

Toby

by Hannah Holmes

I never cared about the environment, but in Fort Worth, Texas, there's so much asphalt I can't breathe; the trees suffocate, and this sultry summer, the grass is brown. It's dead. In Fort Worth, where there's more asphalt than oxygen, it's like the pores of the earth are clogged, but you can't fix it with a facial. You're hard pressed to find a tree amidst a steamy skyline, the air yellow, or a huddled apartment complex; the yards only three feet long. My friend Toby planted a zucchini garden by his apartment. It's the only natural thing for miles. Did you know a zucchini blooms into a flower before it becomes a zucchini? God made something beautiful, but you can't see a bit of it in Fort Worth. That's why we should recycle and build compost piles. That's why we should all be hippies. That's why, when I come home from college, I water Toby's zucchinis while he works at the bakery. I want to save places like Fort Worth, at least a little bit. I want to plant zucchini gardens across the universe.

I like organic food. I like it because you don't have to worry about it hanging around your stomach until you are dead. I buy it sometimes, but while you can buy organically grown New Zealand apples for fifteen dollars a pound at Central Market, you can go to Wal-Mart and buy little frozen pizzas, for a dollar a piece, pizzas that fill your stomach faster than Heinz ketchup pours from a glass bottle. And those pizzas taste alright, even if I can't pronounce half the ingredients, even if when I read the back of the box, I feel like I did in Chemistry class, the way I feel when I read Faulkner, like I'm stumbling around in a dark room full of furniture saying "Ow, ow, ow." Forty years later, all those pizzas and their preservatives are going to be having a little party in my belly, and in the

meantime, I'll be reading a book by Faulkner, a book that devotes an entire chapter to the description of a bucket, as I repeatedly ask myself why I ever decided to be an English major. Then there's Toby, too eager to please, majoring in engineering because his dad said so. Toby says he would give anything to be an English major. Toby likes Faulkner.

I don't like Faulkner, not at all, which is probably scholastically incorrect. I don't know if I'm smart, but I like to think I am. I'd like to write a book, or something: a hopeless attempt at great literature, something that will probably end up in the back of Krogers, with a fat, red five-dollar sticker slapped on it by a disgruntled, zit-faced sixteen year old who wishes his life were very different. Some people aspire to write classics or New York Times best sellers, but honestly, in a world of pizzas that last for lifetimes and books about buckets, I'd be happy only to be published. Even if just a handful of odd people read my book, I would secretly know I was a genius.

Life is beautiful. Maybe I shouldn't be so pessimistic. Maybe I should dream of marvelous things—it's just that sometimes, when I'm at work from eight to five, screaming at kindergartners to behave or else they don't get any skittles, it's hard to be thankful. I know some college kids can't find forty-hour a week summer jobs, and sometimes, I even get forty-five or fifty hour weeks. So every day I wake up and do it all again; give time outs and pass out skittles when the little monsters don't try to strangle each other. It's hard to be thankful that working moms leave their kids at daycare to be raised by someone like me, nineteen years old and irresponsible, barely able to take care of my own business, much less a room full of impressionable youth.

So I live each day yearning day for five o'clock, when I come home to a cramped apartment and on evenings like this one, lay in bed with my lap top while illegally watching new movies on Chinese web sites and hope the government doesn't

catch me. I fancy myself a pirate and walk to the mirror, make a hook shape with my finger, squish my face, and say, “Argh,” to my reflection, while wishing my life was more like Jack Sparrow’s. Then I walk to my parent’s room, where my mom is sitting in her recliner and reading a fat book about the American Revolution. I sit cross-legged on the floor, as she quietly looks up from her book and takes off her reading glasses.

I start talking, talking, talking, because that’s what I do best: ramble on about my kindergarten class, full of cute monsters, and how I just don’t understand why any mom would leave her kids with me for nine hours a day. My mom laughs, and soon, I’m laughing, too. As my mom and I laugh, I begin thinking maybe life is beautiful, at least a little, at least sometimes. Then, when I finish whining, my mom says, “Oh, go find Toby. You’re silly, and I’m reading.” And I shrug and walk a few doors down to Toby’s apartment. Toby is my friend, even if he is so tall and skinny, like fishing line, even if he is a computer nerd, even if he gets on my nerves sometimes. You know, people always have a lot of friends, but only one or two of them are real friends. Toby is the real kind. And we talk and talk and talk about nothing really, until I slowly walk home, uneager to get on with life.

My family’s apartment sears with heat during the summertime, with its elderly air-conditioner that buzzes as if to frantically say, “I’m still here—I swear!” So, Saturday is finally here, and it happens to be one of those stormy summer days, humid and suffocating. I sit outside on porch swing, staring at the gray sky, the clouds wide and daring. I think that God has to be out there somewhere, a God who is surely worth loving, if he made something like that. And I start wondering about the man who came to the door with the brochure just the other day, the brochure about Christians, the kind of brochure that tries to make Christianity look really appealing so you

become one and start pew sitting like all the rest. I start to wonder if maybe, that man is onto something. I think maybe I should start waking up on Sundays and go to a church somewhere, if that's the way to say thank you for this infinite sky and never ending landscape called earth, maybe I'll do it. But when Sunday morning comes I'll sleep, and that's what happens every Sunday, until I forget I ever thought of going to church.

Stormy Saturday afternoons, like this one, when I have too much time to think, are when I realize I have island fever like crazy. If I stay in one place, I lose my mind, and this summer is wearing on me, even if it's only June. I want to go to England so badly. I want to leave this place behind, this hot and dry wasteland called Texas, and find myself on a foggy cobblestone road with nothing but a backpack and a map. Then, I want to work part time, part time so that I am never tired again, at a fish and chip shop. And I'll type a novel in the evenings and never worry about money, never again. But I don't think that's possible. I don't think a part time job serving fish and chips wrapped in newspaper, though I hear they don't use the newspaper anymore for sanitary reasons, would pay rent. Or bills.

I wish I could convince Toby to come along. Maybe two part time jobs would pay rent and bills. But Toby loves me, and I don't love him. Out of cruelty born from loneliness, I go on and be his friend, dooming him to never marry and remain my best friend for the rest of his life. Then, on these sad Saturday afternoons, when Toby is working his twelve hour shift at the bakery, where he ices donuts with complicated machinery, I stare from the porch swing into the asphalt and think to myself that one day, Toby, who is so kind and smart, will leave me and find someone better, a girl who loves him. Then they will kiss, the kiss I never gave Toby, then they will marry, have children and be happy, while I am left a spinster

for the rest of my life, waiting for a phone call that never comes.

As soon as I see Toby, I'll tell him we are going to England in the morning. He might say yes. But then, as I look into the dark clouds and think clearly, I know he won't. He will give me his quiet smile and shake his head. He will laugh a little, run his fingers through his hair, take off his glasses, and look at me. Then he will say something that makes us both laugh hard, so hard that sound stops coming from our mouths, for so long that we forget why we were laughing in the first place. That's how it usually goes when I talk crazy to Toby. I miss him on Saturdays, and I can't wait for eight p.m., when he will leave the bakery, come home, which is just a few doors away from me, and walk up the stairs to my porch, where I am sitting with my guitar. I will strum as he talks about nothing. And I will laugh, because Toby always makes me laugh, no matter how pessimistic I might be. It's on long, lonely Saturdays like this one that I start to think maybe, just maybe, I love Toby.