



SUMMER
FADES

AMANDA BEWS

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ONE

You're fat, ugly and stupid, he spat venomously as I stared at myself in the full-length mirror on my wardrobe door. I shuddered as I looked at myself standing in only my underwear, but I had no choice. It was what the voice required. I inhaled deeply but it didn't help—my bulging thighs were still there. I felt humiliated and tried to block out the tirade of words that followed. But that's hard to do when the voice comes from within.

As I pulled on my school uniform, I wondered how all this had begun, but that only made me feel tired. And I couldn't afford to feel tired today. There was a chemistry test and a maths quiz, and I needed to get to school in time to print out my English paper. The stupid printer was not working again. Funny how this always happened when I needed to use it.

I glanced at my watch. There would be no time for breakfast again this morning. Not that I'd be allowed to eat it anyway.

"Bye, Mum," I called, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl.

"Wait," she called, stepping out of the study with her phone glued to her ear. Her eyes followed the apple as it fell into my bag. She pressed the phone to her chest.

"Is that all you're taking for lunch?" she whispered, eyeing me with suspicious concern.

"Cameron's got a Home Science lunch in third period and I'm her guest," I explained, grabbing another apple from the bowl and taking a bite. She watched me carefully as I chewed and appeared to swallow.

"Aren't you gonna get back to that?" I pointed to the phone still fastened to her chest.

Mum appeared to not register for a moment, then nodded. "Oh, yes."

She looked unconvinced as I headed for the door.

"Have a good day, Summer. Good luck with the tests," she called after me as she placed the phone back to her ear. "No, Mrs Gibbons, he can't sue you for that."

I marched out the door, deposited the apple in the green bin, spat the remainder of the munched residue into the garden and began the 20-minute walk to school, wondering how many calories there were in the apple juice I'd just swallowed.

Why did my mum have to be such a food Nazi? She was just like my best friend Cameron's cat: every time the fridge door opened, there she was, watching. It was enough to put me off eating altogether—and often did.

Cats! Eesssh, I shuddered. I hated cats. The way they stare at you with those large loathing eyes. It's like they can see straight into your soul and observe you as a detestable waste of time. Then, judgment over, it's back to licking their still-poised paw.

Cameron's cat is a white Burmese and she's not too bad—for a cat. We've grown to tolerate one another. I can stand having her in the same room with us now, if necessary, but Pusskins knows not to approach me. But it's black cats that I particularly hate.

* * *

"Hi, Summer," Cameron called from her locker. "Got your English assignment?" she asked, joining me.

I held up my memory stick and flashed her a frustrated smile.

"Printer jamming again?" She frowned sympathetically as we turned toward the computer room.

"Yup, spent half an hour trying to get it working last night, but . . ." I shrugged.

Fortunately, Mr Davis had already fired the computers up and it wasn't long before the printer

began spitting out my pages. The bell rang just as I collected my last page. At least this “perfect” timing was something to smile about. After using the stapler on Mr Davis’ desk, we headed for Home Room.

“See you in English,” Cameron called as she turned in the other direction.

Since both of us were prefects, we were in different Home Rooms this year for the first time in our entire school life. We’d been best friends since Julie left in second grade. I shuddered a second time.

OK, so it’s food, cats and Julie all in one morning. I needed to get to class and find a distraction.

I handed in my English assignment and Mrs Evans smiled. I’ll get an A. She always gives me an A. Sometimes I wondered if she even bothered to read what I wrote or whether she just saw my name and wrote A out of habit. I smiled back and mentally thanked her for it in advance.

I did well at school. Dad tells me it’s in my genes. I come from a long line of academically gifted people. Mum’s a lawyer and my Dad is too. They met in a courtroom and both work at the same firm now. Dad is a lawyer, his father was a lawyer and so was his. I guess that’s why the company is called Collins, George and Rutherford. My Dad is the “Collins” part. The other names come and go but our family has been a constant. I suppose the partnership’s been passing from father to son for a while—until now, that is. I tried to picture my brother Bobby—Robert Junior—donning a suit, wig and gown in court and stifled a laugh.

“Is there a problem, Miss Collins?” Mrs Evans asked in surprise. I never interrupted.

“Umm, sorry, I just tried to stop a sneeze, Mrs Evans,” I sneezed for affect. “It’s this weather we’ve been having. It’s making my hay fever play up.”

This seemed to work and she turned back to the lesson.

I realised I hadn’t heard a word she’d said in the past half hour. I peeked over at Cameron’s notes. She had a full page already, while my sheet was totally blank. I’d have to borrow her notes later.

Still distracted, I glanced out the window, catching my reflection in the glass. If only the genes had carried a bit further than my brains. Mum might be able to carry off her auburn hair but she needn’t have passed it on to me. I was a classic Irish throwback. Red hair, freckles and zero sun tolerance—a perfect candidate for skin cancer. I have to buy the 50+ sunscreen or I fry like a strip of bacon in the sun. Then, once the redness is gone, I burst out in another huge ugly batch of freckles.

Who knows, perhaps the freckles will all join together one day and then I’ll have a tan all year round. I snorted back a laugh and hurriedly searched for a tissue as a cover. Finally, the bell rang.

“Are you alright, Summer?” Cameron asked with concern as I grabbed my backpack at the end of the lesson.

“Umm, I guess I’m just tired. I was up late finishing the assignment,” I began.

She smiled. “It’s just I noticed you didn’t write any notes. You can borrow mine if you like,” she offered.

But the smile didn’t meet her eyes. She thought something was up. She’d suspected something for a while.

I reached for the pages she’d pulled from her folder.

You don’t deserve her, the voice said. *If she knew what you were really like, she’d dump you.* I closed my eyes and tried to block it out.

“Summer, are you alright?”

It was Cameron’s voice again—and that same question again. I didn’t know why everything was so difficult lately. Stuff just kept popping up unexpectedly. Like my past insisted on haunting my present. I swallowed and concentrated on pushing these memories back down. It was getting harder and harder. But, on the upside, my appetite was totally gone.

I took her notes and a deep breath. “Thanks and come on, you’ll be late for Home Science,” I began.

“You’re still right to be my guest?” she asked doubtfully, like she already knew the answer.

“I don’t think so actually,” I dodged. “I’m feeling a headache coming on. Why don’t you just take Nick? You know he’s got hollow legs. He could easily eat both my portion and his.” I really did

have a headache, that was no lie.

Cameron sighed and looked me over.

I held my breath and hoped she'd not say anything.

"OK, Summer, I'll see you at lunch. It won't be until 12.30 though, after the assessment is finished. Are you sure?" She trailed off and looked at me with pleading eyes.

I just shook my head. She sighed and looked a little defeated as she turned to leave.

I offered her my biggest smile of encouragement as I waved her goodbye, then spun in the opposite direction. It took a moment for my head to catch up. Black spots buzzed across my vision like blowflies around the canteen rubbish bin. I steadied myself momentarily, then headed off to double Mathematics.

* * *

"I brought some left-over pie for you," Cameron offered.

"Thanks, but you shouldn't have," I said, dropping the plastic take-away container into the open mouth of my backpack. "I already ate, so I'll save it for later."

Cameron's smile faltered.

I needed to move the conversation. "How did the grading go? Did Nick inhale the entire room?" I forced a laugh as he dropped down beside her, draping one of his unusually long arms casually across her shoulders.

Nick and Cameron had been dating for five months. He'd been after her since Grade 10 but only managed to man up and ask her out this year. They were perfect for each other really—if you have to have a boyfriend, that is. They were both arty, athletic and attractive, everything that I wasn't. Not that I'd *ever* wanted a boyfriend! More shuddering, perhaps it was unseasonably cold? But then I was often cold.

"You shivering, Summer? Did you wanna borrow my jacket?" Cameron asked, reaching into her bag.

"Nah," cut in Nick, "she just needs a bit of meat on. You're too skinny."

Cameron froze mid-search and my small group of friends went suddenly silent. They'd all taken turns to say it to me but no-one had come out and said it in the open like that before. I suddenly felt defensive, exposed even. I needed to say something—but what? I wasn't too skinny, quite the opposite really. The silence was becoming uncomfortable.

"I'm fine, thank you, Nick, besides you haven't seen me in my swimmers," I laughed.

"But . . . ooofff," Nick's retort was cut short by an elbow to the ribs from Cameron.

"I better go. I've got some . . . some stuff to do. I'll see you after class, Cameron," I added as I backed away.

I ducked around the corner of the gazebo but still managed to overhear him saying. "But what? What did I say?"

They'd talk about me. All of them would be discussing me and my weight. How humiliating! Perhaps I should have stayed but I just couldn't. Let them talk—there was nothing wrong with me.

I rushed to the bathroom to splash some water on my face, then paused to look at my reflection in the corroded, soap-smearred mirror. *I wasn't too skinny at all! In fact, if anything . . .* I turned to look at myself side on.

You're fat, ugly and dumb! the voice concurred. They don't even really like you! If they knew your secret, they'd . . .

But I didn't hear any more. The bell rang and forced me to break eye-contact, drowning out whatever other horrid things he had to say. I rushed to class, my lunch apple still uneaten.

* * *

I bought a large bottle of diet cola and an energy drink on the way home. My parents didn't

approve of caffeinated drinks for teens—especially *that* caffeinated! I finished the energy drink and deposited the empty can in the neighbour’s recycling bin before tripping over my brother’s school bag in the doorway.

I could hear music blaring from his room, so there was no point calling for him to come down and shift his stuff. Kicking his junk to one side, I headed for the kitchen. Since Mum was out and Bobby would be busy for hours, it was the perfect time to make a meal.

I carefully measured out the exact quantity of low-fat natural yogurt into my favourite Japanese rice bowl, the one with the blue flowers up the side. I always used this bowl, so I knew I’d have the quantity just right. The yogurt was allowed to just touch the bottom of the flower design—but no more. If I put too much yogurt in, it was really frustrating because I’d have to wash the bowl and start over. Next, I’d top it with a quarter-cup of cornflakes and three slices of tinned peaches in natural juice.

I don’t know why I felt I needed to eat like that. But that was the way I was with everything, I suppose. I liked things orderly, so why couldn’t it be like that for food as well?

At school, I always carried four blue pens and two red. Two was enough red but it didn’t feel like enough blue because we used them more and I didn’t like odd numbers, so three wasn’t an option. I’d carried that many pens ever since starting Grade 7. Sometimes my friends would tease me and steal one. I hated that. *Why couldn’t everyone just be orderly?* It was important to be prepared and I’d never had to ask anyone if I could borrow their stuff, so it just went to show I was right.

I grabbed a teaspoon out of the cutlery drawer and sat down to eat my “breakfast.” I’d really felt like breakfast this morning and had been looking forward to these flavours all day. Eating now meant I’d have to skip dinner later but I wasn’t bothered. I couldn’t wait any longer.

I smiled as the yogurt slipped down my throat. It tasted so tangy and delicious mixed with the sweetness of the peaches. I couldn’t help wondering, as I took the next bite, if these peaches might be sweeter than usual and if this might add to the sugar content of the fruit. I made a mental note to do extra time on the treadmill tonight, just in case.

The front door squeaked open and I heard the screen door bang. “I’m home,” Mum announced from the entrance way.

Grabbing my bowl and spoon, I ran to my room to finish my meal in peace. For me, food was a private affair. I don’t quite know when I decided this. But it was almost sacred. To interrupt a meal was like butting in on someone else’s conversations. They might all have been happy sitting round the table each night stuffing their faces like pigs at a trough, but that wasn’t for me. Food was something special.

* * *

An hour or so later, Mum poked her head through my bedroom door.

“Hi, Summer.” Mum smiled.

I pulled out my earphones.

“I did knock,” she added.

“Undoubtedly.” I said, swinging my earphone to indicate why I didn’t reply.

She laughed a little nervously.

“What do you fancy for dinner?” she asked more seriously.

Glancing at my clock, I eased myself back onto the bed. *Six pm, there was no way we’d be finished by 7.* I never ate after seven and I’d eaten when I got home, so I patted my stomach.

“Oh Mum, I ate so much at Cameron’s lunch today and I’ve just had a snack,” I said, flicking my eyes toward the plate, “so I really don’t feel like anything else.”

Mum reached for the rice bowl—my rice bowl. We grabbed it together. She needed to let it go. *What if it broke?* My heart picked up pace.

“Don’t worry, Mum, it’s my mess. I’ll take it down later.”

Mum looked around at my otherwise-spotless room. “I don’t mind, Summer, really.”

I couldn’t quite place the look she had on her face—sad, concerned, disappointed? How could I have disappointed her? Could she really have been bothered by a bowl? I was going to take it back down after everyone had finished dinner. I tried so hard!

Mum released the bowl and I began to relax.

“Are you sure I can’t make you something? I’ll make you anything you want.” Her eyes pleaded as they darted over my body. It made me feel uncomfortable, so I grabbed the quilt and pulled it up. That seemed to snap her out of it. She opened her mouth to say something else, then closed it again and sat down on my bed.

“You know, when I was young, I used to get busy and I’d often forget to eat,” she began.

“I didn’t forget to eat, Mum. I ate too much.”

But she held up a hand to silence me. Maybe if I heard her out, she’d leave me alone.

“My weight yo-yoed a lot when I was your age. Maybe not quite as light as . . .” she paused as if searching for words. “But if you don’t eat, Summer, you’ll get very sick. And I’m worried about you.”

She did look worried. Didn’t she know conversations like this just stressed me out? She’d done this before.

“I’m eating, truly. It’s like you said: I get busy and I’ve had a busy few weeks. I ate today and I’ll eat tomorrow . . . promise,” I said, giving her a gentle shove to get up, to end the conversation.

“OK, then,” she said, rising gracefully from my bed, as only Mum could do. “I’ll see you later.”

She glanced round the room one more time before backing out the door.

I didn’t realise it until after she’d gone, but I was hugging the bowl. She must have thought I was crazy or something. It was just a bowl, wasn’t it?

* * *

Homework done, I headed down to wash up my dish. Everyone had just finished dinner. I slipped into the kitchen and filled the sink with hot water, taking care to wash the miniscule lines of yogurt from my bowl.

Suddenly, a stinging sensation burnt my left thigh. Bobby stood beside me with a huge grin on his face, spinning the tea towel in readiness for the next strike.

“You know we have a dishwasher right, Summer?” he suggested. “Why do you always wash that bowl by hand?”

Before his words were out, he struck again—but this time I was ready for him. I danced out of the way and carefully slipped my bowl back into the cupboard.

“You on dishes tonight, Bobby?” Mum asked, carrying in an armload of plates. *Mmmm, lasagne.* I could still smell it. *It had been my favourite before . . .* My stomach started to gurgle.

“There’s plenty left if you’ve changed your mind, Summer,” Mum offered.

I imagined all the cheese and oil. “No, thanks. All good, Mum.”

“You’re gonna blow away with the next breeze, Summer,” Bobby laughed, grabbing at my waist but I ducked away before he could get a pinch hold on my rolls of fat.

“Don’t worry, Bobby, there is still plenty enough of me to teach you a lesson,” I said, grabbing the towel off the bench. It wasn’t as thin as a tea towel but I figured I could still do some damage with it. He was only wearing shorts. I dipped it in the dishwasher and *flick*. The welt turned rosy almost immediately.

“Why you!” he yelled, chasing me up the hall laughing.

I rushed for the safety of my bedroom but he was too quick, fighting his way through the door before I had a chance to lock it.

“Right!” he laughed, swinging the tea towel around his head like a lasso.

The towel snapped at me like a viper and bit into my shoulder. Luckily there was enough T-shirt

in the way to stave off most of the damage.

“My turn!” I raised my eyebrows menacingly and prepared to strike. I lashed out at his other thigh, trying to give him a matching welt on his other leg. He leapt back to escape the blow and crashed straight into my chest of drawers.

We both watched in slow motion as everything resting on the drawers shook violently. My lamp fell over, knocking my photo frame, which slid into the treasure chest I’d made in craft at school when I was five. The whole thing crashed to the ground and shattered, scattering the contents across the room.

TWO

Concert ticket stubs, ribbons I'd won at school, my first lost tooth, along with a variety of other mementos, were scattered across my bedroom floor. Bobby and I froze for a moment before he reacted.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Summer!" he said genuinely, leaning down to pick up the little tri-coloured bracelet that had landed on his foot. I reached over and took it. He started cleaning up but I continued to stare at what he'd just handed me.

"It's OK, Bobby, you didn't mean it," I answered quietly. "If it's alright with you, I'd like to clean this stuff up on my own." I forced a smile but inside my stomach felt like it had iced over.

He nodded as if he understood. I could see he felt really bad as he backed from my room, uttering a couple more sorries, taking the towels with him as he went.

I dropped on the bed and stared at the bracelet. It'd been years since I'd seen it. I'd buried it at the bottom so it would be out of sight. Julie—my best friend—had made it for me. It was the last thing she'd given me before she moved away.

Suddenly, I was back there with Julie sobbing in my room. She'd pressed the friendship bracelet into my hand and begged me not to forget her. All the plans we'd made, the dreams we had about growing up together and being BFFs had shattered like my trinket box. And that wasn't all that had been shattered that summer.

My hand tightened around the bracelet and the tiny clasp bit into my skin. I stared down at the broken treasure chest on the floor. Everything was broken, the treasure chest, a friendship, trust, Julie, her childhood—and mine. But no-one knew about me. That was my dirty little secret. The secret I'd told no-one now for eight long years.

Why was it all surfacing now? I'd done such a good job of burying it for so long. But lately it was like small bubbles were rising from the past, bursting unwanted memories into my present.

* * *

I could still replay the whole conversation we had that day. How she'd finally told her parents what Fred had done to her, which is why the police had taken him away the previous week. She'd told me that was why her family were moving in with her grandmother until they could sort everything out. Worst of all, they were leaving immediately. It meant we wouldn't get to see each other anymore because she'd have to go to a different school.

Everything had happened so suddenly. She didn't stay long. When we went back out to the kitchen, her mum was crying in my mum's arms.

I remembered the look on Mum's face when they left. It was just as Fred had told me it would be. She was hurt and frightened as she asked me if anything had happened to me.

I thought of Julie's mum crying. I saw the hurt mirrored in my own mother's face and remembered his words. Still gasping from the exertion, his old man's breath had stunk as he'd whispered across my cheek, "This'll be our little secret. You mustn't tell your mummy! She'll be very upset. You don't want to make her upset now, do you?"

In that moment, looking into my mother's distraught face, I made my decision. "No, Mummy," I'd said quietly, shaking my head as if to convince myself also.

I watched the relief flood her eyes and knew I'd done the right thing. I'd protected her, like Julie should have done for her mum. Then we could still have all been together. Now I was alone.

More memories flooded back as I began picking up the pieces of my broken childhood and

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