

The boyfriend

Simone struggled to speak sometimes but Sonia liked him. He was soft and warm and smiley and never trying to put his hand too close to her chest, or twitch his lips over her mouth when they kissed hello after a long weekend. And he did smell much better than the rest. And he was funny, made school just a little more bearable. They hung around and had a laugh between classes and during break time and sometimes even met up in the park on a Saturday afternoon. Lips hovered desperately close at times but they were brushed aside as words trembled to release.

Stammering came natural, the leafy flow of air through a mind as yet unfocused, or too tightly entwined into the truth. A perfect storm. A perfect shield. He didn't trust anybody. He could see the deceptions: he was surprised his parents hadn't divorced earlier. The stammering bloomed. Then it fled away. Sonia was an angel. He could talk to her. She had that knack of listening, and it freed his tongue, soothing cream on a sore. He helped her through maths and she soothed his lips. Her parents splitting up was the best thing that ever happened him. Suddenly they had it all in common, all under control.

Sonia didn't have a boyfriend. She never had one. That's what she told everybody. Nobody really cared: but when you are young you don't realise.

And Simone.

And Simone what.

Too many questions. They played together when they were five. And thirteen. Football, play station, English homework. They hung out. At home, in school, it was easier than being bullied. They were left alone. Sometimes teased about being more than friends but who cared.

Then it was summer. The sun blazed, allergies faded and the ground dried out. School closed with a sigh, of relief. The gates edged shut with a creak and the faint hope they would never open again.

Simone was loaded up with his mother, packed into the caravan cruiser and they disappeared down the street, out onto a road and off to the beach.

That was when Sonia wondered if she had a boyfriend.

She missed him desperately. He understood her. They used to be on the phone every night explaining math's to each other, or just chatting about a silly YouTube video they'd found, or checking homework, or gossiping vaguely about friends they might have, or thought they had. Then summer arrived and all their routines faded into a past that suddenly appeared to hover and cast shadows over the sunlight that bled through to burn, tan and heighten the sensations of freedom lost through a holiday season.

They'd never kissed but she wondered if maybe he was a boyfriend; why she missed him so much, why she was bored without him. It was slightly annoying. She'd prefer not to think about it. That she wanted to was frustrating. She zapped through the channels. They fluttered by aimlessly. Her mother was in the kitchen. Next weekend she was with her father in the city. What a summer.

She wondered all August. Simone had no wi fi on the campsite so she couldn't ask him. Strung out between two parents she spent the sweaty days between one flat and another, air conditioning on and music doing her head in: anything to keep out the sound of parents arguing on the phone or simply telling her what to do. She read lots of books. Everybody seemed to have boyfriends and girlfriends in their stories. She should have one. She could ask Simone when he came back. But she wasn't sure. She knew him too well to try a kiss. That nose, those spots, the funny fringe never quite neat: she didn't think so. And he might get angry, and never speak to her again. She had her own blackheads and her hair never stood straight. She didn't want love. Or sex. They would just talk. That was cool.

When the big metal gates yawned open he was waiting beside her for the new term. They kissed each other on the cheeks and held hands as they looked for the new timetable and found their room. When he spoke, his words flowed, a nightmare of expression, desires untamed, a river of feeling finally touching base. No missing vowels, no tongue clodding mishaps when the sound wouldn't stutter out. If only he could kiss her he might be cured forever.

It was good to have Simone back. A friend. A new course. They might all learn to speak clearly. Sonia remembered her parents and wasn't so sure: somethings were always better left unsaid. One day she would need a boyfriend, maybe even Simone. For the moment it was back to school. She couldn't face another divorce.

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