

Adam Elliott Segal

The Last Summer

“Your dimples, they look just like the sun,” Fern said to Rose during the summer of 1995. Rose and Fern, sitting on a thick, weathered beach log at Spanish Banks, the orange hazy glow from the west dancing along the horizon’s edge and the faint outline of Bowen Island in the distance. Rose and Fern, best friends, wearing coloured tank tops and jean shorts, their whole lives ahead of them, like the way the Pacific Ocean stretches past the oil tankers anchored in Burrard Inlet. Their days a series of summer jobs and sunsets, smiling and singing and simple things. They knew all the words to “Damn I Wish I Was Your Lover” by Sophie B. Hawkins and “Little Miss Can’t Be Wrong” by the Spin Doctors. They talked about boys that didn’t like them and parents that never listened and trips along the west coast they hoped to take when they were older—*island hopping* the Strait of Georgia or camping in Oregon State when they graduated. Alanis Morissette, The Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco and Jamiroquai played in their bedrooms. The world didn’t feel too big yet.

Rose has long, dark hair that she parts in the middle. She has a brother named Vito who has a good heart but bad friends. She dreams of opening a flower shop with Fern. Fern has short brown hair, an infectious smile and she is seventeen, just like Rose, except she is not Italian and her parents are divorced and she lives with her mother and younger sister Lucy in a small, single dwelling home they rent off Cambie Street.

The house has three bedrooms and a backyard and a view of Vancouver’s North Shore. It’s a happy place. They are always

laughing in the kitchen, mother and daughters, all three of them, and that's why Rose comes over all the time, because her home isn't like that. Rose's Italian father parks himself in a brown upholstered chair after work and watches the hockey game and says little, save for an intermittent flurry of expletives aimed at the television while his wife cooks dinner and hums old Sicilian songs under her breath. Vito is never around anymore. He's only one year older than Rose, but it seems like more, because he is tall and has slicked back hair and played on the soccer team in his final year of high school. He doesn't listen to anyone ever since he graduated last month and leased a car with the money he made from hours at the deli counter in the supermarket. He is tired of his mother's over-indulgences and his father's single-minded view of what a man must be. Vito always misses curfew, and the house is quiet without him. It's too quiet for Rose.

Rose is scared sometimes. Vito has a pager and she can hear the beeps through her bedroom wall at night. She knows people that have died. Ricky's brother, who didn't deserve it. That Asian boy, whose head got smashed on the curb at a party on the east side the summer before last. That Polish thug Roman, who flunked Grade 11 twice. They all had pagers. They all knew Vito.

August was approaching, and the last vestiges of July were already beginning to disappear like the sun behind the clouds but everything still felt full then for Rose and Fern.

"Can you believe it's going to be our last year of high school?" Fern said.

"I know!" Rose replied, wriggling her toes in the sand. "In like, a month!"

"What should we do this weekend?" Fern asked.

"The PNE starts soon," Rose suggested.

“Ugh,” Fern said. Rose started laughing.

“What’s wrong with the PNE?” Rose said.

“I hate roller coasters!” Fern shrieked.

“Really? I like them. What about the giant swings?” Rose said, and she started spinning in place, pirouetting in the sand, a light pink cardigan blowing in the breeze, the sun careening over the horizon’s edge.

“Okay, those *are* fun. And those tiny donuts are soooo good.”

“Anyway, it’s like two weeks from now. I heard Vito’s going to a party Friday night,” Rose said.

“Whose?”

“I don’t know. Some guy he knows.”

“You could sleep over if you want?” Fern said.

“Yeah!” Rose’s cheeks had become flushed because she’d been dancing in place and she looked so happy then, she looked so happy.

Rose likes drinking jasmine tea with Fern’s mother and staying over Friday nights so all the girls can make breakfast together Saturday morning. She likes sharing Fern’s bed like sisters and waking up early to look out the back window at the crocuses and tulips bulging from the ground—it was best in spring, when the mountain rain sprayed across the city and the first green tips punched through the topsoil. Sometimes the sun pokes intermittently through the low-hanging clouds and Rose looks back at Fern, still sound asleep, wishing she would wake up in time to see the way the light slices across the flowerpots in the early morning in such a brief, perfect moment.

That’s what Rose was looking forward to when she packed a bag early Friday evening and snaked her way on foot through East Vancouver—“I’m staying at Fern’s,” she yelled to her mother, walking out the door—the late light of day breaking through the tree-lined streets, casting shadows on the sidewalk.

Fern and Rose arrived at the party with backpacks and a mickey of vodka. They didn't know anyone and stood in the small yard near Vito and his friends, chasing sips of vodka with Sprite and trying to look inconspicuous. But thirty minutes later, the cops arrived and broke it up because of noise complaints from the neighbours. So Rose and Fern hopped in the backseat of Vito's two-door black Acura Integra, squished together like sardines beside all the boys, and they drove around aimlessly until Vito's pager went off.

"Rose, I gotta go," Vito said. "I'll drop you guys off at Sev."

So Rose and Fern ended up standing at the 7-11 with Mountain Dew slurpees, waiting for Vito to pick them up. He said he would be quick. He said he just had to drop something off. "Just be back soon Vito," Rose said. "We don't want to be here forever." But they were, nearly an hour, and midnight was approaching and it was too far to walk home and Rose was a bit tipsy.

"I'm worried," Rose said.

"They're fine. They're boys," Fern said.

Three cars showed up in tandem. Tinted back windows. Rose and Fern were standing by the pay phone. None of the cars belonged to Vito, and they didn't recognize anyone. Teenagers in leather jackets with their arms hanging out the front windows, smoking, engines still running. Rose poured some of the vodka in her slurpee. Fern rarely drank alcohol—she'd only been really drunk once, at her cousin's New Year's party last year—and her mother had to work the next morning and Fern had to babysit her thirteen-year-old sister. So she wasn't as drunk as Rose, but Fern still kept taking sips from the slurpee straw every so often, laughing whenever Rose pushed her face against the inside glass of the convenience store, blowing air towards her cheeks so that

she looked like a drunk chipmunk.

Several minutes later, Vito's Acura peeled into the parking lot. When she saw his car, Rose's face lit up, her dimples just like the sun, and Fern smiled, too, probably from the vodka. Everything that happened next happened so fast. Vito pounced out of the driver's seat, hair slicked back, smiling ear to ear. The back door from another car opened too, and Fern didn't see it right away because she was looking at Vito, but she heard Rose screaming LOOK OUT, LOOK OUT, and that's when Fern saw the gun, and just as Vito turned to Rose, the bullet pierced his carotid artery perfectly, so much so that the bullet sailed through the air and smashed through the window of the convenience store, startling everyone inside. Bodies flew to the ground, hands covering their heads. The cars sped off. Rose stood there in shock, her vodka-spiked slurpee slipping from her hand and splashing on the ground, the concrete simultaneously staining red and green, blood spurting from Vito's neck.

As he lay dying, gasping for air, sirens could be heard over the quiet, muted sounds emanating from bystanders and the muffled screams from Rose's parched throat as she pressed her favourite pink cardigan to Vito's skin. His breathing turned into short, successive bursts. It wasn't long before it was over.

Fern barely remembers anything else that happened during the summer that Vito died. She and Rose went to the PNE two weeks later, but they just walked around aimlessly and didn't go on any of the rides, not even the swings, because Rose was nauseous and wanted to go home early. They sat on the beach one night but barely said a word.

There was one photo that Fern found, taken that July, when the two friends went to visit Fern's father's cabin on Gabriola Island. They went swimming every day and played board games

at night and brought a Walkman to the dock with plug-in speakers so they could watch the sunset and listen to mixtapes that had songs like TLC's "Waterfalls" and Seal's "Kiss From a Rose," which always made them laugh.

Fern stared at the photo long after that summer was over—two girls in bathing suits, standing arm-in-arm on the dock at sunset with smiles as big as beach balls—and she tried to remember what it was like when she and Rose were both happy, when Rose's dimples looked just like the sun, and nothing had changed yet, and the world didn't feel too big.