

## Right Place, Right Time

It has been said that you are exactly where you are supposed to be at exactly the right time. Looking back on it now, I believe that this is true. The move to Georgia was the fourth one for my family since I began first grade. I was going into the eighth grade anxious at the thought of starting yet another new school year with no friends. I decided that if it was meant to be, it was up to me, Jared Johnson, to find at least one friend before the new school year began.

I guess you could say that I was literally on a collision course with fate when I got on my bike that summer morning headed to the park on my quest to find a friend. Moving quickly, I rounded the curve at the end of my street. I blinked, and there she was. The crash happened so fast, all I remember seeing is a mass of hair in front of my face as I spilled over the top of my bike and fell to the sidewalk, my glasses flying in the opposite direction. Suddenly, my field of vision was engulfed with long, tan legs, a blur of hair the color of wheat, and the sweetest voice I have ever heard, frantically asking me if I was okay. As she handed me my glasses, she said, "I'm Jessie." I realize now that, despite the scraped knees, the skinned elbows, and the bruised ego, it was the luckiest day of my life.

As it turned out, Jessie lived just one block over from me, and we were inseparable all summer. Jessie showed me all of her favorite places to explore. We cooled ourselves in the creek behind her house catching crawfish and bullfrogs. We captured fireflies in jars and huddled in a closet, watching them perform their magical light show. I had never met anyone as adventurous as she was. She was the epitome of carefree: cutoff shorts, bare feet, wild mane of hair always in her face, and sinewy build. She could match me shot for shot, pitch for pitch, and mile for mile, and she was the best friend I had ever had. When school began, we had four classes together, and we shared a locker where we would leave each other quirky jokes and notes of encouragement.

A few days before the end of school, my dad came home and announced that he was being sent on special assignment to New York for the summer, and we would be going with him. I was devastated and begged my parents to let Jessie come with us, but to no avail. As soon as school was over for the year, we packed up the minivan and headed to New York City to live in a cramped apartment for the summer. Knowing how much I was missing Jessie, my mom made every effort to keep me entertained, yet no matter how much fun I had, I missed my best friend and longed to share my adventures with her.

As summer faded, we returned to Georgia, and I couldn't wait to see Jessie and give her a souvenir of the New York skyline. I raced to her house as soon as I got unpacked. I knocked on her door with anticipation, excited to see her and talk about everything we had done since we last saw each other. When the door opened, I knew in a gut-wrenching instant that something had changed. I saw her standing in the doorway, taller, tanner, and leaner. Her hair was pulled back in a messy bun and earrings dangled from her newly-pierced ears. She had on make-up and lipstick and was wearing a dress. I heard voices in the background, and I became aware that she was not excited to see me and was actually whispering to me through the door. It became apparent that she had friends over, yet I was not invited in. She stepped out on the porch and closed the door behind her. She told me that she didn't have time to talk to me, and she would see me at school the following week.

I left Jessie's house bewildered. She had changed over the summer, and an invisible shift had occurred in our relationship that I could not explain. When our first year of high school began the next week, Jessie and I shared only one class together, yet I was optimistic we would be able to talk. When I entered Spanish class on the first day, I automatically gravitated toward the seat next to Jessie, but when I asked if I could sit at the table, she told me that she was saving the seats for her friends. It hit me then that I was no longer one of them.

A few days later, I was walking down the hall when someone stuck a foot out and tripped me, sending me hurtling against a wall of lockers and sending my glasses in another direction. I could hear snickers and see blurry fingers point at me. I slowly got up, and, as I groped along the floor for my glasses, I heard that sweet voice come to my rescue. There was Jessie telling the other kids to leave me alone or else. A quiet hush descended on the scene as she reached down to help me up. She said, "I'm Jessie," as she put her arm through mine, and we walked out of the building together. She led me to the creek behind her house, and it was there that she began crying and telling me how sorry she was for the way she had treated me. She said that she was so angry with me for leaving her for the summer, and she missed me so much that she sought out other friends only to find herself caught up in the drama of being in the "cool" crowd. She apologized for hurting my feelings, and promptly proceeded to grab a handful of mud and make a ball with it, hurling it at me at warp speed. It hit me square in the chest, and as I hurled a mud ball back at her, the healing began. When we had exhausted our anger, hurt, and frustrations, we began laughing hysterically, standing in the middle of the creek covered in mud. And we knew that we were exactly where we were supposed to be at exactly the right time.