

The Magnolia Field

Throughout my life, I have inhabited many places and residences all over the world.

When I was sixteen, I lived in a suburb near the wide expanse of an outland field. The sunset would touch the red haze of the skyline, a cherry cough syrup sky, and magnolias bloomed in the spring, lush and perfuming the air with their heady fragrance. My parents were travelling contractors, so we frequently moved to wherever they found work, and they were hardly ever home. Consequently, since we never stayed in one place for long, I hardly had any friends.

I would describe the town as a town of expatriates. It was a town of workers working on a local construction project, of a put-together community that would disintegrate once the project was completed. There was a small church, two or three stores, and a tiny recreation centre where the young kids played. When school let out, I went to the magnolia field every day to read books by myself, whether it be night or day, no matter how wet. I stayed there for hours and watched the sky turn red, watched the magnolia trees with their fading blossoms, felt the kiss of the breeze on the nape of my neck as the air turned cool. These were the only adventures I had, and sometimes, it felt as if those days would never end.

One day, when I went particularly early armed with my novel of the week, there was someone there. She was slightly taller than I was, brown-haired, with tan skin, and looked to be the same age as me. She was sitting down in the field with her own book and looked up at me in surprise as I approached. Me, not knowing how to interact with such a person, was filled with both feelings of invasion upon my magnolia field and sudden interest.

“Hi,” I said awkwardly, not knowing what else to say. “I haven’t seen you around.”

“Oh,” she said. “I just moved here. My parents are working on the construction project.”

“Oh. Me too. My name’s Joy.”

“I’m Vivian,” she said, extending her hand. Perhaps it was that I was a stick-skinny sixteen-year-old girl who was desperate for someone to talk to, that I latched onto her like bacteria. And perhaps it was the dry town, and the feeling of loneliness in the summer, that she felt the same.

Every day, we went to the field and talked with our books. She told me her parents were construction contractors, just like mine, and that they had moved here just as summer began. She told me stories of towns she had lived in before, of a childhood before moving here when her parents worked in one place. I suppose the difference between us was that she had known a stable home, a house set in one place in ways that I did not. Her stories were enthralling to me. I told her about my dreams to be a writer and to move away from this life of constant movement.

Eventually, we stopped bringing books. We went to the magnolia field with board games, and talked about our dreams, school, anything that came to mind. There was pretty much nothing we had to do, with the exception of church, which Vivian went to, so we were virtually free to talk all day and every day. Vivian wanted to be a teacher, which I found interesting, and she would often tell me about her desire to teach at a school somewhere in the countryside, in peace and quiet. We talked about our families and our absent parents, about lonely houses, about not knowing anyone when we hopped from place to place like grasshoppers. Vivian and I both

wanted, most of all, to stop moving. We found an end to solitude with each other and that meant constant companionship.

As the summer progressed, we got closer and closer. We went to one of the two stores to get ice cream. We bought cans of cheap, watery green tea and a bag of snacks, and we would sit by the curb, eating them and telling jokes without a care in the world. We even went to the recreation center to play basketball, or as much as you could with just two people. The ball got stuck on the rim of the net and we fell over in laughter. Eventually, I stopped feeling like my awkward, gangly, self. I became accustomed to her laugh, and our laughter filled our conversations. I grew to love her brown eyes, her smile, with slightly crooked teeth, the freckles that dotted her face with the sun tan. In the evenings, we would return to the magnolia field, the best of view of the sunset, and sit and watch the sun raze over the lilac sky, the red haze of the setting day, the sweet scent of the grass and the dying magnolias. No matter what we did during the day, almost always back to the field of magnolias in the evening, speckled white and pink and bulbous on the trees. That summer, it became a haven for us. The days no longer felt so long.

“You know, they’re going to pave over this field one day,” Vivian said, one evening as we were watching the sunset.

“That’s alright,” I replied. Somehow, I had a feeling the magnolia field extended well beyond the magnolias itself. Looking back, I knew that one day they would pave over the field and the expatriates would move out so the real residents could move in. I knew that it was impossible for us to stay here for long. For then, I was content to sit and watch the sunset as we did every night. It dawned on me then that there was a feeling beyond any attachment to a

physical place. And that's how we were, kids with no homes, and for the first time, I felt, sitting with her under the haze of the breaking sunset, that there was something there, something indescribable.

A few days later, Vivian and her family went to go on a three-day vacation to a nearby town and I was left alone. I went to the magnolia field without her, but it felt empty, as if her presence made the air feel fuller, stronger with the scent of summer and the sun rays filtering down through an expanse of trees. I went to the recreation centre and played catch with some of the kids, but it felt strange. There was none of her laugh, none of our conversations, her presence next to me all the time in the summer that I had grown used to. I missed our dissertations about life, about our similar lives, about our discontent with our families and our desires to settle somewhere. There was a scent in the air of the fresh flowers, but it was not the same as before. It occurred to me then, that it was the first time I felt like I had something beyond just walls and houses, beyond what the construction project meant to my parents. Companionship. We had developed a companionship with each other so that the other person would never feel alone. It is a strange feeling, knowing that someone is your home. It was her. There was a comfort I had never felt in anything in life.

When she returned, we regressed to our old ways. Summer was coming to a close, with a couple of weeks left, and we were discussing what we would do once we returned to school. Her brown hair lay stuck to her face with the humidity and as did mine. We were lying on the soccer field outside the recreation centre while the little kids played on the other end of it.

“I wish we could stay in summer forever,” she said.

“Me too.” I agreed.

“I like spending time with you,” she said. She turned and smiled at me, gap-toothed. “It was really fun. I’ve never had a friend like you before.”

I laughed. “Me too. I honestly wish the construction project would never finish.”

She laughed at that too and we continued lying there in companionable silence.

“Let’s hang out when school starts,” she said, and I agreed. She then had to go home for dinner for her visiting grandmother and I continued lying on the grass. It brought a great sense of relief, knowing she felt the same way. I thought about seeing her in the halls and the feeling of elation that would bring.

It is a strange feeling, to be fully aware you are caught in the midst of teenage romanticism, yet completely helpless to be swept away in its waves. She was my home.

I was in love.

It wasn’t hard for me to understand that I could be in love with someone the way I was in love with writing, but this was a person, not a book. I didn’t know what to do, but it needed to come out.

Vivian and I resumed our hangouts without me ever interjecting anything. Suddenly, after realizing that, what had been natural before became awkward to avoid, like I was dancing around the topic with sandbags on my feet.

“Are you alright?” she asked me once.

“Just nervous about school,” I said shakily.

As the summer receded, my urge to spill ascended and bubbled within me until I could barely contain it or be around her without my gangly awkwardness returning. My cheeks started to burn and I started cancelling our hangouts, saying I felt sick. We couldn't be together anymore in our carefree ways because it was ruining it for me. It was destroying one of the only things that provided me comfort. It needed to come out. I needed to come out.

I planned to tell her the day before school started in the magnolia field where we first met. That way, I could tell her and just get it over with. My nerves hammered in my stomach as the day drew nearer and nearer. After all, what were we? Kids stuck in a temporary place, with feelings that were anything but. I thought about what she said, about never having a friend like me. We were so close and we had nothing but each other. I thought about her gap-toothed smile and felt my cheeks turn red. My heart bounced in my stomach like a ping-pong ball. I thought of how she would react. Finally, I would get to know her, really, truly, beyond how I already did. I could greet her in the school halls and we would be each other's. I could call her my home and she would understand.

The day finally came. Vivian was talking about the school supplies she bought while drinking another can of that awful cheap green tea, and I was doodling idly on a sketchbook where I wrote down all of my story ideas. I remember it being a bright and sunny day, the air not too hot nor too cold. And I gathered all of my courage, into a great big bundle, until I was bursting at the seams.

"Vivian," I said, swallowing. "I-I have something to tell you."

She must have sensed my nervousness, because she looked up.

“Yes?”

“I...” I faltered. The weight of what I was going to say was suddenly overwhelming.

“What is it, Joy?”

“I like you.”

The look in her eyes changed from one of confusion, to one of further bafflement.

“I love you,” I said.

Her eyes changed from bafflement, to something akin to revulsion, and my heart sank.

There was a long, awkward, painful, jarring silence. Never, in my entire life, had something felt so long and heady.

My teenage memories were filled with eating ice cream on the steps of the local store, drinking cheap green tea on soccer fields and road curbs, long talks about life, the red haze of the sunset, and a magnolia field.

“Vivian,” I said.

“Joy—what the hell? Are you serious?”

I nodded.

“What the hell? What did you expect from this?”

“I don’t know. For you to say you too?”

“No! What the hell? I don’t like you that way.”

“I thought you said you liked me.”

“I did. I said I liked you as a friend. But that’s disgusting. It’s unnatural. I don’t like girls. What’s wrong with you, Joy?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, as the world started spinning around me.

Another long, painful silence ensued, and I became ever more aware of the heat of the sun around us as it burned me up. All of a sudden, I was the awkward, gangly teenager I had been at the beginning of the summer.

“We can still be friends, right?” I tried desperately. “And hang out?”

“I don’t think we should see each other anymore,” Vivian said. “At school. Or out here.” She couldn’t look me in the eyes. And she stood up, took her can of green tea, and walked away.

I watched her fading figure in the magnolia field. The sounds of construction were overwhelmingly loud.

“Alright,” I said.

Later, I took a magnolia, plucked from the tree we sat under, and pressed it into my sketchbook so it remained there and dried before the magnolia trees died. When the school year started, I never went back to the field again for fear she might be there, and I have a feeling she never went back either. In retrospect, I had not lost anything, yet I did. I was thrown back where I started, to square one, a girl with no home. I cannot describe the feeling that losing your home has on you, but I felt as if my world was crashing down on me.

My teenage memories were filled with eating ice cream on the steps of the local store, of tossing a ball at the recreation centre, of being stupid and wasting time and the smell of magnolias. Green tea, red sunsets, basketball and dreams in that field. Ever since, every time I have smelled magnolias, I can’t help but associate them with her. Even now, I can’t help but smell magnolias.

A couple of months later, her parents moved away and she went with them.

I have never felt at home since.