



COTTONWOOD
MEMORIES

L.O. CHASE

Free Short Fiction

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Cottonwood Memories
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First edition
December, 2013

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FOREWORD

This short story is based on a photo prompt of a young man wearing nothing but superhero underwear and a pair of glasses, holding a ragged old teddy bear. I wondered, what is he thinking? Is he remembering his childhood? Is he feeling nostalgic? Melancholy?

I was sitting in my car, parked in a gravel lot surrounded by cottonwood trees. It was June, and cottonseed was drifting to the ground, like snow. Just then I heard Avery's voice shout in excitement, and *Cottonwood Memories* began.

For T.

*Thank you for the picpiration
that sparked this little tale.*



“LOOK, BRANDON! It’s snowing!”

Brandon dragged his gaze from the ragged stuffed bear in his hands to the window, expecting to see Avery there; both hands and cute button nose pressed up against the glass. But the smile that had begun teasing at the edges of his mouth fell. The room was empty; Avery’s voice no more than an echo from the depths of childhood memories.

Brandon stared out the window. Fluffy white cottonseed drifted by on a lazy breeze, glistening as it danced between rays of spring sunshine, before collecting in the corners of the window ledge.

Avery loved June, when the cottonwood trees shed so thick it looked like snow. He’d been nine when they met, Brandon a year his senior. Avery’s family had moved into the house three doors down on the other side of the street over the winter, and the two had bonded over an impromptu snowball fight when they were supposed to be shoveling their walks. That spring was the first year they’d begun a private tradition all their own. It was Avery’s idea.

“From this day forward, I hereby declare June seventh Avery and Brandon’s Spring Christmas Day,” he’d proclaimed. Chest puffed out, arms raised, and an excited gleam in his bright blue eyes. The next day he’d given Brandon the first of too few gifts—a stuffed bear. Together they’d named him

Mr. B Boy, but Brandon couldn't remember how they'd come up with that now. Only that it somehow fit.

"It was yesterday, wasn't it, Aves?" Brandon's voice echoed in the old attic where they'd so often hung out, where they could be themselves, daydreaming about their future selves and how they'd always be together. "You and me sitting right here in this very room."

Like it was yesterday.

He hadn't known it at the time, but looking back now he knew. That day, with the cottonseed falling like snow and Avery's eyes as wide as saucers, a huge goofy smile on his face, that was the day he'd fallen in love with his best friend. For the next six years they were inseparable. That struggling smile finally succeeded in taking over Brandon's face. Those years had been some of the best of his life.

"Hey."

Brandon turned toward the soft baritone, and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. They were forever sliding down but contacts didn't work for him. Besides, Zach loved the scholarly look, so who was he to argue?

"Hey." Brandon's voice cracked a little.

Zach leaned against the doorframe, rather than attempting to navigate the disaster Brandon had made of the floor, by pulling things out of boxes and drawers. "You doing okay?"

Brandon's smile faltered. He quickly turned to look out the window when he felt his eyes begin to sting. "It's snowing."

Silence stretched between them for a moment. Zach being Zach gave him the minute he needed to collect himself, which was one of the many things Brandon loved about him. He had an uncanny read on Brandon's emotions, and instinctively seemed to know what he needed.

“Huh. I never really noticed how the cotton could look like snow. We didn’t have trees like that where I grew up.”

Brandon turned his attention back to the ratty stuffed bear in his lap. It smelled a little musty from being boxed for over a decade, and stuffing was leaking from a small tear in one paw, but its eyes still shone as bright as the day he’d unwrapped it. He slid a fingertip carefully over its nose then smoothed the fur on an ear. “He gave me this for our first Spring Christmas.”

Zach made his way through the room and kneeled before Brandon. He placed one hand on Brandon’s bare knee and ran the other over Mr. B Boy’s head. Zach looked up and grinned. “Did he give you that underwear too?”

Brandon frowned and then laughed. He’d forgotten he’d put them on. It was hot and stuffy in the attic, so he’d pulled his shirt off while digging through his past. His collection of superhero underwear had been carefully stored away, but when he found them he’d stripped off the rest of his clothes and put on a pair. These particular ones were similar to those he’d been wearing the first time he and Avery explored their new and growing attraction to one another. Avery had teased him, of course. Relentlessly. And then for their second Spring Christmas he’d given Brandon a pair of Superman and Batman underwear. After that it had become a tradition.

“Not the original pair, no. I’d never get those on now. But these and all the rest he got for me.”

“I’ve never seen you wear underwear like that before. They’re kind of sexy.” The glint in Zach’s eye made Brandon smile, and he found himself appreciating Zach even more. “We might have to make some changes to your wardrobe.”

“They have a hole in the ass.”

Zach raised an eyebrow, and sunlight highlighted the amber-marbled brown irises in his widened eyes. God, he had the most stunning, inviting eyes of any man Brandon had ever met.

Brandon laughed and shook his head. “Mind out of the gutter, babe. I think moths got to them.”

Zach raised both eyebrows then and scrunched his nose up. “And you put them on? Hon. Eew.”

Brandon dropped his gaze back to Mr. B Boy, the smile slipping from his face and his vision blurring at the edges once again. Granted he hadn’t been back home in years, had refused to see Avery when he had, but he didn’t want there to be any holes in his memory. He wanted to remember everything, every day, every word and touch and dream. They had so many back then. They were going to take on the world and make it the best place possible for everyone everywhere. Brandon knew he was doing his part at the research center where he worked. Every one told him what he did was important, and he knew it was, but sometimes it just didn’t seem like it would ever be enough.

“Let’s go see Avery. Today.” Zach’s soft voice jerked him from his thoughts and he shook his head. He knew it was a petulant thing to do, but he couldn’t help himself. He’d been so angry for so long. Staying away was better. Meant it wasn’t real.

Zach reached out and cupped the side of his face. Brandon closed his eyes and sank into the warmth of Zach’s touch. “Yes. You need to do this. For you. For us. And I’d like to meet him before Saturday.”

Brandon opened his eyes and held Zach’s determined, loving gaze. He covered Zach’s hand with his and laced their fingers together. “You’re an amazing man, Zach.”

Zach only smiled in response. That soft, sensual smile of his, the one that had drawn Brandon to him the first time he'd seen him at the boardwalk café in Venice Beach five years ago.

“Come on. Let's put on our Sunday best.”

Brandon stood and carefully placed Mr. B Boy on the trunk by the window, where he'd been sitting. Mr. B Boy looked up at him like he'd been there all these years waiting for Brandon to come home, which only served to make him feel even more guilty for all the years he hadn't.



Brandon finished tying his shoelaces, and then sat staring blindly at them while a long-forgotten numbness seeped beneath his skin and sent a chill into his bones.

“Ready, hon?”

Brandon startled. He hadn't realized Zach had come into what had once been his childhood bedroom, but was now a guest room lacking all signs that a teenaged boy had lived there. Hadn't noticed time passing while he sat there numb and unthinking.

Zach eased down onto the bed at his side, and Brandon looked at him. *Really* looked. His hair was dark, a little long and the bangs hung in his eyes, but Brandon loved playing with it, twining it through his fingers, especially when Zach made love to him. His eyes were a rich brown, almost like mahogany, with amber flecks that sometimes seemed like they were dancing. They were warm and beguiling and fathomless, and when Brandon gazed into them he knew he'd found his missing piece. Zach was handsome in a boy-next-door sort of way, because a button nose dusted with freckles could only

be sweet. Just like Avery. They weren't similar in appearance overall, but certain features Brandon had loved most about Avery, he'd also found in Zach.

Brandon leaned over and pressed his lips to Zach's. The kiss was short, chaste, familiar like home, but instead of comforting Brandon it spread a trickle of sorrow through his chest. He didn't ever want to be without Zach. Couldn't imagine a life Zach wasn't a part of. He'd thought that way about Avery too, but with Zach it was different. He and Avery had been so young, had so much to learn about life, about each other and themselves. But things hadn't turned out like they'd planned, and even after all these years Avery was never far from Brandon's thoughts, or his heart.

But with Zach, they'd already discovered who they were, and together they'd begun building a life beyond what either of them had imagined. There was a sense of belonging and contentment with Zach he hadn't ever felt before. Even with Avery. Maybe if they'd had more time . . . but then he'd never have met Zach.

And, oh God, how could he even think something like that! A whimper clawed at the back of this throat. Avery had meant everything then, but their time had been cut short. A future together not meant to be. But Zach . . . Zach was his now, his everything, his future, and losing that terrified him.

"Hey." Zach placed a hand on his cheek, drawing his focus. "I'll be right beside you. Okay?"

Zach was right. For them, for their future, he had to visit Avery. Brandon stood, nodding as he smoothed down his shirt with shaky hands, and sucked in a deep breath.

"Did I tell you yet how amazing you are? How much I love you?"

Zach smiled. “You may have, once or twice, but I certainly don’t mind hearing it again.”



Zach pulled the car over to the curb and shifted it into Park. “We’re here.”

Brandon’s throat constricted, squeezing off any chance of verbalizing his acknowledgement. Without looking at Zach, or out the window, he nodded. Zach released a heavy sigh. The warm, comforting weight of his hand rested on Brandon’s thigh.

“Come on, sweetheart. Let’s go.”

Brandon drew in a stuttering breath, and let the piece of paper with directions he’d been clutching flutter to the floor of the car. He grabbed the bag he’d placed between his feet, and reached for the door handle, but he couldn’t open it. Did he really want to do this? Did he really need to?

He jerked when the door fell away from his grasp and a light breeze brought a bouquet of spring flowers inside to wrap around him—gentle, subtle, comforting. Zach stood there with an unreadable expression on his face, one hand on the door, the other reaching out for Brandon. “You need to do this.”

Yes, he did. It was long overdue.

Brandon stepped from the car with Zach’s help, the bag clutched tightly in his hand.

Silently they walked under a stone archway marking the entrance, and down a winding path. Tall cottonwood trees lined the property, and a gentle breeze carried spring snowflakes across the lush greens. Flowers of every variety

were scattered throughout the immaculately manicured landscape, and for a second Brandon imagined himself Jack in the movie *Legend*, on a quest for his Lili. Avery had loved that movie, especially the Unicorns, and they'd both cried when the evil gremlins cut the horse's horn. Brandon had never been able to watch it again, not without Avery.

It seemed like he and Zach had walked for hours, but he knew it was probably only a few minutes before they stopped in front of a granite marker. The engraved bronze plaque on its face read:

*Sweet are the memories
That never fade
Beloved son, beloved friend
Avery Marks
1980-1995*

And finally he could deny it no more. It was real.

The last eighteen years came crashing down in flood of anger and guilt and loss, drowning his senses until the weight of all he'd kept inside became too much to bear, and forced him to his knees. A strangled sob clawed over his vocal chords and his eyes stung.

"Oh, Avery." His throat closed and he looked up, needing a moment to breathe. To the heavens he said, "I'm sorry. So sorry I never came to see you before now. Sorry I was mad at you for leaving me."

Zach's hand closed over his shoulder and squeezed gently, letting Brandon know he was there for him, giving him strength. He placed his hand over Zach's and lowered his head. Then he took a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

“I’m trying to keep the promise I made to you that day at the hospital, but so far I’ve failed.” Brandon ignored the grunt of disagreement from Zach. “I haven’t found a cure yet. I think we’re getting close, but I won’t stop until we do.”

Brandon settled more comfortably on his heels and reached out to trace the engraved letters on Avery’s tombstone. Then he pulled a small bouquet of roses from the bag he’d brought with him, carefully arranging them at the base of the marker. There were a dozen of them: four yellow, four white, and four red. The colors of eternal love, his grandmother had told him.

“I did what you said, Aves. I found an amazing man to love and who loves me back just as much. More, even. You would love him, too. We’re getting married this weekend. At McBride Park. You remember the swing over the creek there? How we much fun we had trying to get out of the water because it was all clay bed and we kept sliding back in? We’re going to have the ceremony right there.”

Brandon’s vision blurred and a tear broke free, making a sluggish a run for escape down his cheek. He pushed his glasses aside and swiped it away with his sleeve.

“I wish you could be there, but somehow I think you will be. I’ve learned something since you’ve been gone. Something Zach and you taught me. The heart is a muscle and the more you exercise it, the bigger and stronger it gets. I love you as much today as I did from the moment I met you, and I love Zach more than I can ever say, but I didn’t have to love you any less to make room for him. This is the really great part. My heart just grew bigger so I could love you both with everything I have and everything I am.”

He smiled and let the next tear fall freely.

“Did you know today is June seventh?” He looked up again and a cottonseed landed gently on his cheek, captured by the errant tear. “And it’s snowing.”

Brandon reached into the bag again and pulled Mr. B Boy from it. He’d made Zach stop at a department store on the way to the cemetery, where he’d managed to find infant-sized superhero underwear and a small black face cloth. The underwear fit Mr. B Boy perfectly and the cloth made for a cape. He adjusted the cape with a safety pin, kissed the bear’s little black nose, and then placed him next to the roses.

“I hope you’re happy up there, and giving superhero underwear to all the angels. Happy Spring Christmas, Avery Marks. I will always love you.”

Brandon stood, and Zach immediately wrapped an arm around his waist, knowing Brandon’s legs were too shaky to hold him just then. He turned and buried himself in Zach’s warmth, their height difference such that he could tuck his head under the crook of Zach’s chin. Zach kissed his temple and Brandon hugged him tighter. He didn’t know how he got so lucky, to have not only found love twice, but to hold both so fully in his heart. And he wasn’t going to waste a single second of it.

“Thank you,” Brandon said, his voice rough with emotion. “I don’t know how you always know just what I need.”

Zach threaded his fingers through Brandon’s hair. “I would do anything for you, Bran. Loving you has been the greatest privilege of my life.”

“Mine too.”

“Come on.” Zach leaned back and kissed him. “Let’s go get you some new superhero underwear. I want you to wear them under your tux at our ceremony.”

Brandon laughed. “Kinky man.”

“Just how you love me.”

“That I do.” Brandon smiled, his heart letting go of the loss and the regrets and the anger so it could swell even bigger, overflowing with love. Yes, he’d always miss Avery, but there in his heart, Avery would be with him forever. Right beside Zach. “That I do.”

Hand in hand they walked back to the car, toward their future and a lifetime of love.



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Jailhouse Rock, *with Xara Xanakas*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cover artist by day, romance author by night, L.C. Chase is a hopeless romantic and adventure seeker. After a decade of road tripping on three continents, she now calls the Canadian West Coast home. When not writing tales of beautiful men falling in love, L.C. can be found designing book covers of said beautiful men, reading, drawing, hiking the trails with her goofy four-legged buddy, and ~~giving in to~~ fighting her root beer addiction.

L.C. is an EPIC eBook award finalist for *Long Tall Drink*, and an Ariana eBook Cover Design award finalist.

Find out what else L.C. has in the works on her website, www.lcchase.com.