

# the last week of june

By Melissa Nie

“Let’s be princesses,” Sadie says. “Then we can do whatever we want.”

We don’t look like princesses. Dirt smears our hands and faces, clothes stick to our skin from the summer heat, the pearly tips of permanent teeth peek out from the gaps in our smiles -- hardly the image of royalty. Still, like the children we are, we make-believe.

Old brooms turn into majestic steeds. The dusty attic becomes our palace. Stuffed animals transform into obedient subjects.

We invite our subjects to a royal banquet, poring over the seating arrangement because Minnie Mouse obviously can’t sit with Daisy Duck; they’re refusing to talk to each other. But if we put her next to Princess Leia, they’ll spend the entire night talking and they won’t eat a single thing. Finally, we solve the problem by having Minnie sit next to Snow White, who is friendly enough but won’t distract her.

Pretending to sip out of plastic pink teacups and delicately munching on carrot sticks, we gossip about the latest happenings in the royal court -- did you hear that the duchess invited Harley the Horse to her wedding? Yes, really! And everyone was so shocked because Harley the Horse doesn’t know how to act like a proper subject. He wiped his dirty hooves on the tablecloth and released methane in the duchess’ face.

We can’t stop giggling.

There is no one to judge us, no limit to stop us -- only our own imagination.

I met Sadie at the beginning of fourth grade.

It’s a scary thought and a haunting presence in the back of my mind. It marks the beginning of a new year at a new school with new people, leaving the security of the familiar hallways and faces.

I enter the classroom, the weight of my backpack and my fears pushing me down. I take a step. Another. And another. One by one, my classmates turn to look at me. There’s a short girl with strings of plastic

beads twisting her hair into a set of braids. Her expression is a cross between a grimace and a synthetic grin. The boy sitting next to her looks bored, playing with a pair of scissors. I wince at the sound made when he snaps them shut.

Who's the new kid?

I wonder where she came from.

Look at her backpack. Are those Barbies?

“There is no one to judge us, no limit to stop us -- only our own imagination.”



I make it to my seat without bursting into tears, and the teacher begins class with a too-bright smile and a chipper voice. I can't hear what she's saying. My heart is beating too loudly.

At recess, a girl with short blond hair and a determined expression approaches the swings where I've been sitting glumly.

“My name is Sadie. Do you like horses?” she asks.

I look up.

“I like horses,” I say. “I ride them sometimes.”

She appraises me for a second before breaking into a smile and holding out a hand. “Okay. You're my new best friend now.”

Hope blossoms in my chest.

We spend our time galloping around the playground and spinning elaborate backstories about our pretend characters. I'm the queen of an imaginary land and Sadie is my loyal animal companion. We don't care what anyone thinks despite the whispers, the pointed fingers, and the stares. It's our world and our world only.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” I ask. We're sitting in the classroom making paper snowflakes. Outside, rain pummels the windows.

“I have a big sister,” she says.

“Oh,” I say. “I'm an only child. How old is she?”

“My sister is fifteen.”





“Does she go here?”

She doesn’t respond at first. Instead, she cuts a large hole in her snowflake. “She used to. She goes to Fort Knoll now.”

I hesitate. “What’s Fort Knoll?”

A loud clap of thunder shakes the room and makes me jump.

“It’s a school for problem kids.”

I bring my attention back to her. She’s staring down at her finished snowflake, adorned with a hypnotizing pattern along the edge and a gaping hole in the middle. “Problem kids?”

“You know. Bad kids. Kids who don’t get along with other kids. Weird kids.”

I am silent for a while. I look back at my own creation and find that I’ve accidentally shredded it to pieces.

The rain continues.

She gives me a friendship bracelet one day. “Look,” she says. “My dad engraved our initials on the charm. Sadie and Layla. Best friends forever.” Sure enough, there’s a heart attached to the string with tiny letters carved into it, almost too small to be seen.

The bracelet is just a bit too small for me, but I wear it anyway. I wear it because it makes her brighten with happiness.

The day we have our tea party, her sister comes home. We hear her footsteps walking up to the front door and we shudder as it slams, throttling the whole house.

Her mother calls out in greeting with a trembling voice but she’s met with a series of incoherent screams. She is helpless to stop her child from stomping up the stairs and pausing right below the ladder to the attic.

“Sadie,” she growls. We are frozen in fear. My gaze is fixated on Sadie, silently begging her to do something. She can’t meet my eyes.

“Sadie.” She grabs the rickety old ladder and I hear it splintering under her force.

Finally, Sadie speaks. “I’m up here. D-Don’t come up.”

That does it. I can barely process what’s happening before she’s in our faces, spitting viciously and screaming words that



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I have never heard before. My ears are ringing. My heart is threatening to launch out of my chest. Everything is telling me to get out of here NOW. She's focused on Sadie. Practically jumping down the ladder, I race downstairs and a fumbled apology spills out of my mouth before I run out of the house.

Sadie doesn't talk to me the next day.  
"Why are you friends with her?"

I glance up from my book. One of my classmates, Nancy, is hovering over me, her long dark hair hanging inches from my face. I'm alone, for once. Sadie's at home sick today and there's no one for me to be with.

"Who are you talking about?"

"Sadie, obviously."

There's a glint of something else in her eyes, something that I don't like. I look back down.

Nancy continues. "I mean, she's so weird. Did you know that she was invited to Mickey's birthday party, but she kept picking her nose and wiping the boogers on the tablecloth? And she's still obsessed with horses. That's so last year."



I stay silent. *Go away*, I think to myself. *Go away. It's not nice to talk about people when they're not here.*

Still, there's a part of me that's intrigued by what she's saying. "All I'm saying is, maybe you shouldn't play with her. She's just nasty. That could rub off on you."

My voice is barely above a whisper. "Do you really think so?"

Nancy nods solemnly. She offers me a hand. "Come join us at recess. We're a lot cooler than her."

My heart is pounding. I think back to that very first day, where I came into the fourth-grade classroom as an insecure, frightened little girl. I think of how Sadie asked to be friends. I think of the royal tea parties in her dusty attic.

But I also think of her sister. I think of how she's locked away at a school for bad kids. I think of the way she yelled and swore and frightened me half to death.

I take Nancy's hand. My own hand is quivering, and whether it's from guilt or fear of excitement -- I can't tell. Maybe it's all three. Maybe it's something else entirely.

The bracelet around my wrist seems tighter than before.

"All right," I say. "I'll come with you."

I stop talking to Sadie.

**I**n fifth grade, there's a new girl in class with brilliant red hair. Looking at her, I'm painfully reminded of the way I was last year: the hunched shoulders, the tension in her body, her eyes darting from place to place.

Introducing herself to the class as Amy, she says she's from Kansas, her favorite color is yellow and she has two little sisters.

At recess, I walk toward the new girl sitting on a bench alone.

I'm so focused on Amy that I don't notice the figure coming from the opposite direction and I run right into her.

When I've regained sense of my surroundings, my heart drops.

"Oh," says Sadie. "Hello."

She's still wearing her friendship bracelet. I took mine off a long time ago.

I pause, then push her out of the way and continue to Amy.

“You don’t want to be friends with her,” I say to Amy. Her basement is warm and we’re wrapped in soft blankets, nursing cups of hot cocoa.

Her brows furrow. “Why not?”

I take a moment to sort through my thoughts.

“Trust me. She’s just not a good person to be around. Did you know that in fourth grade she...threw up all over Mickey at his birthday party?” Deep in my chest, something foreign and unpleasant bubbles up and

Swallowed whole by the tangled mess of blankets, I recognize what it is: Guilt.



leaves a sour taste in my mouth. I can’t discern what it is, but it’s terrible.

Amy wrinkles her nose. “Ew. I see what you mean.” She sets her cocoa on the nightstand and turns out the lights.

Lying on the ground, swallowed whole by the tangled mess of blankets, I finally recognize what it is: Guilt.

Sadie stops coming to school in sixth grade.

“Did you hear?” my classmates whisper. “She has mono.”

“Who would ever want to kiss her?”

“She had it coming.”

“Thank God. We won’t have to deal with her now.”

I glance down at my hands. I’ve been wearing the little bracelet again, ever since the first day of her absence. *Guilty guilty guilty*, it seems to chide.

“Thank God,” I say to myself. “She won’t have to deal with us now.”

She won’t have to deal with the side glances, the turned backs, the giggly conversations that stop whenever she draws near. She won’t have to deal with sitting alone at lunch because no one wants to be with her.

It’s the last week of June.

When I wake up on Monday morning, the sunrise is unusually bright, unusually red. There is a pervasive silence throughout my house, seeping in through the cracks and slithering through the pipes.

I think nothing of it.

I arrive at school and walk into the classroom. The other children are chattering brightly and the teacher is reading something on her computer.

## “Window Seat”

Abby Hedberg



I greet Amy, I ask her if she did the science homework. She gasps and rummages through her backpack as I giggle. It's nothing unusual.

The teacher gathers us for morning circle. There's an odd expression on her face, a strange light in her eyes, a slight tremble in her voice.

I lean over to whisper in Amy's ear. "This is probably going to be another one of those be-nicer-to-each-other meetings. What's the point?"

She doesn't laugh. Instead, she's focused on the teacher, her brows furrowed in concern. I follow her gaze and I'm shocked by the tears running down the teacher's face.

She snuffles loudly. "Class," she says. Pause. Deep breath. She tries again. "Class, I have some sad news to tell you."

Uneasiness washes over me and I dig my fingernails into the center of my palm. When I look down, I see angry crescent-shaped blemishes arranged neatly in a curve.

"Sadie was in a terrible accident yesterday afternoon. And we don't know if she'll wake up."

Amy asks me if I want to visit Sadie in the hospital. I tell her no. I don't tell her that I can't bear seeing Sadie's sleeping face covered in scars. It would only remind me of the wounds I inflicted on her.

So she goes alone. When she comes back, she tells me how pale Sadie looks, the appalling tubes and monitors emanating from her body. She tells me about the gifts and flowers and cards surrounding the bed.

"I just feel so bad, you know?" Amy muses, tugging at a strand of red hair. "I wish I was nicer to her."

I smile and agree. If only she knew.

**T**here are rumors. Of course there are rumors. It's ironic. Rumors are what left Sadie friendless. Now rumors are destroying what little life she has left.

"I heard that her sister did it. It really wouldn't surprise me. Have you seen the way she treats her? Unbelievable."

"I think she tried to run away but something went wrong and she landed in the hospital. Can't blame her, though."

I want to tell them they're all wrong, because *don't you see?*

She's just like us. She's lonely. She wants to fit in and to be loved. She needs friends. And it's your fault! And it's my fault too.

It's all my fault.

She's in my dreams sometimes. We're in her attic again, laughing like the children we once were, playing with Barbie dolls and stuffed animals. Her hair gives off a golden glow and her loose white dress flutters behind her like she's flying. Minnie Mouse is sitting next to Daisy Duck again. She's happy.

I wake up feeling incredibly loved and peaceful.

I don't deserve it. Because the real world isn't a matter of playing pretend and acting like royalty. The people around us aren't going to bow down to our every whim.

It's still my fault.

**"D**id you hear the news?" A good five years have passed since the events with Sadie. I'm sitting in advisory with Amy, who has a funny look on her face.

"What news?" I ask lightly, grinning.

"Sadie woke up this morning."

I see her walking down the hall.

"I miss you, Layla," she says. She holds out her arms.

I close my eyes. Breath in. Breath out. Smile.

"I missed you too."

And we enter the classroom together, children again in a world where imagination reigns.

