

The Long Grass

by Ryan W. Bradley

Julius jumped from one hay roll to another and another. Two and a half feet between each, they stretched across the entire field.

“J-Bird.” Amy shouted from behind.

He grinned, stopping to let her catch up. Perched on top of the roll he could barely see the road. He wanted it completely out of sight. Amy landed next to him.

“Why are you going so fast? Don't you want to wait for me?” she asked.

“Don't you want to be faster?”

Julius launched to the next roll. His shoulder ached every time he landed. He looked at the compass he kept in his pocket. His father had given it to him for his seventh birthday, the same day his parents' divorce became official. Julius carried it with him every day. Amy hopped down, and turning, he saw her sprint toward the line of trees that framed the hayfield to the West. So far Julius' mission to make it from the first roll to the last without touching the ground had been thwarted every afternoon by her need to wander.

“C'mon J.” Her golden hair flopped across her face as she turned her head in the direction of the river.

He waved her away, his attention on the next stop along his route. Julius didn't mind Amy's need to explore, or her lack of focus. In fact, he thought it might give him the opening he'd been looking for. He'd been trying to kiss her, touch her, since they had first met a few weeks back when he arrived from Oregon to spend the summer with his father.

But playing it cool was the only way he'd get close to a girl. He knew that much from watching the other boys at school. Julius was ashamed to be fourteen and not have seen a breast yet, or felt a girl's tongue in his mouth.

He swung his arms, and his feet lifted simultaneously. He didn't watch the ground, but kept his eyes on the curve of the roll in front of him, spotting his landing point. A gradual incline in the field as

Julius continued up the line forced him to catch his breath after each jump.

As long as he kept the line of trees to his immediate right he couldn't get lost. Scanning the field for Amy, he saw she was by the riverbank. She waved her arms wildly. Julius leapt. Hands on knees he looked back toward the river, Amy was hopping up and down now. She must have found something, he thought, knowing instinctively what it was, but resisting the idea.

"I'll finish jumping the line," Julius said. He wasn't going to give in, not today. By the time he finished, maybe she'd have moved on.

Julius fell on the last roll and his shoulder throbbed, but he'd made it, although when he looked right the trees were no longer there. The line of hay rolls had arched inward, putting the tree line behind him. Julius flipped the compass over in his pocket. There was no reason to worry. All he had to do was follow the rolls back. It was simple.

A border of dirt, about as wide as Julius was tall, separated the hayfield from a field of corn. The day after Julius arrived for the summer, his dad and he walked around the fields with Cash, his father's dog, and his dad warned him about playing in the corn. He'd stood there in front of the first row of stalks, 6'4, over half a foot taller than Julius, his arms crossed, and said in fields that hadn't been harvested it was easier to get lost than Julius could imagine.

"Especially when you're no taller than the corn itself," he had added.

Julius focused on the freckles on his dad's leathery arms and shrugged. Cash took off along the dirt border, but Julius' father shouted, "heel," and the dog returned. The two of them walked on, while Julius stared into the corn, imagining what might be on the other side.

"Thinking about getting yourself lost, J-Bird?" Amy said, suddenly at his side.

"Something like that." Julius swallowed hard and forced a chuckle.

"That's my dad's corn, five acres of it, anyway. There's a road on

the other side and more corn on the other side of that.”

Julius nodded, ran his fingers along the sides of the compass in his pocket. “Why didn't you come when I waved you over?” she asked.

“Didn't see you.”

Amy grabbed his hand and pulled him away from the corn. He watched her butt in her jean shorts. Her tan calves glistened with sweat. She was muscular, her biceps something he'd never seen on a girl. In fact, she wasn't much like any girl he'd ever known. She liked football, she'd said, and could pack away as much food as Julius.

“There's something you've got to see,” she said. “It's gross.”

Julius winced, knowing there was no way out. Amy showed him every worm, every insect, every dead mouse she'd found when they were in the fields. She pulled him forward, making his bruised shoulder burn.

The dog's black and white fur was damp and matted with blood. Amy pulled a branch from a nearby tree and shoved it under its stiff body, flipping the corpse over on the riverbank. Tufts of fur were scattered in the grass, and the dog's skin looked like it had been shredded. It was Cash. Julius shook, holding back a rush of bile rising in his throat.

“That's your dad's dog, isn't it?” Amy asked, poking Cash's collar with the stick.

Julius turned away. Every time he closed his eyes he saw himself dragging Cash's body to the river, dumping it in and hoping it would wash far away. That his father would never have to see it. But it had washed up just on the other side of the road.

“Yeah, that's Cash. I'll tell my dad when he gets home,” Julius said. He had no intention of telling his father about the dog. Julius' father had gotten Cash in the divorce, the only thing he'd really fought for, giving up the custody battle as soon as Julius' mother dangled the rights to the dog. But it would be the fact he'd snuck one of his dad's guns and shot it on his own that would earn Julius the belt.

“It looks like he was shot,” Amy said.

Julius grabbed a handful of pebbles and tossed them into the river. He nodded and shrugged, and Amy kept commenting on how disgusting Cash looked, increasing Julius' nausea.

"Who would shoot a dog?"

"I don't know," Julius said, turning his head.

"I guess we can just leave him here." Amy poked the ground with her stick.

Julius shuffled away from the river, hoping Amy would follow. When she did he was relieved. He reached for her hand and held it tightly.

They walked back toward the middle of the field and the hay rolls. Julius tried not to think about Cash, and focused on Amy instead. Her hand was sweaty in his, and his heartbeat raced looking at her breasts. He pulled her in front of him, put her back to a hay roll, kissed her. The first time he'd tried to kiss her, a few days before, she had giggled as soon as his lips met hers, but this time he felt her give in to his touch.

His hands moved with a fury over Amy's butt, and up her waist until his hands were on her chest. Amy turned her head.

"What?" Julius asked.

Amy pushed his chest gently, backing him away, and ran off toward the river. Always the damn river, Julius thought. When he caught up, she was sitting on a large rock in the middle of the water. Her shoes were on the bank, socks folded and tucked into their respective sneaker. Julius kicked off his own shoes, nearly putting one in the river, and walked toward her. The water was cold.

"What did you do this morning before I called?" Amy asked.

Julius lifted himself up onto the rock, and sat beside her.

"Nothing. Watched TV."

"Do you want to know what I did?"

"Not really," he said and laughed.

Amy's smile sank.

"Okay, what did you do?"

"My mom took me shopping in Anchorage."

Julius nodded. About a week after Julius arrived Amy stopped

wearing overalls and her brother's Seahawks sweatshirt, which, on her, hung only a few inches shy of looking like a nightgown. She started wearing tight t-shirts that accentuated her chest, and jean shorts that showed off the curve of her butt.

"I got new underwear."

"Really?" he said. "You wearing it?" He noticed for the first time that she wore a pink bra, the straps sticking out from under her white tank top.

Amy nodded. Julius put his hand on her thigh and fumbled his way to the button of her shorts, trying for a peek. She stopped his hand and shook a finger at him.

"You need to learn some manners, J-Bird."

Julius turned back to the river.

"Don't pout," Amy said.

"I'm not pouting." He slid off the rock, into the river. "I'm not a baby."

"Don't be mad."

"I'm not." Julius splashed through the river, found his socks and pulled them over his wet feet. He slipped on his shoes, and started walking north, toward the road and his dad's house.

"J-Bird," Amy shouted after him.

He heard her splash into the water. Keep cool, he thought. He quickened his pace, and by the time she caught up he had reached the road.

"Julius," she said, the first time she had ever used his actual name. "You don't have to get pissed. We were having fun."

"I'm not pissed," Julius said, stopping in the middle of the road for a moment, looking at his feet the whole time. "I'm going to the barn. I'm tired of the river." He crossed the road, listening to Amy's footsteps close behind.

The grass stood waist-high behind his father's barn. Julius sat, leaning his back against the fading red wall. Amy sat facing him, her legs just inches from his own. He picked at the long blades of grass, feeling her stare like it was being filtered down the barrel of his father's shotgun.

"Do you like me, Julius?" Amy's cheeks tightened, her mouth pursed.

Julius split blades of grass in half with his forefingers. "Of course I like you," he said. "I wouldn't hang out with you if I didn't."

"More than a friend?"

"I try to kiss you don't I?" His eyes were fixed on each new blade he dissected.

"Better than girls in Oregon?"

"I don't know. You're different."

"What are they like?"

"They aren't as goofy or giggly, I guess."

"Oh."

"I didn't mean that." Julius looked around at the barn behind him, the unruly field that surrounded it. His father hadn't mowed the grass in the year and a half since taking a job as a mechanic in Palmer, which left little time to tend to the farm that had been Julius' mom's pet project. "I like that you're goofy. Girls at home aren't as strong as you. Most of them don't have muscles."

"Good," she said, and scooted closer to him.

Julius dropped the grass from his hand, pulled a new batch from the earth. He wondered what Amy was thinking. She wasn't looking at him. Her attention had drifted to the right where brambles took up ten or so feet before the fence of his dad's acreage, and the river just beyond. Julius watched her face, her lips pulled tight and small on her face.

Without a word she turned and faced him, leaned across his lap to kiss him. She put her tongue in his mouth. His eyes widened, and shuffling his hands across her back he said, "That was out of nowhere," gasping for air as her lips left his.

Julius felt her eyes fixed on him as she perched on her knees. He sucked in a large breath and held it an extra moment in his lungs.

Julius kept his hands at his sides when Amy came back for another kiss, but hers held his face. She kept her eyes closed. He couldn't help thinking she looked pained. He thought about the boys back at school in Portland, what they would say. He shifted in the

dirt. Amy reached for the bottom of his shirt, he lifted his arms and she pulled it over his head, tossed it to the side.

"Where'd this come from?" she asked, running her fingers over the bruise that circled Julius' shoulder.

"My dad's shotgun." Julius said, and then, "Kicks like a mule," mimicking what his father had said the first time they shot together. His dad always held him by the shoulders when he shot, to absorb the buck. Julius was too small, his dad said.

"Does it hurt?" Amy poked gently at the black, blue, and yellow skin.

"No," Julius said, and recoiled at the touch.

Amy kissed the bruise, twice. She straightened up and peeled off her own shirt, her hands shaking, and revealed the pink bra and more muscles. Julius uprooted his hands from the ground at his sides. When he placed them over her breasts, her heart pounded against his fingertips. She took his hands away from her chest and held them tightly in her own.

Julius got to his knees and leaned over her. He ran his fingers up her leg and to the fly of her shorts.

"Not yet," she said, and placed her hand over his, clamping it to her waist.

He leaned down and they kissed again. Her lips no longer trembled and her eyes stayed open. She released his hand and he ran it up her side.

"We don't have to," Julius said. His hands shook as he touched her face and kissed her cheek.

"I want to," she said.

"You sure?" He leaned on his elbow at her side, his head level with her chest so he had to arch his neck to look at her face.

Amy nodded. "I'm just nervous."

"Me too," he said, and let out a half-gasp, half-laugh.

She took his hand and led it back to her shorts. He watched her chest heave as he fumbled with the button. Her underwear matched the bra, vibrant against the grass they had trampled. He had a hard time with his own shorts, too, rushing to shove them down his legs.

The compass knocked against his knee as his legs shivered. He kissed the curve of her chest above the edge of her bra.

“Is this okay?” he asked, breathless.

Amy nodded, her eyes half closed but still looking at Julius' face pressed to her skin.

“You're beautiful,” he said, first quietly, and a second time louder. Amy smiled. She leaned to the side and reached back, unhooking her bra, her breasts firm, nipples surrounded by goosebumps. He touched them, pressed his lips to them, as she ran her fingers through his crew cut. The grass prickled Julius' bare thighs. He shifted and pressed tightly against Amy.

“Are you scared?” she asked.

Julius nodded. “I feel tingly.”

A laugh sputtered from her mouth, and her body shook in his arms. His hands grasped her strongly. Julius moved back to her waist and he pulled her underwear down her legs, as if he might seize up, have a heart attack. Her pubic hair was wild, and stuck out like straw.

He planted his arms firmly on either side of her head, and held himself above her. She reached between his legs and touched him, her eyes unblinking.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes.” She exhaled and pulled her hand away, resting it on his back.

Julius struggled to push himself inside. It made him think about health class. All the boys in class erupted when they were shown diagrams of a female body. “I'd hit that,” one of them had said, while another chimed in with, “looks better in person.” When he slid in, Amy winced, and pulled him closer. He tried to meet her eyes, but couldn't.

“Can you go slower?” Amy asked.

Julius relaxed and focused on the dirt and grass beside her body. “That feel all right?” Julius asked.

Amy flexed her body upward into his chest. He felt her nod slowly against his neck, her hair brushing his chin.

Holding himself above her gnawed at his shoulder, like bone might break through skin. His arms wobbled. Amy let out a painful squeal, and Julius finally looked at her. Her face was pale, the skin tight around her high cheekbones and her lips drained of color, almost matching the rest of her skin. He pulled back. She turned her head and he couldn't see if her eyes were open.

He sat back in the grass, leaned down and put his head on her stomach. Amy reached down and touched herself, when she pulled her fingers back they were tinged with red. She shivered and wiped them in her pubic hair. Julius couldn't tear his eyes away. For a moment he was staring at Cash again, all blood-matted fur and death. He tried to blink the vision away.

He hadn't meant to shoot the dog. He was just trying to take target practice like he and his father had done back when his parents were still making a go of it, their marriage and the farm. He aimed for a tree trunk, but his father had been right when he'd said Julius wasn't strong enough to control the shotgun. The recoil knocked him on his back.

Cash was off his leash and running east of the barn when the gun fired, now he lay three feet from the tree, a hole in his side, fur torn by the spread of buckshot. Julius dropped the shotgun, fell to his knees, and grasped a handful of Cash's blood-streaked fur.

He couldn't let his dad know what he'd done. He grabbed Cash by the hind legs, pulled him to the river, and dumped him in. Then Julius ran back and returned the shotgun to his dad's gun case, worried that even though his his dad worked until six, he might somehow show up, catch him red-handed.

"My father's going to kill me," Julius said.

"No one has to know." Amy placed her hand on his chest and Julius watched her hand rise and fall with his breathing.

"He'll send me back to Oregon."

"I'm not going to tell anyone, J-Bird."

The grass tickled his skin, and Julius shifted. He clasped Amy's hand between his, lifted it to his mouth and kissed her fingers.

"It was an accident."

“It will be okay,” she said.

Amy covered her face with her hands. Julius moved up, scratching his thighs against the dirt, took her in his arms, and held her head against his chest. He stared past Amy, past the side of the barn, past the road, and the riverbank on the other side where Cash lay.

