



A Month of Sundays

Meryl McQueen

Published: 2004

Categorie(s):

Tag(s): "young adult" YA adolescent teenager suicide bulimia
"commercial fiction" "high school" friendship family

I guess it must have started that summer at camp. Some of us talk about it now, three weeks before graduation, as we look back at all the kids who've come and gone with us since we started kindergarten with Mrs. Abrams at Rosehill Elementary. We've started to talk more slowly about the things that really matter, and skip right over the surface stuff. Like on Tuesday in math, Emma wrote me a note about her dad back after her parents' separation—most times math class is reserved for mooching about the finest guy in school, Matthew Burke. But that's just the way it goes—the closer to graduation, the less airtime Matt gets.

So yeah, we talk about Lauren, and we've been trying to trace it all the way back to the beginning.

Bagels. It was definitely bagels. Well, okay, half a bagel. No wait, that's the middle bit. Back further.

Right. Twenty-oh-two, June. Summer camp, and not your typical mosquitoes/canoes/campfire/ marshmallows/we're-all-seven-years-old summer camp. No way. This was 'smart kids camp', on campus. Y'know Hailey College, the one an hour away that's always got all those art shows touring from Boston? Well a bunch of us soon-to-be-sophomores were enrolled in a three-week philosophy class there—residential, living in dorms, eating in the cafeteria, doing our own laundry, parties all night long. And studying with one of the best college professors around. Classical philosophy and life as college students for a whole chunk of the summer. Not everyone's idea of a good time, but we were stoked.

So anyway, me and Emma and Abby and Lauren all met up at my house early that morning. It wasn't like we'd forgotten to pack anything, since we'd been planning for weeks, but just in case. As usual, Lauren herded us along.

'Swimsuits?'

'Check.'

'Cover-ups?'

'Check.'

'Sheets and towels?'

'Check.'

'Laptops?'

'Check.'

'Shoes?'

'Check.'

'Other shoes?'

'Check.'

'Other sh..?'

'Alright already!'

Like I said, not everyone's idea of summer bliss, but hey. The Fear-some Foursome knew fun when it hit us between the eyes. And it was gonna be fun.

Oh, the nickname? Well in fourth grade Frankie Jacobs saw us hanging around together at recess and carpoled all his brain cells to come up with an acronym of our names. Lauren, Abby, Megan and Emma. L.A.M.E. As in, he was then, is now. He ran around the field screaming it every day for a week until we fought back. Four ten year-old girls, matching braids and denim jackets, arm in arm. I can't even remember which one of us shouted it first—only that after five minutes, we had a new nickname, a theme song, and a cool-as dance to go along with it. Frankie never had a chance. He's still a moron, only now he's totally cute. But he's also Abby's ex, from the Spring Fling in 8th grade, so we don't talk about him much anymore.

Emma's mom dropped us at the school with all our stuff, and we shuffled onto the bus with a handful of other labelled brain trusts.

Hailey College has the best views for miles, and I knew right away it was perfect. The hill's not steep, but all the cut graystone buildings cluster at the top and whisper to each other across diamond courtyards. The library has two domed turrets with study carrels like window seats all along the inside edge, and the soccer and lacrosse fields ring the campus. Showing up there in that rusty school bus was like Cinderella in her pumpkin carriage. We'd arrived. Forget boring high school with its extension classes and its special projects, its Model U.N. and its chemistry competitions.

This was wake-up brain time, big time. College.

One of the R.A.s met us as we climbed off the bus. 'Welcome to Hailey College's summer camp everyone. I'm Jack, one of your residential advisers while you're here. We've got a few forms to fill in up at the Union, then we'll get you settled into your rooms.'

Jack was barely halfway through his intro when Emma interrupted with the questions. She'd sidled up to the unsuspecting R.A. and fidgeted for his attention until he stopped talking.

'Hi, I'm Emma. So, do you go here? What are you studying? Does your family live around here? Where are the cool places to hang out on campus?'

I don't know how she does it. The rest of us are standing there like fish drowning on air and she's off flirting with the first college guy she meets. Emma's always gotten away with it though. She's tall, with legs that condense raindrops from the sky and hair the color of the final burst of fall. She told me once that when she was little she was always the center of attention, so she figured she might as well go with it. Jack, with his clipboard, floppy hat hair and thick black-sole sneakers, mumbled something about 'junior, physics, time to go,' and led us away. Not a subtle creature, that Jack. He whipped his head around to stare at Emma about fifty times in the first ten minutes.

Lauren started up right away. 'Geez Em, flirt much? That poor defenseless college boy is helpless before our mistress' charms! He's probably so dazzled by your beauty that he'll be dragging us around in circles for hours!'

Abby jumped in. ‘Like you should talk Laur—whose idea was sneaking out for donuts at 4 o’clock in the morning just so you could accidentally run into ‘Bill the baker boy’ when he came off shift? At least Em’s prospect can probably read!’

To complete the circle, my turn. ‘C’mon people—focus! Granted, college boys over the decidedly non-muffin material who came with us from high school on the bus? No contest. But can we just be here five minutes with the books and smell of higher learning?’

It was always like this. No harm, no foul, no fights.

The rooms were smaller and more puke-green than we expected. Carpets one shade of the stuff, beady walls a slightly lighter color. But the windows were huge, and light streamed in like liquid ocean, and the world outside those rooms just sat around twiddling its thumbs waiting for us.

Emma and I paired off to the double on the left, Lauren and Abby to the right. As we unpacked we shouted discoveries back and forth.

‘Megan, I call top bunk! Did you see the storage lockers under the beds?’

‘Fine, you can have top bunk but I get this side closet—I think it might have half an inch over yours.’

And next door continued conversation.

‘Abby, did you bring your hotpot? Where’s the curling iron? Is that my phone or yours? D’you think I can hit that prof down there with a water balloon?’

‘Hey look, a built-in CD rack—and here’s the T1 line—do you think we can set up wireless in here? I stashed my hub.’

Girl talk.

We had some time to kill after we unpacked, so we wandered around the dorm collecting detail. Laundry room, TV/DVD lounge, kitchens,

bathrooms, pool table. Then we met up with the rest of the summer camp class in the common room. This time Jack was flanked by reinforcements: the other R.A.s, Debbie and Chris.

There were about 80 kids lazing around on the floor and spread over the turquoise 70s furniture dotted around the room. We found a corner near the door and I looked around. Maybe 20 were from our school, coiled in little groups—the others were just like us, only different. Guess high school really is the same all over. I ticked off the geek guys, the coed cools, the loners and the artists. And then, Alice through the looking glass, I found another quad of girls. Even across a that crowded space I could pick the faces they turned most often to the shallow world: brash beauty, quiet techie, writer, and athlete who could also be the clown. Emma, Abby, me, and Lauren. Creepy, to be so predictable at first glance. And comforting, to be with the three people who knew me better than my first impression.

Debbie gave us the run down on the rules. Yaddy yaddy yah, smoking, drinking, lights out, stay on campus, safety after dark. She was boring as Britney but everyone perked up when she listed off the social events. And because we actually wanted to learn something, no one squirmed at the mention of school.

We split into two groups for the tour. Up close, the buildings were more gravel gray than silver, the ivy cut back and dying along the walls, the grass worn through to ground. But all the essential elements of college life fell into place: the library and dining hall and gym.

Lunch was buffet style in the cafeteria, and we were starving. We did the usual—pile up whatever you want, then prepare to share. I grabbed a chunk of Lauren's fries, who ricocheted over to steal Abby's lime green Jello. Abby bounced over to Emma's fruit salad, and Emma swiped my pie.

We abandoned each other briefly in the afternoon. I spent four hours in the library, breathing in mold spores and wandering the stacks. Abby beelined to the computer lab, Emma introduced herself to everyone in the dorm, and Lauren headed to the swimming pool.

We were a fortress, the four of us. Class came and went, lights out was the best excuse to stay up all night talking, and the field trips and dances rounded out our not-so-subtle social life on campus. There might have been 76 other trombones in that camp band, but we could only hear each other. Not that we snarled like pit bulls at the other kids—just that we had each other. No vacancies at FF headquarters.

Then the bagel blow-up. Last breakfast before the bus picked us up—I'd said goodbye to my favorite study spot, between 19th Century British Playrights and Early American Poets on the 5th floor of the west library tower. Abby had just sent her last e-mail from the lab, and Emma was giving fake phone numbers to the usual puppy dog drool brigade that had followed her around from day one. Lauren showed up, hair still sopping from the pool and a grin a mile wide. She'd lined all the drawers in her room with toothpaste for the unsuspecting occupants who'd arrive in the fall.

Pancakes, eggs, waffles, bacon, sausage, melon, OJ, chocolate milk. Breakfast of champions, and our last meal of freedom.

'Emma, pass the milk. Hey Megan, where'd you get that kiwifruit?' Abby tried to look bored while she stole a handful of granola from my tray.

Only Lauren ignored the negotiations, plowing through two full plates without a breath and stretching for another. While she got up to go to the bathroom, I reached over to grab a buttered sesame bagel—half a buttered sesame bagel—from her plate. It was balanced like an acrobat on top of a pile bacon and scrambled eggs, and I'd deserted my soggy pancakes to their slow death by syrup. I'd crunched halfway through the much better bagel when Lauren showed up and freaked.

'Whaddya doing? That's my bagel, I was gonna eat that!'

She tore it out of my hand and popped the whole thing in her mouth. I was still trying to recover from that freeze frame shock when Emma plowed in.

'Uh, Lauren? Your comic timing must be off or something girl, cuz that just wasn't that funny. Do you need a Midol moment?'

For a second, Lauren looked like she might blow again.. Then she dropped back into herself and laughed it off. 'Whoa, sorry guys! Guess this whole 'returning to the fold' thing is getting me down. Just trying too hard. My bad.'

And then there we were again, vying for stage space and ribbing Emma about Scott-the-hot sophomore from our key state rivals, Brentwood High.

So that was it. Two minutes, tops. And because later we looked for signs, now we can find them.

I don't remember much about the rest of the summer. After stuffing my head full of ideas and possibility at Hailey, everything else faded like tie-dye tees that have been washed a thousand times. I guess there was my job at Delroy's pharmacy, sneaking cigarette breaks in the back with Moira, the cashier with platinum hair and an ancient sagging boob job. Abby was tutoring junior high kids in computers, and Emma and Lauren dove full-on into their babysitting biz.

September screamed around the corner and we were back at Rosehill High. Same time a year earlier we'd been fumbling around with locker combos and getting lost in the halls. As sophomores though, we knew the ropes. And with all kinds of schedule scuffling, we'd managed another year of same-time lunch periods. This was a major achievement, considering that only two of us had last names close enough for the same homeroom and there were three separate honors tracks in our school. Without that mid-day meetup it would have been adios, schooltime hangout and hello, extracurricular friendship. But anyway, no worries, it was sorted.

One afternoon in mid-November, I was running late to meet up with everyone. Unless it was 10 below or snowing, we always grabbed our lunch and hung out on the bleachers by the football field. I'd gotten stuck talking to Mr. Douglas, my chem teacher, about a make-up test. That guy knows his stuff but he's scarily addicted to the science. And even with an audience of one, he scuttles along forever about titration and molecular compounds. Blah, blah, blah.

'Hola all, sorry I'm late. Where's Lauren?'

‘No clue,’ said Emma. ‘We sat for the McCauliffes last night and she was in homeroom but I haven’t seen her since.’

Abby was a bit more helpful. ‘She said she needed to workout today—something about her stamina for swim practice. I saw her running with the track team on my way over.’

Emma was indignant. ‘Boring! Okay, we all know Laur’s the queen of the quarter-mile. But this is hang time! What’s that girl thinking?’

I wasn’t fussed. ‘Let it go, Em. It’s just a one time thing—she’ll be back to gritty tuna salad sandwiches and unidentified meat product casserole with us tomorrow. Probably just showing off for one of the guys on the track team, eh?’

My words softened Emma and she laughed. ‘So that’s supposed to make me feel better? She’s dumped her best buds for a boy? Eugh!’

Lauren wasn’t at lunch the next day, or the day after that. I finally cornered her between classes on Friday morning.

‘Hey Laur, what’s the sitch? We never see you anymore.’

‘Look Megan, everything’s fine. I’m fine. I just need to focus right now—I need to be in great shape for spring. Between work and school, lunch is the only time I can get that workout in. I miss you guys too, but it won’t be forever. Just until I make the cut—just until it’s over. April at the latest.’

I left it at that. I didn’t see the pattern, and I left it at that

Semester exams piled on top of us, and then winter break. Even though Abby was Jewish, and my family preferred New Year’s to the traditional December 25th gift-giving, the four of us had had a Christmas tradition since junior high. Nothing over \$10, often gag gifts, but we did have one firm rule. Every gift had to have a story attached to it. So our gifts were usually goofy and our stories raunchy. Rainbow wigs and vamp eye shadow and kitchen utensils. But that year Lauren broke ranks.

We were all sitting on the floor in my living room, surrounded by an avalanche of discarded paper. Lauren went last, and she pulled three odd sized packages from her backpack.

‘Megan, this is for you. I know you’ve loved it since our ski trip to Killington in the 5th grade and it’s about time I let you have it.’

Before I peeled away the silver wrap I knew what it was. A lavender snow globe, with the letters of ‘Killington’ spelled out across the belly of an abominable snowman. The water level had dropped a little over the years, but the dandruff of white stuff still swirled as I shook the tiny world.

‘No way Lauren! You love this thing! You wouldn’t even let me touch it when you bought it, though I begged all the way home on the bus.’

But Lauren had handed the next gift to Abby, who spilled it out onto the rug. The marine green pashmina shawl flowed over Abby’s hands and onto the floor. More protests from the recipient.

‘Laur, it’s gorgeous, but wasn’t this a present from your dad when he went to that conference in India?’

Lauren wasn’t moved. ‘Don’t be ridiculous Abby. That old thing? It matches your eyes. Merry Christmas.’

Emma’s gift was just as unexpected. The amethyst earrings glowed in a nest of gold crêpe paper, and she squealed before putting up the now-familiar rejection. .

‘Lauren, these..these are an heirloom. From your grandmother. There’s no way I...’

‘Whatever. Just don’t wear them in front of my mother, and we’ll be both be fine. I want you to have them. Really.’

What could we say to all that, other than thanks? I know I felt less than for my feeble attempts at cheap humor in my own role as Santa, but Lauren laughed it all away. So there we sat, glowing in the safety of a

friends forever holiday celebration. Then it was time for brownies, and movies, and boys.

A few days after New Year's I went to dinner at Lauren's house. We sat in the formal dining room, linen napkins and good china. The whole family's washed out ribbons and dull trophies loomed over the end of the mahogany table. As usual, there were only three of us. Lauren's older brother Ben was a final year med student at Harvard, and her sister Bec was a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in D.C. Her dad was a quantum physicist who was spending the winter in Copenhagen on a research grant. While Lauren excused herself, her mom fired more questions about my plans.

'So Megan, where are you thinking of applying to college? Oh, you haven't really started thinking about that? Lauren and I have been talking about accelerated admission to Harvard—of course she'll have to pull up her science scores, and there's the National Honor Society to think about, and if she wants to swim in county trials next season she'll have to pick up on the pre-school practice.'

As Lauren reappeared, I heard all about Ben's fiancée, who was double medicine and law and was tri-state tennis champion as an undergrad. Ben had scored a job with a top oncology research professor at Harvard, so he wouldn't be back to visit much. And Bec was off to work with a top council of Middle East diplomats for six months as the resident expert on the latest crisis there.

Those dinners were always exhausting. My brain felt like a purse turned inside out and upside down while I hunted for my lipstick. Drained and a little bit lost. Later, hanging out in her room, I asked Lauren about the constant topic of who's-who in her house.

'Oh, no biggie. It's fine, I mean Ben and Bec are serious superstars, y'know? And my mom's totally right—I really do need to study harder to get some of the chemistry pounded into my brain, and I have been majorly slack this year in the pool, not to mention I've gained about 10 pounds. I'm just not as much of a natural as my sibs. So I gotta work that little bit harder.'

Case closed. Second semester threw itself into gear, and the dark days of January covered Rosehill in icy blizzards. I never had dinner with Lauren and her mom again.

The funeral was on a Tuesday in February. It was an impossible day, the only sunshine since October and so warm that halfway through the service I wanted to kick my boots off and go running through the deceptive slush. Or maybe I just wanted to run. I didn't sleep much the night before, and when the sun dumped its cheerful self across my face I felt all the fluorescent lights in the world scraping the backs of my eyeballs.

The three of us—the ones she left behind—didn't even sit together in the church. I went with my mom, who came upstairs that morning and drew my favorite moss blue cable sweater over my head because she found me just sitting half-dressed on my bed. Emma's whole family was there—her older brother Jeff, twin sisters Caitlin and Michelle, her mom and dad. They were Lutheran too, so maybe this was like another family church gathering for them. Abby sat in the back by herself, wrapped up in a two-tone peppermint and khaki green scarf that she and Lauren had knitted when they were eleven.

That scarf made me laugh, and my mom gave me this nasty look full of angry eyebrows. I gulped down my giggle, which only made me want to fall on the floor in hysteria. I tried to fight it, I really did. But the more I gurgled thinking about that scarf, the more my shoulders rocked with stifled explosions of absurdity.

Lauren and Abby had done the impossible with that scarf, beginning on opposite ends and then trading one needle each in the middle. At one of our sleepovers, they'd literally knitted themselves together, and now all our lives had come unravelled. That last thought stopped me laughing.

The service was hopeless—all sermons and heaven and 'she's better off now' garbage. No, she'd be better off HERE. With us. The Fearsome Foursome. Her friends. At least my mom didn't try the 'in time, this too will pass' line, and she let me sit in the car for a half hour while the choir sang idiotic hymns about redemption and light.

The flowers were Pepto pink and chalk white, and I wondered if anyone else in the room knew that Lauren loved sunflowers. I secretly

hoped that someone had thrown in a Lauren moment and stuck a whoopie cushion on the pastor's chair. But the only people who'd even think of it were the sad dregs of the Fearsome Foursome, and all we knew how to do was to think it. Lauren had always jumped into the joke fray without a thought. And now we had no one to follow.

So no luck on the comic relief. The pastor sat down in solemn silence, and then another 45 minutes of waiting for permission to stamp our feet in the frozen sunshine before ending up at Lauren's house for the reception.

Everyone kept saying it happened so fast. As I was standing in the kitchen, trying to breathe through another eternal Emma hug and wishing she would never let go, I even overheard one of Lauren's dim, croaky relatives mutter, 'one minute they're here, the next they're gone.' And I wanted to shriek like a banshee because that's not how it was at all.

It was slow—impossibly slow, like a frog waiting for death as you gently gently turn up the heat on lukewarm water. Only we didn't realize it, and it was us waiting. Our waiting was a month of Sundays, lazy, cozy, slow. Our waiting was a month of Sundays, somehow knowing that a tough week lay ahead.

Waiting for the day a week before when Lauren was out sick. The guidance counselor called me and Emma and Abby into his office, and we thought it was for some special project. Well, it got us out of gym so we were glad.

We laughed all the way down to A block, dangling our hall passes like medals at any inquiring eyes. Only we got to Mr. Kresky's office and our parents were already there, mine and Emma's and even Abby's. Something was horribly wrong. My mom was wearing sweatpants and her 'I'm with stupid' t-shirt that my dad had given her for Christmas, her hair up in a raggedy ponytail. My dad's tie was crumpled at the neck. I didn't register the others, only stood there staring at my mom in her for-family-eyes-only clothes and wondering what time my dad's next client would show up to find him gone for the day.

'Girls, we have some bad news. There has been an accident. Lauren Cartwright...'

I didn't hear the rest. Months later, when we compared notes, Abby and Emma and I agreed that all was silence after Lauren's name. There must have been some explanation, some cold comfort, some insipid narrative of how and when and where. I didn't hear it, because the scream inside my head was left unanswered: why?

The three of us forgot to cry, standing there in Mr. Kresky's sky blue office at 2 o'clock on an icy winter afternoon. Our parents did that for us, mothers all snuffling and fathers playing gender games of stiff-held upper lip.

Sitting at home that night, I made my mom go over the whole thing again. Lauren had written the note, and queued up the CD player. I didn't even know she owned a Pink Floyd album. In the letter she talked about 'crying herself to sleep every night for a year.' The bulimia had been going on a lot longer than that.

After swimming practice the night before, she took her dad's new SUV and she drove it at 90 miles an hour into the concrete barrier dividing the interstate. No skid marks, so she didn't even brake on last approach. That's our Lauren, headfirst, headstrong, clear.

We were there, but not that night, not when it counted. Every day we were there, and were blind. And when my eyes finally swam, while I lay alone in bed in shared darkness, all I could see was four girls on a field, arm in arm, with a song, and a dance, and a future.

From the same author on Feedbooks

Fall Daze (2004)

New school, new town, new life: sixteen-year-old Nicole is about to find out the hard way that home can be a four-letter word.

Swimming Lessons (2005)

A parent's worst nightmare: the loss of a child. A parent's only hope: a child's joy. What happens when all you have to give is not enough? A story about love, dreams, family, unexpected connections, and learning to swim.

Boarding Pass (2005)

Where do you go, when you've been everywhere? Carl is about to find out. A short story about love, travel, familiar faces, and airport food.

Homesick (2005)

Marcus has been on the run for decades from the violence that scarred him as a child in South Africa. Now his past has caught up to him. It happens now, the sirens and the silence. It happens now, the sirens and the silence and the thunder. Later, then and always, rain.

Vertigo (2006)

Traveling in Paris with her husband and kids, Melissa Foreman meets an old flame. What happens next is anyone's guess.

Dead Fairies (2007)

It's not magic. It's just life. A dark fairytale about a village's strangest daughter, the man in the woods, and a dying boy. Fairies only die if they stop dancing, and they can't dance if they can't fly.

Do Butterflies Bleed? (2007)

A short short about grandfathers, grandsons, and the beauty of a dignified death. Written in the form of a one-scene play.

Courting Disaster (2008)

Abrams Porter. Plumber. Smart, sexy, single. Every woman's best friend. And falling hard for Nina, the long-legged vision he met at

a hot dog stand. A short, sharp story about love, pickup trucks, relish, Twizzlers, and the joys and perils of too many people in one bed.



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind