

A Strange Day in July

Emily Crane

"He threw with all his might, but the third stone came skipping back."

The morning air was hot, too hot to be attending church in both Edmund's and Lyra's view. Lyra was in the throes of an argument with her hairbrush. Her wavy blonde hair always seemed to have a mind of its own. Meanwhile, Edmund was standing in front of the hallway mirror as his father gently helped him tie his tie. Edmund always liked dressing for church. For some reason, he enjoyed looking like a miniature adult, a version of his father, which he believed was the best version of himself.

"Lyra, Edmund, the car is ready. Come down now, please," their mother yelled from the downstairs hall. Edmund rushed downstairs, tugging on his shoes. Lyra followed, slipping into her small white Mary Janes. Her white dress flowed to her skinned, 6-year-old knees, and her hair was fastened with a silky white bow. Taking her hand, Edmund led Lyra to the car where their father and mother were waiting. The pair were inseparable. Sure, they had their moments, arguments about trivial issues that soon were forgotten, but they otherwise were best friends.

The drive from their remote home to church was a bit long and miserable, with Lyra dozing off and nearly drooling on her new dress, earning her a scolding from her mother. Edmund, eyelids

drooping, threatened to fall asleep as well, but resisted.

Pulling off the main road, the car finally arrived at the tall white church with a giant cross standing mightily against the roof. Beside the church was an old cemetery, which Edmund found quite depressing. The pair hopped out of the car, racing along a dirt path to enter the red doors that held the promise of cooling fans inside.

Once inside, the family was choked by humid air, clammy and even hotter than the air outdoors.

"Sorry, sorry, the fan is broken at this service. Just bear with us, and God bless," one of the ushers pleaded.

The family squeezed into the pew, Lyra at the edge of the seat, Edmund next to her, and their parents next to them. They were surrounded by a bunch of people, which made the space extra cramped. "They need to expand the church, especially for summer services," their father whispered.

Hours went by, people praying under their breath, then hands outstretched, voices raised in song. Edmund sat up straight, attempting to stay awake, but exhaustion kept taking over. It didn't help that Lyra's head was resting on his shoulder and was drooling on his dress shirt. He wanted to sleep, too, but 7-year-olds did not sleep in church, his mother had told him. He wiped beads of sweat off his forehead as he gazed ahead, singing along

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to at least keep himself awake, unlike his younger sister.

Despite the sweltering humidity — heat that might have convinced most kids to stay inside — Edmund and Lyra were just *itching* to go outside after church. They reasoned that four hours in a steamy, cramped church had earned them some time outdoors.

“Fine, fine, go out in the back. You have fifteen minutes, but that’s all,” their mother told them, before she returned to preparing an early dinner. “It’s way too hot for the two of you to stay out any longer.”

The children beamed with happiness as they raced toward the door, long grass brushed Lyra’s bare legs, the wind whipped past Edmund’s golden curls. The two came to a stop once they reached the edge of the lake. The lake water lay still, mirroring the bright blue sky above it, clouds drifted through the sky as if they had nowhere else to be in the heat. At the shoreline, slender willow tree branches draped over the children with their lush green leaves fluttering from smaller branches. The leaves moved back and forth with the light breeze as if dropping in for quick hellos.

Edmund quickly flicked off his newly polished brown shoes, rolled up his pant legs, and cuffed his sleeves. Lyra, not seeing the appeal of chucking rocks across the water, began plucking daisies from the soil, her tiny hands working to make a crown of flowers.

Edmund bent down near the water and picked up three rocks and chucked them one by one so they could skid across the water. But as he bent to collect more, he noticed one of the rocks he had thrown seemed to come flying back to him. Edmund, quickly alarmed, stepped out of the way

to avoid being hit. Then, they both stuck out their heads, eyes wide, confusion marking their faces.

“No way, did you just see that?” Edmund asked.

Lyra responded by dropping her unfinished crown, yellow daisies scattered on the ground as Edmund helped her off the rock. The duo looked across the lake and saw a young boy. He seemed to be about Edmund’s age with tousled, chocolatey-brown hair and tanned skin that looked golden in the afternoon sun. Lyra looked at her brother, who glanced back, and they raised their hands and waved. The boy waved back.

They wondered whether a new family with kids had moved to the area. For as long as they had lived in their house, no one had ever thrown a rock back at them across the lake! Edmund became excited — as much as he loved his dear sister, he wanted to play with boys his age, too.

Then, Lyra gently tugged on Edmund’s sleeve, alerting him of the stranger’s disappearance. One minute he was there, the next he was gone.

Lyra and Edmund grinned at each other with amusement and confusion. Oh, this was so exciting! The two sprinted back to their house, church clothes wrinkled and dirty, sweat streaming down their foreheads. Lyra smacked the hair off her forehead; Edmund caught his breath before speaking.

“Mom! Mom!” Edmund shouted, his cries echoing through the halls.

Their mother rushed out from the kitchen toward Edmund, worry sketched onto her face.

“Edmund?” She paused, then spotting him, exclaimed, “Edmund! Why are you so filthy? And where is your sister? Did something happen?”

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"She's just fine, but we saw a boy across the lake. He threw a stone at us. He was my age!" Edmund blurted excitedly.

Her expression registered relief for a moment as she led Edmund down the hall to join Lyra. She picked Lyra up into her arms, then paused.

"Wait — across the lake?" she asked. "That's not possible. The Bakers have no children or grandchildren," their mother explained.

"But— but me and Eddy saw it! Right? Right Eddy?" Lyra asked Edmund while she shimmied out of her mother's grasp. "Come on! Come on! Let me show you!" Lyra said as she began to grab her mother's arm, pulling her to go outside.

"Now wait just a second, it's way too hot, you guys are filthy, and look like you just ran a marathon!" Their mother scolded. The siblings shared a look, not taking no for an answer. They just needed their mother to believe them. Edmund moved behind their mother and starts to push her from behind. She gasped at the audacity of her children, "Hey, hey, hey!" She scolded, but laughed, amused by their determination.

Once the three of them stepped out into the humid afternoon air once more, they all broke out into a sweat.

"Just down here mom, I'm sure he'll come out again!" Lyra said, trying to hype her mother up.

"He?" Their mother asked, "What did he look like?"

"He was Eddy's age, brown hair like dad, and his skin was tan, like tanner than Grace's from school!" Lyra explained, hoping she was doing a good job.

"Okay... we'll see," Down at the lake, both siblings pointed simultaneously across to where the boy once stood.

"There! There!" Edmund said.

"Yeah! Eddy is right! The boy was right there!" Lyra agreed, bouncing up and down on her heels a bit. Their mother's expression stayed the same, amused by her children's antics.

"Nice try my love, I understand you're bored and want to play, but I still have to make dinner," Their mother said, not believing her kids. After all, the Bakers had no children, or grandchildren for that matter.

"No! It's true! It's true!" Lyra exclaimed, pouting while she crossed her arms over her chest, annoyed that their mother didn't seem to believe her.

"Now, don't get all pouty, it's not my fault I don't believe your silly stories," their mother said, and without a word, she turned and walked back inside calling over her shoulder, "Come inside, now."

Edmund and Lyra looked at each other and both pouted.

"You saw it too, right?" Lyra's voice cut through the silence.

"Yeah, of course I did, why else would I try bothering ma while she cooks dinner?" Edmund asked.

The clouds seemed to grow darker as the sun drifted down to go to sleep, and the moon began to rise. The orange, pink, and purple colors faded as stars appeared.

"We should go inside," Lyra suggested, already trying to tame her once again wild hair.

Edmund followed. The lake still looked the same, but something was different, it was almost eerie. The branches on the tree swayed as a single rock skidded across the water. Both children jumped, Lyra clung onto her brother's arm desperately, both curious, but obviously petrified. They looked across the lake, and just like before,

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there was the boy. However, he looked different, his skin was still tan but slightly paler, his hair was drenched in water, and his clothes were sticking to his starved looking body. His eyes were hollow and looked as if they were caving in. Then he smiled, his teeth rotten, he raised one frail arm, and waved.

And in terror, both kids screamed.