With Smiles as Wide as Summer, Ray Bradbury

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“Hey … hey … wait for me!”

The call, the echo. The call, the echo, fading.

With apple-thudding bare feet, the boys of summer ran away.

William Smith kept running. Not because he could catch anyone but because he could not admit his feet were slower than his wish, his legs shorter than his goal.

Yelling, he plunged down the ravine at the heart of Green Town, seeking friendships hid in empty tree houses blowing their burlap-bag door curtains in the wind.

Searching caves dug in raw earth, he found only burnt marshmallow fires. Wading the creek, even crayfish saw his shadow, smelled his need, and scuttled back in milk-sand explosions.

“All right, you guys! Someday I’ll be older than you! Then, watch out!”

“… Watch out …” said the bottomless tunnel under Elm Street.

Will slumped. Every summer—much running, no catching. Nowhere in all the town was there a boy who threw a shadow just his size. He was six. Half the people he knew were three, which was so far down you couldn’t see it.

The other half were nine, which was so far up, snow fell there all the year. Running after nines he had to worry about escaping the threes. It was a sad game at both ends. Now, seated on a rock, he wept.

“Who wants them? Not me, no sir! Not me!”

But then, a long way off in the noon heat, he heard a great commotion of games and frolics. Slowly, curiously, he stood up. Moving along the creek bank in shadow, he climbed a small hill, crawled under some bushes, and peered down.

There, in a small meadow at the center of the ravine, were nine summer boys, playing.

Circling, they knocked the echoes with their voices, plunged, rolled over, spun, jigged, shook themselves, raced off, hurtled back, leapt high, mad with summer light and heat, unable to stop just being alive.

They did not see William, so he had time to recall where he had seen each before. This one he remembered from a house on Elm, that one from a shoe shop on Maple, a third had last been seen leaning against a mailbox near the Elite Theater. Nameless, all nine of them, gloriously frisky, nutty with their games.

And, miracle of miracles, they were all his age!

“Hey!” cried Will.

The frolic ceased. The boys unscrambled. All gazed, some blinked at him. Some looked to set the panic off. Panting, they waited for Will to speak.

“May—” he asked quietly, “—may I play?”

They peered at him with their shining honey-warm molasses-brown eyes. Their smiles, the white smiles pinned to their faces, were wide as all of summer.

Will threw a stick far over the ravine.

“There!”

The boys, answering with their own sound, bolted off. Their furious romp kicked up vast sunlit clouds of dust.

One trotted back. The stick was in his smiling mouth. He laid it at Will’s feet with a bow.

“Thank you,” said Will.

The other boys ran, danced, waiting for a throw. Looking, Will thought, cats are girls, I always knew that. But dogs, just look! All summer ahead, us here together, and dogs are nothing but—boys!

The boys barked. The boys smiled.

“You’re my friends, right? We’ll meet every day, right?”

They wagged their tails. They whined.

“Do like I say, and—bones and biscuits!”

The boys shivered.

“Biscuits and bones!”

He hurled the stick ten million miles out. The summer boys ran and he thought, No matter if they have pups, dogs are boys, no other animal in the whole world so much like me, Dad, Gramps.

And suddenly he ran yipping, barking, fell on their dance-ground, pummeled their dusty earth, leapt their wet tree stumps. Then in a great yelling swoop they rocked off, all ten, toward wilderness country.

Under a wooden rail trestle, they froze.

A train like steel God in his wrath flashed over, along, above, away, unraveling, swift-shimmering, gone. His voice knocked forth a sweet dust in their bones.

They stood up on the empty tracks where a thousand tarbabies had melted to pools at noon. Their eyes cried with light. His summer friends showed their pink, loosely tied cravat tongues to each other.

Over them, a vast power-line tower hurled its flaming blue wires north and south in dazzles of solid electric insect-hum.

Climbing half up the tower, Will gasped.

The boys were gone!

Will shouted Hey! Boys retorted Bark!

They had trotted over to lave themselves in vast pools of butterfly shadow beneath a tree that had summoned them with the sound of the wind in its drowsy leaves. Legs out in all directions, stomachs pressed to earth, awash in green shade, they fired another cap-pistol roll of barks from their automatic throats.

“Charge!” Will slid down and off.

The boys unbathed themselves from shadow, tossed amber water-beads to telegraph pole with crisp salute of leg, then in a running march, saluting all along the way, they headed for the real lake.

There the boys dog-paddled out, the boys dog-paddled in through the great silence. A mystery lay on the shore in foam whispers and sky color which they waded through to lie on the fried sand, baking.

And lying there, Will guessed this was the best summer of his life. One like this might never happen again. For these summer-happy friends, yes, next summer and the one after that they would lie like this in water as cool or sun as hot.

But next year Will, being older, might have new real friends to keep him home, fence him, draw him away from this fine sprawling, aimless time of no clocks, no beginning, no end, on these lonely sands with his unschooled and silently accepting friends.

These boys, eternal children, would run forever on the rim of the world, as long as the world turned round. He did not see himself running with them anywhere beyond tomorrow.

But then at last, while his friends saluted trees, William rose and imitated his team with style and flourish. His name was writ in amber water on the sand.

“I feel sorry for girls.” He looped the two l’s, made low hills of the m, and dotted the two i’s in his name.

The summer boys barked and scratched idle scatters of sand over the wet signature. Then proud as a gang of calligraphers, all ran into town, and with the sun tilted over his house, at long last he went up the porch steps and looked back at his independent volunteers, these tramp bum excursionists, who stood in a rough cluster on the lawn.

“This is my place, see? Tomorrow, more of the same!”

Will, in the door, felt the easy weight of the tennis shoes in one hand, warm-relaxed, and life slung in his other hand, no weight at all to palm, to bone, to whorl of thumb and fingers. He knew he smelled of dog. But then, they smelled of boy.

“Go on! S’long!”

An imaginary rabbit pelted by. In wild pretense, the team, a riot, a tumult, scurried off.

“Tomorrow!” cried Will.

And the day after and the day after that.

He watched their smiles, as wide as summer, shadow away under the trees.

Then, bearing his own smile as easily as the shoes in one hand, and life in the other, he took his happiness back through and into the cool dark pantry, where, picking and choosing, he gave it gifts.

The end