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## Cook: Summer Night Breeze, 1976

### SUMMER NIGHT BREEZE, 1976

Erin Lynn Cook

Claudia was very small and dreamed of being big. Inside her bed at night she would count days, like sheep, imagining each one holding hours of growing.

Dr. Kuljin had told her not to fret. "Don't fret," he'd say to her. "You will aspire to do great things."

"But when will I grow?" she'd ask again and again. Her tight fists wrapped around the white paper covering the examination table.

Dr. Kuljin just turned to her mother and asked if she was sleeping comfortably. Always the adults would turn away.

On a day like today, Claudia went outside to play. She was allowed to wander the back yard as long as she promised not to wedge herself between the bars of the pool fence. There in the unusual stillness of the spring day she turned over stones to find the hibernating toads. They lived along the wooden fence under the heavy rocks that kept the dog from digging out. Each one she turned had a community of insects, arachnids, and beetles. There were black widows huddled in bundles of thick black legs, hiding their visible red splotch for fear of death. There were roly-polys wrapped up inside themselves when the stones were first turned and then splaying their legs out eagerly when they saw the light. Claudia liked roly-polys best. She'd capture them quickly and let them warm on her skin until they crawled like pets up her wrists. She usually had a collection of them in a discarded kitchen cup kept up on the porch. Then there were the water beetles, big and clumsy, looking stupid in their enormity. And finally she found what she was searching for, the eyes of a toad.

It seemed to squint at her from the dirt. Too bright, it seemed to be saying. She poked at it with a stick. Not hard, she knew better than to try to harm them. It hardly stirred, a blink or two were the only indications of life. The weather felt warm enough to her, so Claudia urged the sleepy toad out with her finger. One

hop, two hops, and then it sat like a smaller stone. Too stiff and cold to move any farther. She picked it up and tucked it into her pocket for warmth.

There was a swing set. She had had to argue for months with her mother and father to get it. They saw her small stature as arrested age. A perpetual four year old, barely tall enough for the dragon roller coaster in the kiddies play land. She was nine and knew when adults patronized her. They finally relented.

The play set had monkey bars, a slide, a sand pit, and two swings. She climbed to the top of the slide and out over the edge to sit on top of the monkey bars. Her legs dangled between the bars. She was conscious of the toad—she wasn't a child!—and felt the side of her pocket gingerly to make sure it had ample room.

Up on top she felt the stillness give way to moving air. She could see into the neighboring yard and heard the rowdy loud boys next door. They threw mud against the cement fence and made underground forts with shovels. The oldest was younger than her by several months.

Claudia arched her back and tried to see them. "Hey!" she yelled.

"What!" one of them yelled back.

"Look up, can you see me?"

"No." It was Harry, the eldest. He was tall. He could reach her monkey bars with his whole hand and palm them, pulling himself up with ease, and swing his legs through the bars to sit with her. She liked it when he came over.

"Climb up on the fence. Look over."

Harry obeyed. Claudia could hear his feet scraping against the cinder block fence and then finally saw his head pop up, like toast, over the edge. He leaned awkwardly on his elbows, a look of pain around his eyes. "Oh, yeah. I see you. Hey, can I come over?"

She nodded.

A foot, then a knee appeared next to his elbows, and then the fence became a door and Harry was in her backyard. He

was always nasty-mean at first. Like her toad, he had to warm up to the idea of her. His blood had to thin and flow, loosening his mood like tendons until he could freely be himself in her presence. Claudia knew this and was patient.

"You're nuts," he said.

"Why?"

"Because. You just are." Harry stuck his hands into his back jeans pockets and stepped on a moving snail. His shoe was muddy and the snail shell crunched.

"That wasn't nice."

"Yeah, so?"

Something Harry never did any more was call Claudia small. She appreciated it, but had fought for it. He used to stick his elbows on her shoulders and laugh. Or he'd put his chin on top of her head, and although she kind of liked that, she knew he was insulting her. Finally she'd had enough and kicked him repeatedly in the shins. She had yelled at him, "Harry Hosfield, I might be smaller than you, but I can give you bruises you'll cry about!" She had won his respect and he never made mention of her size again. She felt, next to Harry, equal, as if she could see into his eyes like a compass—east to west—horizontally—with nothing separating them save boy and girl.

He moved his head from side to side, stretching his neck muscles, and then shrugged his shoulders to crack his back and finally his knuckles, one, two, three. He had to physically warm up to her. She saw his nasty mood slip away like snake skin. His face opened up and he looked at her anew. He walked under the monkey bars and did just what she wanted. He put his hands straight up and grasped a bar in each fist, then he pulled. His shirt rose at his stomach and his pants slunk down to reveal the waistband of his underwear. He swung back and forth then dropped back to the ground. Instead of climbing up to her, he sat on a swing and began the lengthy process of swinging higher.



Dr. Kuljin's office smelled of Lysol. There was a sick-child entrance and a well-child entrance. Both doors led to the same waiting room and Claudia thought it ridiculous. The first time she walked boldly into the sick child entrance her mother had tried to hold her back. "You're not sick," she had scolded. Claudia had rolled her eyes and kept walking, her mother double-stepping to keep up with her small daughter.

"Hi, Claudia, new shirt? It's cute." The receptionist, Gloria, knew her and kept her file handy. Claudia liked her because she spoke to her like an adult. She didn't mind that people treated her special; she knew it was just something they had to do. There were two ways adults responded: one was to be very protective of her, watching out for her, making sure others didn't say rude things, and the other was to treat her as if she were older than she was and take the opposite approach and treat her like an adult. That was her favorite way of being treated special, like an adult.

"Oh, thanks, Gloria, I chose it to match this skirt." Claudia put her arms out to her sides to demonstrate the effect. What she didn't tell Gloria was that it had to be purchased in the toddler section. That was too embarrassing. What she also didn't tell Gloria was that she didn't even pick it out, it was all her mother's choice. She didn't go clothes shopping. Something unspoken happened a couple of years before between Gloria and her mom. Her mother began coming home with outfits for Claudia to try on, and Claudia never asked where they came from. It became one of the many little games to play.

"Go on in to room two."

Claudia didn't have to be shown to the examination rooms anymore. She knew the office like her own home. She knew where the gowns were kept inside the top left drawer of the table. She removed all but her underclothes and then lifted her arms up over her head to slip a gown on. She had told Dr. Kuljin that she expected to be treated like a young lady, and that meant gowns. He had gladly shown her the drawer. Her visits had increased since the decision. A specialist was meeting with Dr. Kuljin and

her parents at the office. A determination would be made about her potential for stability after the surgery.

Dr. Kuljin had been opposed to her parents' idea at first. "I'm telling you, you've quite a young lady here. I don't think you truly understand what you're going to put her through. She will do great things no matter her size." He said only once in her hearing his real fear—"It's very experimental"—and that was said so low that she had to work the words around in her mind until she correctly formed what she had heard.

At times they still talked above her head, spelling out certain words, as if she were two. And there were times when she didn't mind Dr. Kuljin's advice—she liked the motivation to aspire to great things despite the odds. But reality was she wanted height and so did her parents. It was a family decision, like conception, Claudia was their child, and if they had it in their power to help her grow, they would do it.



"Can you hear me down there?" Claudia asked Harry. She watched the top of his brown-haired head as it tipped like a bottle to reveal his face on the backward swing. His nose was small, and his mouth tightened into a hard grin with each pull of his legs. His two front teeth were big, but Claudia saw power. He could get to swinging high faster than any kid on the playground. He had strong legs.

"No!" Harry managed to spit out.

"Well, obviously you can."

He shook his head.

"I'm going to be inside all summer."

"Why?" He made a quick motion of his eyes up to hers. Her legs dangled just inches from where his swing was connected to the beam. If she had wanted to, she could entangle his chain in her shoe, and possibly hurt them both.

"That's just what they said."

At school Claudia was a grade above Harry. They didn't

have the same lunch, but occasionally they passed each other on the playground as she was going in and he was coming out. Sometimes he'd catch himself and wave at her without thought. She'd laugh and wave back, knowing that his hand would soon discover his embarrassment and dart back to his side. He was never too cruel, just not the same as he was at home in their own yards.

Harry's swing went high up over the top of the backyard fence. He had once told her that he wanted to make it go all the way around, like a Ferris wheel car; he could hold on tight, he had assured her. His face grimaced as if in pain. Claudia knew what he'd do next. She'd seen him do it a handful of times. She gripped the monkey bars tight in anticipation. It was a thrill to see, the idea of soaring out over land, only her body between the air and grass. The bars were shaking from his steady pace. Up and down, in and out, there was technique, of course, and Harry seemed to have it mastered. On the downward flow he put his legs straight out before him and arched his back. Then he let go of the chains, and as his body flew forward, he reformed into a crouch, then landed on the lawn in a run. If he was angled just right, he could avoid the fall.

Claudia clapped as if he were a circus performer. He threw his hand up in the air and waved her praise away. She wanted to tell him more about her procedure. That's what her parents were calling it, but Dr. Kuljin kept referring to it as the surgery. The specialist had predicted a seventy-five-percent chance of gaining up to four inches and a fifty-percent chance that the bones would begin to expand on their own, even after they healed. That seemed like a mile high to Claudia. She had read the information packet and knew that the higher the percentage, the greater the chance, and the percentage of patients who reached heights over five feet was in the twenties. But still, there was that chance.

"Why would you want to stay inside all summer? I don't get it." He had been listening, she knew he had.

"The doctors said it will take up to six months to recover from

my surgery," she said, feeling the words of Dr. Kuljin leave her mouth.

"What surgery?" Harry walked back towards the play set.

Claudia thought fast of something that would make him grab hold of the bars and come up to her nesting spot.

"They're going to cut my legs open and then break my bones."

That was it. She had given sufficient drama to the words *cut* and *break*.

"Gross!" Harry put one fist and then another onto bars just three over from where she sat. He pulled, and Claudia could see small striations in his wiry arms where his muscles worked to pull his legs, then his body, up to the top of the set. He was just close enough that Claudia could imagine him trying to save her if she fell. She wouldn't though; that was something only clumsy people did, and Claudia prided herself on her agility.

"Remember? I told you last week."

"Yeah, but I thought you were just trying to impress me."

"Nope. It's true. They're going to make me taller." At the mention of height Claudia noticed Harry give an instinctual flinch. She knew he didn't feel comfortable with it.

He moved his head from side to side as if he were smelling something interesting, or as if he were trying to avoid a conversation. She felt a tickle in her pocket and remembered her toad. She paused. If she pulled the toad out Harry might grab it and be mean. If she left it in her pocket, he wouldn't have something to grab from her. She pulled it out gently and kept her other hand cupped over the top so it wouldn't hop out.

"What's that? A toad?"

"How do you know?"

"Because of how you're holding it, duh. Let me see."

"Are you going to hurt it?"

"Nah."

"You squished that snail, I saw you."

"Yeah, probably heard it, too. Let me see it, I won't hurt it."

She continued to hold both it and Harry's attention. "I want to tell you what I heard my mom say to my dad. Then I'll let



you have it.”

Harry nodded.

“She said it’s going to be horrible. And that I won’t be able to move for at least three months. That I’ll have to be carried everywhere, including you-know-where. I’ll have to have medicine because my legs will hurt.”

Harry looked right into her eyes for the first time that day. He looked deep and she felt him. It was almost as if he were stepping into her brain to take a look around, peek behind the brainy folds for truth or lies. Finally he shook his head.

“What? Why’d you do that?” she asked. Unsure of his attention.

“Nothing. Okay, I listened to you, now let me see the toad.” He held his hand palm-side-up next to hers. His skin was warm. With his other hand he made a ceiling, like she was doing, so he could keep his promise. She carefully unfolded her fingers and exposed the still sleepy toad. It had peed on her palm, but she didn’t mind. Harry Hosfield’s hand was touching hers.



Her bed was too warm. The sheets hadn’t been changed in a couple days, and they felt sultry and filled with her own oils. Her mother did her best to keep her fresh; she sprayed Lysol around her furniture and kept her wash basin clean with bleach. The room still had an odor of disease and decay. Though Claudia didn’t consciously think of being sick, she felt it.

To her left was a table filled with her knick-knacks. Books and writing pads, colorful paper with scrolls of hearts and flowers, were piled in a jumble on the shelf below. Her mother had purchased the paper, certain that Claudia had friends to correspond with during her recovery. I don’t have anyone’s address, Claudia had complained. I don’t know where they live. Her mother had assured her if Claudia would write them, she would find them. “What about your friend next door? What’s his name?”

Claudia didn't answer and busied herself with an encyclopedia. It was L, and she looked up the word Library—too dull. She had learned the Dewey Decimal System at school—Lorrie, short but funny; Luxemburg; and then she wanted B for Belgium, but her assortment of encyclopedias near her bed were only L-M and Q. What kind of encyclopedia had only one volume for Q? Her mother kept chatting, pulling her drapes aside to reveal the summer morning. Her chatting echoed like a bird inside Claudia's mind. Underneath the up-lifting voice of her mother was guilt, and Claudia didn't want to hear it. Her mother had nothing to fear.

"It's okay, Mom. I'll just write them and you address them, alright?"

It seemed a gift of forgiveness, and her mother smiled shyly as she left her daughter to her own thoughts.

She put the encyclopedia aside and perused her assortment of other books. Since the surgery she had wandered through the lives of Charles Wallace and Meg, of Lucy, Edmond, Peter, and Susan. She was at that exciting stage in her reading where she could do a balancing act between the worlds of picture books and chapter books. She could easily embark on interior voyages with both. In her hand was a book by a Russian author writing about the adventures of an imaginative boy searching for little people. The illustrations were so finely detailed, that though she had been on her bed for six weeks, when she stared into the intricate line drawings she settled there. She was inside the ship looking out at the curiously large boy.

But though the readings kept her occupied for much of her day, she spent another portion listening to records. A small portable record player could be placed just next to her on a rolling table. When the pain came on strong, she would ask her mother to play her the story book records of Bartholomew and the Oobleck and Yertle the Turtle and Gertrude McFuzz—who wanted the most beautiful tail that finally hindered her flight—they took the pressure off her imagination and allowed the pain medication to take effect. Dr. Kuljin had told her parents the pain should subside in a couple

of weeks. He had written the prescription for only fourteen days, but had okayed the refills her parents had requested.

Around two o'clock every day Claudia felt the dull pain increase to sharp pin pricks then to piercing foils until she could stand it no longer. She would ring the small hand bell on her night stand until her mother came in with the codeine syrup. The recorded voices of Bartholomew and Yertle and Gertrude, crackly through so many turns under the needle, softened her mind to let the medicine flow.

After sometimes hours of dozing she would wake to see the shadows falling onto her shelf filled with her acrylic life-like horses. They were stagnant in motion. Her favorite was a black stallion in a full run. Wind sweeping his mane and tail, right foreleg raised in anticipation of coming down again some distance beyond to gain more speed. She imagined herself upon that horse, grasping his mane and seeing clods of bright green Kentucky blue grass flying up and behind her as they flew through endless fields. She felt small enough, still, to do it.

The codeine once-a-day increased to two, and she began receiving another dose around bed time.



There was a scratching on her window screen; it faced the backyard and was left open to allow the summer night's breeze into her stuffy room. The curtains were still open and the sky had become nothing but stars. She flicked on her bedside light and shut it off again quickly. It was a silly thing to do, everyone knows you can't see outside in the dark with a light on inside, and she waited for her eyes to adjust again. She wondered if the noise had been real.

"Hey," said a voice. "You awake?"

She pushed hard on the bed with her fists to push her body and the heavy casts up into a sitting position. The pillows didn't follow her and made her back feel as awkward as her front.

"Harry?"

"Yeah. Can I come in?"

"How?" She could hear him snort at her questioning of his abilities. She saw him push the screen forward until the springs popped that held it in place, then he pushed it up and angled it out, and in a moment the window became a door and Harry Hosfield was in her room. Claudia switched her light back on, and he squinted instinctively at the sudden glare.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"I dunno, my folks are watching Johnny Carson."

"How did you get out?"

He snorted again, and this time Claudia could watch him turn his head away from her question. "Easy," he said.

He took in her room. The record player had been rolled to her dresser, and that caught his attention. He flicked on the switch and waited until the turn wheel was moving fast enough, then he expertly placed one finger under the tone arm, lifted it, and moved the needle gently onto the revolving record. He sat at the foot of her bed, and she could feel the depression of his weight. He had grown, she thought, in the last six weeks. The announcer's voice came on too loud, he turned the volume down, and then it moved into Gertrude's whiny voice, dissatisfied with her dreary, ugly, too-short tail.

"How was your birthday? Did you get anything neat?" Claudia wondered if Harry would be scared away by her remembrance of his July birthday. He had been nine now for two weeks.

"Aw, you know. Just stuff." He wandered over to her horse shelf and picked up a rearing mare. "What do you do with these?"

"Play with my Barbies. They like riding on them. I get two every year from my Grandma." Claudia pulled the sheet up a bit around her waist. It didn't bother her that she was in her nightgown, nothing much about Harry bothered her. She knew what he wanted to ask her, but she also knew that he wouldn't. "Do you want to see my casts?"

He turned back to face her. A look of embarrassment on his face.

“What do you want? I mean, do you want me to?” he said.

She shook her head and felt like she floated. Sometimes things swirled. Whatever growth her marrow may be doing, it was causing her legs to feel like rubber bands stretched too thin.

“Can you turn that off? I’ve already listened to it twice today.”

He obliged her.

“I want to know how come you haven’t visited me?” Claudia wasn’t sure where her boldness was coming from. Maybe it was because she needed to use the toilet.

He scratched his head, and she was afraid he might fly out the window again.

“I don’t know, Mom says you’re having a hard time. Does it hurt?”

“Yes, a lot.” The words that needed speaking were out of her. She felt relief.

“I brought you something.” Harry reached into his shorts’ pocket and pulled out a wiggling, army-green toad. He didn’t hold it securely enough and it hopped out onto Claudia’s pink quilted bedspread folded at the foot of her bed. They laughed loudly as Harry scrambled around the bed. He caught the toad as it soared out over the edge of the mattress, bound for freedom in her house. He cupped his hands carefully and brought it over to her.

“Do you want it? I’ve got loads more. The drainage pond was filled with polliwogs this year. I got a bucketful, and now they’re hopping all around the neighborhood.” His face was animated, and Claudia was able to look unabashedly at his brown eyes rimmed with thick lashes.

Claudia shook her head. “Leave him outside my window, okay?”

“Guess I’d better get going. Your folks might come in.”

Harry hesitated, then reached a hand out to her arm. Claudia could feel his fingers press down, and when they lifted, they remained.

He climbed back out the window and put the screen back

in place, leaving it unhooked from the inside, of course. For everyone knows you can't hook a screen from the outside. Claudia could hear him still outside.

"What are you doing?" she called.

"Digging a hole. I'll put him in here and this stone on top like a roof. He'll like this home."

"I wish I could see."

"You will."



On her tenth birthday, Claudia walked. The leaves had turned and dropped. School had begun, and the new corduroy pants she had looked forward to wearing had indeed become too short. To another girl, the difference in length would go unnoticed. Her parents celebrated her new year with a cake in the shape of a doll and a bottle of champagne. Her gift was a new record, "It's a Small World," with all the songs from the Mickey Mouse Club that she loved. When she opened it, her initial reaction was pleasure, but as she let it sit on her lap and picked off the plastic coating, pain seeped into her shins and thighs. She felt the needles, then the swords, piercing her legs until it was unbearable. She knew what it was. She had heard Dr. Kuljin whisper it to her mother when he came to the house to check up on her. He had said her mother was not being strong, he would not fill the prescription again, Claudia would need to break free of the codeine. He had raised his voice at her mother. She heard the words culpable, kidneys, failure, addicted, all jumbled together.

The record covered her lap like a napkin. The vinyl seemed to heat up and the colors blurred into messes of pinks, blues, turquoise, and purple. She felt nauseous. The faces of the Small World children mashed together like oatmeal, and then Claudia's head fell to her lap.

When she awoke she was in her bed again. The success of walking had disintegrated, leaving her trapped inside the sheeted

cocoon again.

From her father's hi-fi stereo she heard Barbara Streisand singing of second sight—a gift of seeing well beyond the present. The sun was bright. How long had she slept? She heard the school bus honk for the Hosfield boys next door. It stopped in front of their house. Harry was a late sleeper. Since his gift of a toad he had come to her room—the screen still unnoticed and unlatched—several times. Each time he brought something from the yard. Sometimes she was drowsy from a dose. He never stayed more than a few minutes. He always touched her arm as he left.

His bones were strong. Claudia noticed how even his jaw had grown. He had lost another tooth, and there was such a difference between the two baby teeth he had left and his adult teeth. They were so large in his mouth. His hands, too, seemed long, and his feet, mostly bare, had toenails growing past his toe, jagged from where he had snagged one or two. His father was over six feet tall—a former athlete—and Claudia saw in him Harry's potential height.

She heard his mother shout his name, and the bus gears grind in departure, a screen door slammed, and the sound of running shoes down the sidewalk. Harry had missed the bus again. Soon his footfalls would resume to a walk and he'd have to go the distance alone.

She shivered, and sweat formed unexpectedly on her brow. She looked at her arm and saw the familiar pale cast of invalid in her tone. She held her hand out in front of her and saw it shake, this time so much harder than before. She clutched the sheet and screamed for her mother.

Her mother came in with a tray. A glass of milk and a cool washcloth on top. There was no bottle of syrup anymore. Claudia cried at the sight.



When Claudia finally walked outside, the air was still and chilled. There were Christmas light bulbs hanging from eaves, looking clumsy and bright in the dark. A teacher had been assigned to bring her work—keep her studies up! was the goal. Her reading had increased. She was reading of Pip and Jane and Emma, characters from the past, but filled with purpose. Harry snuck her a Judy Blume novel. He hadn't read it, of course, but had heard it had some bad stuff in it.

Christmas vacation was a week away, but she was going to go back to school. Her legs were strong, and she accompanied her mother to the department store in hopes of being able to purchase in her age section. No one stared at her strangely when she pulled a pair of gauchos from the rack. They fell far below her knees, but not to the floor, and she insisted that they fit.



Claudia went out early to wait for the bus. She had on her new clothes and stood with her books by the curb. Now that Harry was in the next grade up, they would share the same lunch recess. She wondered if things would change.

She sat behind the driver. He knew her from the year before. Harry's little brother ran on just before the swinging doors shut. He climbed up the steep steps—the steps that used to seem a mile high to Claudia, and she had just used them with ease—flushed from the cold air. He glanced at her briefly, a tight little smile, and then heard his name and headed to the back.

Claudia saw her mother in the front window, coffee in hand, a smile of accomplishment on her face, and she waved. Claudia, too, felt some pride. After all, it had been a family decision. The experiment was over.

The bus driver shifted down and she smelled the familiar exhaust and heard the gears grind and felt the bus lurch forward. She heard a yell and looked out her window. Harry was running fast to catch up.

“Can't you stop?” Claudia asked the driver. She saw him



glance in the rear view mirror at her and for a reason she believed was pity, he braked, and the doors hissed open.

Harry Hosfield climbed on board. His head held high, his brown hair swept low over his forehead. His lunch bag clutched in his hand.

"Thanks!" he said to the driver.

He stepped forward along the black rubber mat. His shoe was untied and his mis-matched socks slunk down to his ankles.

The toe of his shoe paused near the base of her seat. She felt his brown eyes look down at her head, her hand splayed across the top of a book, fingers wide. His free hand dangled down, his fingers hovered near her shoulder.

If she tilted her head the moment would be gone, so she kept her face down and watched his calves as he walked away.

It wasn't her job to stunt his growth.