Look, calm down." They slowly filed up, Brady leading the pack, looking unsure in his new role as the sane one. "Don't jump yet, nobody's checked how deep the water is out there."

"It's deep enough." I didn't look down, but across, at how far away the other side seemed from this height.

"You don't know that!" Now Sarah was concerned, her eyes taking up most of her face, like the time she peed her pants back in third grade. "Remember the story about that girl who dove into the ocean where it was too shallow? She got paralyzed!"

I turned to the river and just stood. I could feel the group relaxing behind me like a paper bag that's been balled too tightly and has to uncrumple itself to relieve the pressure. When the breeze picked up again, I felt light, delicate, like the blue heron feathers the squirrels in our yard use to pad their nests. I felt small, like the time Momma brought us to Creek's Bend, the abandoned river-town she grew up in. At first I was scared of the empty house trailers with their thick green mold and overgrown yards covered by broken swing-sets and rusty tricycles. But she took us to her old swimming hole, where a rope swing was tied to a high branch in a giant oak. I was in love.

My brother Randy jumped from the tree, letting go at his swing's peak, seemingly hanging in air, then cut a flip and disappeared into the water. I'd never seen Randy do anything graceful, and Mamma saw how much I wanted to try and somehow climbed the tree with me on her back, clinging like a monkey. But when we got to the top, the water looked so thin and hard, so *dangerous*, and I clung to the tree trunk. She got so frustrated that she left me there, a leaf in the breeze, while she whooped with joy at the end of the swing. I'd never forgotten that moment, my frozen arms and legs, Momma's smile; it was not just a picture, but a full-body reaction that overwhelmed my senses.

"See you downstairs!" I yelled, and ran off the edge of the roof.

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It's funny how things change in your mind when something big happens. Like the day Momma left. I don't remember what she wore, or what her last words were, but I do remember the color of her suitcases—one was navy blue, the other dark orange—and how the handles squeaked when she carried them. I didn't even know we owned luggage.

When I jumped off the boat, I couldn't see or feel. I knew I was high, like I was caught in a spiderweb I never saw. But then, I started to fall. The wind screamed and my hair snapped at my eyes. My heart tried to escape from my chest by beating its way out; when that didn't work, it tried squeezing through my throat.

After a second, my eyes cleared up and I saw the water rushing toward me. From up where I was, it looked clean and greenish, like the ocean on TV. I'd never gone swimming in that part of the river, and I wondered if the water would be warm, or if it was as cool as our usual swimming hole.

I don't remember hitting the water, but I do remember coming up for air. My right leg stung horribly, but it sort of felt numb-like, too. I couldn't move. Then, I thought, *gator!* and once the idea was there, formed in my mind, I actually saw it—just for a second—latched onto my leg, all green-brown scales, chalkboard eyes and dirty long teeth.

I looked around, feeling through the water for a stick to fight it with, and found a thin, rusty pole right next to me. It had a spiral texture and felt strong, but when I tried to pick it up, my leg exploded. Everything from the thigh down felt like it had been shredded into raw meat.

That metal pole had somehow gotten inside of my leg, or, actually, *through* it. I tilted my head. My hand moved slowly, and when I touched my leg, just to make sure it was still attached, everything turned off.

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When I opened my eyes, I could smell alcohol, the rubbing kind that feels so cool against your skin, and something pinched my arm.

"That's it," a woman's voice said. I tried to work my jaws into a word or two, but they just wouldn't cooperate.

"It's ok. You'll feel better tomorrow," she promised. "Your mother's coming to see you tomorrow."

The voice was calming. I didn't want it to stop. I wanted to talk to her, to tell her everything from how I got my nickname to how it felt to be alone in a river and impaled on a metal rod, that it wasn't really any different from laying awake in my room while Ella came in later and later from Henry's each night. I wanted to tell her that my favorite Girl Scout cookies were Samoas, the ugly ones with coconut and caramel and chocolate all together, and that \$250 of the money Momma took, the most I'd ever seen at once, had been raised by me. I wanted to tell her that I wasn't really mad at Brady, that things would have been different if it hadn't been a surprise and I really wanted to see him now. But mostly, I wanted to tell her that the scariest thing about Momma leaving, scarier than even being in the hospital, was the fact that I didn't really miss her, not even a little, not even at all.

Ashley Berthelot received an MFA in Creative Writing from Louisiana State University, where she currently works in media relations and freelances on the side. She lives with her boyfriend, Barry, a little girl named Lennon, and a ferociously fat cat called Kitty. When she's not working, writing or traveling, she can usually be found curled up in a corner re-reading Jeffrey Eugenides or Dorothy Allison.

"A front porch teaches you about perspective...your perspective on yourself and your place in the world. For me, it's always represented a safe place to get your bearings before you have to strike out into the unknown and leave all your securities behind. It's the perfect balance between inspiration and trepidation...and isn't that where all great ideas come from? My favorite front porch in the world is a metaphorical one: Old Town Square in Prague (Czech Republic). That one plaza is like the center of the universe for me...you can stand there and take in all the exotic sounds, curious architecture and culture-soaked context, but there are dozens of little streets around you filled with surprises. It's up to you to pick which one to explore."