

Buttercups

Summers are what I remember most. Summers were egg salad picnics at Roger Williams Park. Frisbees by day, amusement rides by night. And endless: time stretching itself so fine and so thin we could almost feel the snap.

Summers were long and thin like that.

C'mere boys, our mother said with the voice of a teacher. *I want to show you something.*

It was the first time I would remember her showing us that even though my brother and I were identical twins, at times, we were also different.

The plan was simple. We were to span the green grass of the open park and look for the one perfect buttercup before picking it. *I want you to look carefully at the flowers.*

This is what she said. *I want you to look carefully at the buttercup flowers in the grass*, choosing at that moment to not see the dandelions as weeds, but as sacred flowers that would somehow reveal our true nature.

I want you to look carefully at the buttercup flowers in the grass and look for the one that is most perfect. Once you've found it, bring it back and I'll show you a little trick.

My brother spanned one side of the field; I spanned the other. Sometimes running to the perfect spot (I chose sunlight over shade), sometimes crawling, led only by our fingertips. And tens of minutes and hundreds of flowers later we each emerged valiant as if returning from battle.

Here's mine, I said, holding in my hand the largest and roundest and most perfectly shaped buttercup I could find.

I chose two, my brother said, *just in case the first doesn't work*. Even then he was victorious in his own tireless way.

I chose not to argue the outcome of the contest. This is what it was, after all, a contest. This is what it is whenever one asks twins to do anything. A contest, and an experiment, with us as the controls. I chose not to argue, and instead waited eagerly as our mother grabbed the flowers from our hands and whispered with the tone of a sorceress, *Now watch this; I will tell you if you love or hate butter.*

She was referring, of course, to a game we would later come to play quite a bit. According to its rules, if you hold a buttercup to a person's chin and the skin reflects its yellow color, it means that person loves butter. This was the lesson we learned that fine summer day in the park.

On that day Mom took the flower I picked and held it under my chin as if it were a microphone. *See, Bobby*, she said to my brother. *Notice how his chin turns yellow? This means he likes butter.*

At first it all seemed rather silly. That is, until we took my brother's flower and placed it under his chin. Imagine my excitement when there was no change! Imagine my excitement to learn that this little yellow flower that looked like a small button understood my need to be different from my identical twin.

Nature, at that moment, had spoken.

But if such a small flower could know the difference, why not anyone else?

Well, that doesn't mean anything, my brother later said to me. *It just means your skin is more sensitive than mine.*

Our mother just looked at me and smiled.