

They Call Me Zuz

by Sarah Adair Frank

They call me Zuz. Susie, Ellie, Jay and I are summer friends. Warmed by the dead heat of July, a precious thirty-one days for us, we trample soft fern and tread green mounds of moss, trailblazing a fresh path through the woods morning after morning to the beach. After a swim, dragging multicolored towels in the sand, we comb the beach for washed up treasures: a piece of sea glass, its edges smoothed by the constant churning of the sea, a polished periwinkle, a lobster claw, a crab shell, an old buoy, and a group of gray, somber looking rocks.

"We are spelunkers, examining stalagmites today," Susie tells me, concentrating on the rock formation at her feet. A hand tugs on my shirt from behind.

It's Jay, plastered in sand.

"Zuz, I'm hungry."

And then they all speak at once.

"Zuz, look at this one!"

"Zuz, where's my shovel?"

"Zuz, Jay tracked sand all over my towel!"

I shake out the towel and satisfy them with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, goldfish, and apple juice. Jay chews thoughtfully before announcing his plan for the afternoon.

"Zuz," he says, "I'm going to dig to China."

I think about telling him that his goal is unrealistic, but instead, I fetch him a spade and egg him on.

Jay works slowly at first, his small shovel overturning the rough sand unevenly. Half of his pile collapses into his hole. But he perseveres. Watching his small hands mold the sand, I remember a time when I too was entranced by play. My hands are bigger, and more adroit, with nimble fingers that can tie shoes, unwrap candies, and get the sand out from between my toes before we leave the beach. I can even snap, loudly and clearly now.

I try it; just to be sure I can still do it. My fingers slap the palm of my hand. Jay looks up. He wants to learn how to snap, too. Later, at home, he'll ask me to explain how to play checkers, how to blow enormous bubble gum bubbles, and how to fly a kite.

Jay is four years old. Ellie is his twin, and Susie is seven. And I, Zuz, the summer friend, the babysitter, am 17. "Stalagmites can grow to be over 50-feet tall, but it takes hundreds of years for them to form," Susie explains to me, quoting her spelunker guide, a recent library borrow. "They're old," she says, with emphasis.

We're squatting over her rocks, examining them scientifically. One juts upward from the sand about four inches, surrounded by shorter ones, Stonehenge in sand. I think about reminding Susie that these aren't real stalagmites, but instead ask her if she likes a good

mystery. She notices a fresh trail of footprints next to the rocks, follows them, and discovers Ellie at the far end of the beach, burying stones with intense concentration. Left to guard the somber looking rocks, named, appropriately, "Susie's Stalaghenge," I flip through 'The Beginner Spelunker's Guide' and mull over how well the young mind combats skepticism.

I'm not as old as a stalagmite, though I may have grown just as tall, mentally, physically, and emotionally. It was the years spent developing a consciousness of myself as an individual and of the world as a whole that erased the inherent simplicity and joy of childhood. It's an inevitable process that affects everyone. We grow up and face facts.

My younger self constructed Lego spaceships, scribbled with chalk on stone steps, and nibbled sticky open-faced sandwiches with the crusts cut off. And my mind nursed little fears. Mom crosses the city streets at night, alone. Does she look both ways? Today, I close my open-faced cream cheese and jelly with another slice of bread and take gargantuan bites. My consciousness has merged with reality. I even opt for crusts.

Jay has not merged yet, so he deposits his crusts in my hand. Years from now, he might remember his China campaign, the sand he buried himself in afterwards, and the way the tide came in a few hours later, filling his hard-earned hole with water. But he may never feel the same spark, the same guileless energy that led him to the idea in the first place. For some, ambivalence eventually replaces curiosity.

Counteracting that effect, I have my beach picnics morning after morning with my summer friends. And I muse over journal entries. There, where crayon meets felt tip pen, the past always returns, lurking behind me, eating peanut butter and jelly, and tugging at my shirt. So when it starts talking all at once, in the flesh, at the beach, covered in sand, I listen.

This essay, the winner in a Maine student writing contest in 2001, was previously published by Blethen Maine Newspapers Inc. and Alternet.