

1961

THEN JUNE DIED

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There is seldom a more significant emotional event than the death of a young boy's best friend.

No one has ever been as close to me as June was.

June and I grew up in a small West Virginia town in the late 1950's.

As a child of 10, my world revolved around my friendship with June. Oh, there was family and there were friends; but, then, there was June.

Wherever I went, June always wanted to tag along. After I finished my chores and she was finished with her morning rituals, we'd disappear into the hills surrounding this simple, former coal mining town. The green, rolling hills covered with trees and rocks and gorges made for a wonderland of adventure.

I fancied myself the leader. June was the follower. Together, we were a team to be reckoned with.

We'd investigate the old mines and wander aimlessly along the creeks and the river. The river divided Fort Gay, West Virginia, from Louisa, Kentucky to the southwest — but nothing could separate June and me.

She listened to my dreams. She understood my aspirations. She comforted my frustrations. Sitting under an old shade tree by a babbling brook, time passed as we shared the hours of our youth. Life, without June, was unthinkable.

In the evenings, we'd sit on my family's porch in the two-person swing.

While Daddy read his Bible, we'd sit side-by-side and watch the coal trains go by. Sometimes I'd count them, but June never did.

Both of us were fascinated by those endless coal trains.

Then, one day — like every coal train — our companionship ended.

As a result of a divorce, I was sent to family in Miami, Florida.

June stayed behind. Her coming to Miami with me was not an option.

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I don't have any idea how I got from West Virginia to Miami.

The lies that were told which convinced me to move to Miami were quickly revealed and I cried myself to sleep many nights — wishing I had June to talk with.

One day shortly thereafter, in Fort Gay, a coal train came by.

June, for reasons never quite clear, stood too close to the tracks.

Miscalculating the suction of the revolving wheels, she was drawn helplessly underneath those wheels.

When one is hit by a train, there isn't much doubt about the result. However, my Daddy ran to her. Trying his best, he could do little more than hold her limp body and pray.

The funeral was held in the quiet of the shade tree that June and I loved so much.

Since I was still away, my Daddy was the only one in attendance.

He said a prayer and sang "Rock of Ages."

Then he covered the grave.

I believe that even today, the small stone he laid upon that spot still marks the grave of this wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime friend. But she is not there; she is in my heart, in my memories, and in my most pleasant dreams.

Even remembering her name brings tears to my eyes. For no one has ever been as close to me as June was.

When you're a kid, your first puppy will always be your bestest friend.