

JUNE



Photo by Michael Morse: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/photo-of-children-playing-with-dry-leaves-1582736/>

June and I were friends. Best friends.

We lived next door and our parents were so close that a lot of people thought our moms were sisters. They used to sit out on the back porch of our house and drink a glass of wine on Fridays at the end of the work week relaxing and laughing, telling each other the stories of our lives. June and I used to watch them and talk about how when we grew up we were going to be just like them.

I once told June I wished I'd been born in her family so we could be sisters. She said we were already sisters and nothing that'd been invented could come between us.

She'd sometimes pretend she was in a TV show and look at me with her chin tilted down and her eyes on fire and say, "Trust me baby, there ain't nuthin' like you and me" then she'd throw her head back and laugh hysterically.

On that Tuesday morning we were in school. I think the principal came to our classroom around 9. I don't know exactly because at the time we were in the bathroom. We were looking in the mirror at this little red mark just underneath her chin that we both thought was a zit. June said,

“What do I do?”

“Leave it. My mom says you should leave them alone ‘cuz messing with them only makes it worse.”

June looked at me like I was nuts, then she washed her hands and we went back to class.

When we got there everyone was lining up in the hallway. It was pretty loud like usual so we just thought we were going to an assembly. Then, coming from the far end of the hall we saw Mr. Clayton, the principal, walking with his arm around one of the second grade teachers who was all hunched over like she was crying. You could hear everyone in the hallway get real quiet group by group as they walked past. Our teacher, Ms. Grace, said, “Guys, we need to go into the gym and I need you all just to sit quietly, OK?” That was the first time I ever remember her asking us if it was ok. We got in line and marched into the gym and sat down.

After they sat us all down the teachers got together and started talking in groups quietly. None of them were smiling and we all noticed it. June took hold of my hand. Her hand was warm, it felt good, everything was going to be ok.

We' been sitting for awhile when Mr. Clayton came over to talk to Ms. Grace. He spoke quietly and shifted his eyes in our direction. Something in the back of my throat began to close and make it hard to breathe. Ms. Grace walked over toward June and I. She reached out her hand and said “June can you come over here for a minute?”

June stood up still holding my hand and pulling me up with her and said,

“Can Carlie come?”

Ms. Grace hesitated for a second and glanced over at Mr. Clayton who nodded and we started walking towards Ms. Grace who was heading into one of the PE offices where we saw a few other kids going with their teachers.

There was a light on in the second office and nobody was there so we walked in and sat down. June sat in a wooden chair next to the desk and I sat in the office desk chair facing her. On the desk was a half filled cup of coffee and some pastry. We kept staring at the pastry, then the coffee then each other.

After about 15 minutes a lady with a clipboard and a sharpie came in and read June's name off the paper on the clipboard. June said,

"Yes"

It sounded strange and made June seem much older. I looked at her but she was staring at the lady and the lady said,

"June, something's happened in the city, we don't know all the details exactly, we're still trying to get information, we wondered if your parents maybe tried to call you to let you know about it?"

June said, "No"

Then pulled out her phone to see if there was a message.

"No, no one called me. See." She showed the face of her phone to us.

Then the lady with the clipboard said,

"Oh, well I'm sure they'll get in touch soon....Listen June, we think for now the best thing is for you to go home and wait for your parents, we've asked your neighbor, Mrs. Adams to come by and get you. She'll take you home. Carlie, if you want to go with June we will contact your parents and let them know where you are."

We were stunned and didn't know what to say. Go home from school? Now? I stood up first and reached for June's hand. We held hands all the way to our lockers and then from our lockers to Mrs. Adams' car. Neither of us said anything.

Mrs. Adams lived in an old brick and ivy covered house across the street from our house. Her husband had died years earlier and so she spent her time looking after a few of us kids from the neighborhood. She was sort of like an in-home daycare only there was no money involved. She loved kids and we loved her and so it worked out. We used to hang out at her house before school on days our parents left early and sometimes we'd go to her house after school when our parents couldn't get home until late.

When she picked us up at school she hugged us both and said how glad she was to see us. This was just like her. She signed us out of school and led us to the parking lot and her car.

She drove an old blue Plymouth in perfect condition with huge sofa seats in the back and carpeting on the floor. June and I piled in and sat in the back holding hands and Mrs. Adams turned on the radio and headed for home. There was a man's voice on the radio who said, "...we are still trying to gather more information..." and then Mrs. Adams reached for the knob and shut it off.

When we got to her house and went inside the TV was running.

This was unusual because Mrs. Adams hated television and always went thru elaborate steps to discourage us from watching. On the screen was a shot of the World Trade Towers with black smoke streaming out of both of them and the voice on the TV was saying, "You are watching the World Trade Towers in New York City where at approximately 8:45 a.m. this morning 2, 747 aircraft crashed into the buildings..." Mrs Adams came in behind us, quickly snatched up the remote and shut it off. June didn't move. I stopped breathing. She looked at Mrs. Adams, then at me, then at her feet...slowly, ever so slowly, she melted down into the floor where she ended up sitting cross legged in the middle of Mrs. Adams living room.

"Honey?" Mrs. Adams said, but June didn't move and she didn't stop looking at the floor.

I sat down across from her and our knees touched. I picked up both her hands and held them together with mine and waited for her to look at me but she didn't. I just watched her breathe. When she finally lifted her head I could see that she was crying but she was very quiet. She looked deeply into my eyes in a way that no one has ever looked at me since, and said,

“That’s where my parents work.”

There is a picture of June that sits on the mantle of Mrs. Adams fireplace. She is 8 or 9 and sitting by a stream that runs along the border of the school yard where we both went to elementary school. She is looking up at the camera, at the photographer, me, and she is sticking her tongue out. That is how I remember her now from before. From before any of this.

June stayed with Mrs. Adams for a few days before they were able to confirm that her parents were gone. I don’t know who told her but I was looking out my bedroom window one afternoon when a car pulled up in front of Mrs. A’s house and 2 people got out, one of whom I recognized as a counselor from the school. No one had to tell me why they were there. I turned away from the window and hoped that now, somehow, things would get back to normal.

A week later, the phone calls started.

The first one came about 2 in the morning. I was deep asleep when my cell phone rang.

Carlie?

June...June? Is that you?

Yes

What’s wrong?

They were here tonight.

What? Who?

My mom and dad.

What?...Ohmigod June, that’s...incredible...what happened?

They were here.

But how? I mean how did they? What happened?

Dead

Yes.

They are.

What?

They're dead.

Oh.

But they were here.

Oh.

They sat at the edge of my bed. My dad looked tired. My mom was happy.

Did you say anything?

No. I was afraid to wake Mrs. Adams. *(pause)* Carlie, can you come over?

Now?

Yes.

Uhh...ok

I'll let you in thru the back.

OK, I'll see you in a couple of minutes.

And that was how it started. At first it was just phone calls at night. Not every night but almost. Sometimes she would talk about her parents visiting and sometimes she wouldn't but I think for her they were there every night. I knew she was scared. I think she knew she was coming apart but didn't know what to do about it. It was like she couldn't resist it and just felt herself slipping away bit by bit, day by day. After a couple of weeks things started happening in school. Like we would go to class, then after about 15 minutes she'd get up and go to the office and then a few minutes later the phone in the classroom would ring and I would be sent to the office to be with her.

At first, each time it happened I thought it would be the last. The counselor would ask me if I minded and after I said I didn't she'd take me to June who would be sitting on a couch in the office staring at the pictures on the counselor's desk and a poster along the far wall. The poster was a picture of a cat with its left front paw stuck in a ball of string and printed along the top were the words, "Hang in there baby." We'd just sit there for a while then Mrs. A would come pick June up and take her home and I'd go back to class.

After the first couple of weeks it started happening every day and we all realized that June really couldn't go to school any more, at least for a while. So she started staying home at Mrs. A's every day.

June had family but they were all far away. She had an uncle who lived in Michigan and an Aunt in California but everyone agreed it was best for June, for now, to be close to friends. I was desperate for her not to be taken away and asked my parents why she couldn't live with us but they said it just wasn't right and that June's family needed to sort it out and that they were sure that when the new year came around that everything would be worked out. But nothing changed. June's uncle was hard to reach and her Aunt wanted to have her come live with them but felt it best that she complete the school year close to her friends.

When June started staying at Mrs. A's I would go over there every day after school and try to hang out with her but we could never figure out how to be together. I'd tell her a few things that were happening at school and she'd nod then click on the TV and that was it. We would just sit there and watch old TV shows until it was time for me to go home. This went on for about 2 weeks until I finally got up the nerve to try and say something,

June?

Hm?

What's going to happen?

Nothing.

What?

Nothing.

But...well...eventually...

No.

June.

After that we just stopped talking and it seems like the less words we spoke the more she wanted to be with me. The phone calls started coming every few hours. She'd call up and wait for me to answer and then just breathe on the other line. She'd ask me to let her listen to whatever I was doing so she wouldn't have to listen to her thoughts and so we'd stay on the line for hours at a time. One time my mom and I were going shopping for some school clothes and June called me and asked me to leave the phone on while we shopped. We stayed on the phone that way for the whole afternoon. June listening to my mom and I talk about which blouse we should buy for school. She started asking me to come over all the time. When I was at school she'd sometimes call my mom and ask her for permission for me to sleep over at Mrs. A's. When I got home my mom would tell me that June had invited me over. For a while I went because I didn't know what else to do but after the first couple of sleepovers I realized nothing was going to change and that the longer things went on this way the deeper the silence would grow between us.

The first time I told my mom I didn't want to go to see June she looked at me like I had stolen something from her. I was sitting at our dining table while she was in the kitchen making dinner.

Why honey?

Because we don't talk.

Well it's hard for June....sometimes...

Mom, she calls me...she calls me almost every hour of the day...and when I answer she says, nothing...nothing...and when I go over there ...sometimes she doesn't speak to me the entire time I'm there...it's scary Mom...I'm scared and I can't do anything to help and I just don't want to see her right now, OK?

I think my mom knew what was happening all along but like me she didn't know what to do either. She had lost her best friend and could see me searching around for June looking for something that might trigger a connection, a starting place, a way back. But there was only June's silence and my anger and frustration at losing something that was supposed to be mine forever.

The last time I saw June was at the airport. It was the middle of June. Her month. School was out and her aunt had agreed to have June fly out and live with her in California. I was with my parents and we had driven her to the airport to say goodbye. We all sat together outside the security checkpoint until the last possible minute, nobody saying anything and everyone wishing they knew what to say. My mom asked if we were hungry but I said no and June just looked at me. Then my mom asked if we wanted to talk alone and suddenly June looked up and said, "yes". My parents walked down the terminal a ways and June and I were alone. She looked at me and said,

They're gone now.

Yes.

No. My parents. They're gone now.

Oh.

Yes.

Yes.

OK

OK?

I love you.

I love you too June.

And that was it. She looked at me for a long time, then hugged me and turned and before my parents could come back she had gone into the security checkpoint and passed thru it.

Yesterday was my birthday. I'm 17. I hadn't heard from June in 5 years although we've received a Christmas card from her aunt every year. Today when I got home from school I found this package sitting on our front table. When I looked at the cover I knew it was from June. I could still recognize her handwriting. Inside the package was this locket with a little card. On the back of the card it says, Made by June. Inside the locket is a picture of June and I when we were 10 sitting on her slide in the middle of winter. There was lots of snow everywhere and her mom and dad were throwing snowballs at us. We were both sticking our tongues out at the camera. On the back of the locket engraved in gold is an inscription. It says, "Hang in there baby".