



My Summer (with Robots)

A novel by
Marsh Myers





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Sample Chapter 1

1 SHOOTING PVT. BRAVO INTO THE SUN AND OTHER REGRETS



When I was in sixth grade, there was a great controversy when my teacher, Mrs. Gumenick, claimed I symbolically assassinated one of my classmates through a story I'd written. It's the first and only time I've been accused of murdering anyone so, as you can imagine, it left a lasting impression.

Mom and I had to meet Mrs. Gumenick and the principal, Mr. Van der Pol, in this tiny room right off the school's main office which had absolutely nothing in it but an oval-shaped wooden table and four matching chairs with bright orange cushions. The office secretary asked us to be seated, closed the door and we waited, alone, for over twenty minutes. Mom had scooped her chair right up against mine. I know this was meant to make me feel protected, but really it just made me feel like she knew something I didn't and was quietly preparing me for the worst.

It didn't help when I commented on how the room had no windows and she quipped back, "That's so no one can hear our screams." When she noticed my look of horror she quickly added, "Joking, Quint. Joking."

I forced a smile. "Do you think they locked us in? Are we in school jail?" I asked in a lame attempt to match her humor.

"Don't worry, I told your father where we were going," she replied. "He has instructions to send in the National Guard if we don't return home by four."

This wasn't much of a comfort. Though my parents wouldn't divorce until the following year, my father was already pretty disengaged from the rest of us. If my Mom was actually concerned that we'd never return home from the school, it was doubtful Dad would even notice until dinner failed to show up on the kitchen table. I looked carefully at my mom's face and could see this tiny vein twitching at her temple, right where her Miss Clairol "Autumn Mist" hair dye met her natural streaks of silver. She was sitting very straight, staring at the two empty chairs across from us with her hands folded on the tabletop. To anyone else, she would've looked like she was preparing to take a pop quiz, but I knew she was preparing for battle. Her posture didn't change a bit when Mrs. Gumenick and Mr. Van der Pol finally arrived. My teacher was carrying two things. The first was an unopened can of Fresca, to which she was hopelessly addicted. The second was a stack of handwritten pages which I immediately identified as a science fiction story I'd been writing called *The Blood Moons of Beta Prime* which, the last time I checked, had been squirreled away in my desk.

Mr. Van der Pol wasn't carrying anything except an extra fifty pounds which spilled like a fleshy girdle over the top of his belt. After he shook Mom's hand and apologized for keeping us waiting, he pulled a chair out and slouched into it with his right ankle resting on his left knee and his paunch resting on his nuts. Mrs. Gumenick remained standing.

"So, how's everyone doing this afternoon?" Mr. Van der Pol asked in a transparent attempt to put us at ease. No one answered, so I guess it didn't work. "So we're here to talk about stories," he continued. "Mrs. Wyatt, I'm sure I don't have to tell you what a very, very talented young author Quinton is."

"Thank you, I know," Mom replied in that genteel way parents have when they're trying to be adult about things they secretly think are childish.

The principal continued: "Yes, very talented. Probably has a future at it. He's written quite an epic here, which is what we wanted to discuss with you."

As if on cue, Mrs. Gumenick set the stack of papers in the center of the table. My mother immediately laid her right hand on top of the manuscript and pulled it completely to our side.

"Have you read this exceptional story, Mrs. Wyatt?" asked Mr. Van der Pol.

Mom looked him right in the eyes and replied, "I read most of Quint's stories, but only when invited to do so."

"I'm afraid I didn't have the luxury of being invited," Mrs. Gumenick offered quickly, defensively. "Not when another student tells me about it with tears in his eyes."

It's useful to note here that Mrs. Gumenick was a very serious person who neither appreciated creativity nor thought it was a useful part of the educational process. Her teaching style was precise, unimaginative and completely boring. Most of my classmates hated her, but she was popular with parents because she never had discipline problems in her classroom and nearly everyone did well on standardized tests. Personally, the only other time I'd run afoul of her was when she complained I was checking out books "too advanced" for my age during our monthly field trips to the public library. This concern was easily alleviated by me borrowing stacks of *The Hardy Boys* novels and keeping at least one sitting on my desk at all times. (My copies of *Brave New World* and *Dracula* stayed at home where they wouldn't offend Mrs. Gumenick's sense of appropriateness.)

But the *Blood Moons* was hardly a controversial piece of literature. It was just a stupid little story about two fearless space captains — based on me and my best friend, Eddie "Monkey" DeGuzman — caught in the middle of an intergalactic war. I'll fully admit that the story borrowed heavily from the TV show *Space:1999*, but I wasn't trying to craft a great original novel. I started writing it mostly to amuse myself during the less interesting parts of Mrs. Gumenick's class, but it quickly took on a life of its own. Everyone wanted a role in it and eventually most of my friends and family had alter egos in the story. Even my sister Kenna, whom I passionately hated at the time, was represented as a cannibalistic reptilian mutant called Draken the Horrendous. Within a few months, *The Blood Moons* had made me the most widely read author at school and I couldn't imagine how

anyone would object to something that awesome. Not even someone as unimaginative as Mrs. Gumenick.

Mom answered Mrs. Gumenick's emotionalism with profound calm. "I don't understand," she said. "Why was a student crying about Quint's story?"

"It would seem that Quinton has been writing many of his classmates into this story, making them into fictional characters you understand?" Mrs. Gumenick replied gravely. "It all takes place in outer space and the different children are different characters who live on these two moons which are at war with each other. Well, Quinton subsequently killed off one boy in a particularly gruesome way. When the young man discovered this, he was deeply hurt and offended. Naturally, Mrs. Wyatt, I have to worry when one of my students kills another."

"Killed a fictional character," Mom said quickly.

"Excuse me?"

"You said Quint killed off another student. He didn't kill anyone. He killed off a fictional character in a science fiction story."

"I think that's a minor distinction," the teacher grumbled.

"Really? I think it's an important one. I wouldn't want anyone to misrepresent the facts. Quint didn't actually kill or threaten to kill anyone, correct?"

"No, he didn't—" Mr. Van der Pol said, only to be quickly cut off by Mrs. Gumenick.

"—but symbolically the message is the same. What worries me is not what Quint did or didn't do, but his intent behind the story." I could tell how seriously Mrs. Gumenick was taking this because she hadn't bothered to crack open the Fresca and everyone knew she needed a steady infusion of its grapefruity nectar to sustain her life force. But the unopened can sat forgotten on the wood laminate tabletop, sweating even more than me.

The little vein in my mom's temple was twitching faster now, but outwardly she didn't even flinch. "I haven't read this story," she said, "but if we're talking about intent here, isn't it more likely that Quint was simply trying to write a good story? You said it was a war story. Characters die in war stories, don't they?"

"Of course."

"Then what are we really talking about, Mrs. Gumenick? That the boy whose character was killed off suffered some hurt feelings because of it?"

"It's not just the hurt feelings. I'm concerned that Quinton's been targeting this boy."

"Targeting?" Mom replied, for the first time showing a legitimate flash of anger. "What does that mean?"

At this, Mr. Van der Pol slid upright in his chair and uncrossed his legs, his casual and profoundly insincere body language now gone. He was visibly irritated with Mrs. Gumenick and she was certainly aware of it.

The next words my teacher used were carefully chosen and slowly delivered. "I've just heard... comments... from other students that Quint really wanted to be friends with this boy..."

and when that didn't happen... well... the boy's character in the story was killed off. Frankly it sounds more than a little vindictive... which is not something I would expect from or condone in any of my students... especially Quinton."

Mom narrowed her eyes. "You didn't answer my question, Mrs. Gumenick. Please, explain to me what you meant by 'targeting.'"

"That was a poor choice of words," Mr. Van der Pol interceded gently. "There's nothing like that going on. Quint's never been in a lick of trouble here and we all know he's a really good kid with just tons of talent."

"No disagreement here," Mom replied.

"As is the other student," Mrs. Gumenick said challengingly. "He's also a good kid and he's been damaged by this."

"First this unnamed student's targeted, now he's damaged," Mom snapped. "We're talking about a story here, written by a sixth grader. Unless you can convince me that Quint did anything other than hurt someone's feelings, let's not speak like there's some great conspiracy going on."

"Agreed," Mr. Van der Pol answered. By this point, I was thoroughly confused by all of this, but it was obvious that Mrs. Gumenick had gone off script and my principal was putting an end to it. "I think a simple apology to the other boy would suffice," he suggested awkwardly.

Mom frowned. "So Quint should apologize to a real person for killing off a fictional character in his very own story?"

Before Mr. Van der Pol could answer however, I announced that I'd do it.

Mom looked at me with wide eyes. "Quint, you don't have to say you're sorry for something which happened to a fictional person. You can write whatever you want in your own story."

I looked up at Mrs. Gumenick and asked, "It was T.J., wasn't it?"

She hesitated before answering. "I think it's better if we don't name the other student," she said coldly.

"Well, I know it was T.J. because he's the only kid I had a character based on who died."

At this I actually saw Mrs. Gumenick's words stick in her throat, her neck bulging out like a bullfrog choking on a *ribbit*. Mom hid her smile behind her hand.

"Yes, it was T.J.," Mr. Van der Pol answered.

T.J. Shapleigh was the biggest kid in the sixth grade. I don't mean he was fat or anything, just built like an adult man and almost as tall as me. He was widely considered the best athlete in school, something which irritated Monkey no end. No one could match T.J. when it came to sports, especially on those occasions when Mrs. Gumenick forced us to play dodge ball.

Of all the playground activities I've endured over the years, none was as humiliating and physically crippling as dodge ball. In fact, my deep hatred of the sport was due largely to T.J.'s lethal accuracy. He had this twirl similar to how a discus thrower would spin before flinging that iron frisbee thing. I'm pretty sure he adapted some martial arts move because he'd been studying Kung Fu since he was six. Some days he would wear his *gi* to school and if he played dodge ball in it, the

big sleeves would snap like ship's sails catching the wind every time he spun and hurled the ball. When he found his mark there was always a loud *THWAP* followed by some child screaming in pain. Personally, I never survived longer than three minutes if I was playing against him and usually had ball-shaped welts all over my legs as a unpleasant reminder of his skill.

Despite the fact that T.J. could knock me into next week with a rubber ball, he was neither mean nor a bully. What he was was that kid you simultaneously liked and felt intimidated by, even though he did nothing particularly intimidating. Between his natural confidence, the fact that he looked like a miniaturized adult, and that he wore *gis* with colorful patches of Chinese dragons sewn to the sleeves, he could make you feel self-conscious without even trying. Everyone recognized this about T.J., and no one seemed to resent him for it.

Well, no one but Monkey.

T.J. had always been pleasant to me, but it wasn't until I started writing *The Blood Moons of Beta Prime* that we became friends. Why this happened I can't really tell you because we were polar opposites in almost every way. He was athletic, I was a klutz. He was boisterous, I was reserved. He barely pulled B's while academically I was at the top of the class. Maybe he was just one of those rare people who's nice to everyone? Whatever the case, he liked *The Blood Moons* so much he'd often read and re-read it in class. I finally made him into a character named Pvt. Bravo who had superhuman strength because the entire left side of his body was robotic. After this, T.J. started treating me like I was a celebrity. Suddenly he was protecting me on the dodgeball court, taking out everyone but me with his cannon-like arm or, if we were on the same team, leaping in front of the balls meant for me like he was taking a bullet for the President of the United States. The rest of the time he followed me around like a puppy, this giant boy dressed in a bespangled Kung Fu *gi*. All this attention didn't make me feel anything but good, until Monkey decided to make me feel bad.

"People think you're a fag, Quint," he told me as we were walking home one day.

Monkey has always been a very melodramatic person so I'm used to ignoring the stupid shit he says. But being accused of being queer was a first. I knew he resented my friendship with T.J. Before that, Monkey had had my undivided attention and he was always happiest when he didn't share the spotlight.

"No one thinks that," I replied. "Why do you have to say things like that?"

He growled while simultaneously rolling his shoulders back defensively. "I'm just trying to help you 'cause you're my friend," he replied. "And everyone thinks that, by the way."

"Who?" I challenged him. "Give me names."

"Everyone, Quint. Choose anyone at school and they think that. Everyone goes around whispering 'is Quint a fag or what?' Everyone."

"Why the hell would they?"

Monkey's eyes bulged. "Are you kidding? See, this is why I'm glad I told you because apparently you're stupid about certain important things."

"I guess I'm stupid about stuff that isn't true," I smirked.

The tips of Monkey's ears flushed red, which is always the first sign he's getting pissed off. "Don't act all stuck up like you usually do when I try to help you. I'm telling you the truth. T.J.'s killing your rep and if you don't do something about it people aren't gonna hang with you no more."

I stopped in my tracks. "Who's not gonna hang with me no more, Monkey?" I asked. He didn't reply, just kept walking as though he hadn't heard the question at all. I ran to catch him. "I know you heard me," I snapped.

"You know the answer so don't ask the question," he said.

"You'd stop being my friend because of what idiots at school are saying?"

He turned to face me and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "I don't wanna be friends with someone who's queer," he stated.

"But it's not true," I exclaimed.

"I don't want to be friends with anyone people *think* is queer," Monkey answered quickly.

"T.J.'s a nice guy, Monkey. He likes my story and we talk about movies and stuff, just like you and me. Whoever's saying this shit to you is making up lies."

Monkey shrugged and in that moment I knew nothing I said would matter. In our sixth grade world, I could be guilty based on a rumor alone and if I didn't do something about it, I'd lose my reputation and my best friend. By the time I made it home, I knew Pvt. Bravo had to die.

I did my best to avoid T.J. until school let out for the Christmas break. Over the two week vacation, I wrote this elaborate subplot to *The Blood Moons* where T.J.'s character heroically sacrifices himself while saving his spaceship and its entire crew from a terrorist's atom bomb. The young private holds the bomb to his chest and throws himself out an airlock and into a sun. There's this excellent paragraph describing how his body's ripped to shreds by the resulting explosion and all the fleshy particles bursts into flame as they're sucked into the star. It's probably the best death scene I've ever written.

When school reconvened, Monkey made a big deal about this surprise twist in my story and naturally T.J. asked to read it. During lunch break he plowed through the handwritten pages. I fully expected him to react badly. In fact, I was counting on it.

But T.J.'s reaction was minimal. He just said, "Okay, guess I'm dead," and walked away.

Two days later I was sitting in the windowless room with my mom, my principal and my teacher, being accused of assassinating him. Sometimes life sucks balls.

Mom slid my manuscript over to me and said, "Quint, I don't want you to feel pressured if you didn't do anything wrong. I think it's great if you want to soothe T.J.'s hurt feelings, but I don't think you need to apologize for a fictional incident. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, but I didn't mean for my story to upset him," I said, which was of course a lie. As shitty as it sounds, I did mean to upset T.J. because I just wanted him to stop. I wanted him to stop running up to me every morning to say hi. I wanted him to stop sitting with me and Monkey during lunch break. I wanted him to stop treating me like I was so damn special. But I never thought I

could actually move this kid to tears. T.J. had always seemed indestructible, and learning that I had hurt him filled me with more guilt than I'd ever felt before.

"I like T.J. I feel bad that I hurt his feelings, so I'll tell him I'm sorry," I said.

"I think a note would be better," Mrs. Gumenick offered. "You write it and I'll deliver it to him. Then you boys can just stay away from each other the rest of the year and everything will be fine."

This made no sense to me. I saw T.J. every day of the week so writing a note when I could just tell him seemed weirdly impersonal. Still, writing a note was the fastest way out of that room so I did it and everyone seemed satisfied that the matter was closed.

When school let out the following day, I ditched Monkey in the crowd of kids pouring across the playground. As much as I wanted to tell T.J. I was sorry, I didn't want Monkey to know so I ran as fast as I could to the fence which skirted the riverbed on the school's southern edge. T.J. lived in the opposite direction from me but I knew he went home through the dry river, so I threw my notebooks over and then quickly scaled the chain link. I waited out of sight until T.J. climbed the fence and dropped onto the sand below.

He spotted me immediately and laughed, but it sounded awkward. "What're you doing over here?"

"Waiting for you," I replied.

A look of dread spread across his face. He kept walking and I struggled to keep up.

"Did Mrs. Gumenick give you my note?" I asked.

"Yeah, I got it," he replied without looking at me.

"Okay, good. Well, I wanted you to know I meant it and I've been thinking about my book—"

"—what book?" he asked stupidly.

"*The Blood Moons.*"

"Oh. Right."

"I just wanted to say that I think I made a mistake killing off Pvt. Bravo. He's like the most popular character in it, y'know?"

"He is?"

"Yeah, by far. Ever since I killed him off, lots of people have told me it was a mistake, so I just wanted you to know that I'm gonna bring him back. Can you hold up, please? You're walking too fast."

T.J. stopped in his tracks, squared his shoulders, and turned to face me. "What's that mean?"

I started talking really fast, like I needed to get all this out before he took off running or told me to fuck off and I lost any opportunity to make things right. "It means I'm gonna bring him back to life. I already have it figured out. His crew collects some of the fragments of his body from space and then they clone him."

"But every bit of him burned up in the sun. That's what you wrote. He's all burned up."

“Nah,” I assured him. “They find parts that didn’t cook, right? So they scoop up these little fragments from space and put them in this machine which reassembles Pvt. Bravo, just like the transporter on *Star Trek*.”

He took this long hard look at me, obviously unimpressed by what I thought was a pretty ingenious way of both resolving an awkward plot point and giving T.J. what amounted to a public apology.

“You don’t have to bring him back,” he answered. He said it kindly, because T.J. was a kind person, but it was still a rejection. A rejection of my apology, such as it was. A rejection of my lame attempt to make things right.

“But I want to,” I insisted, a growing sense of panic rising in my belly. “I made a huge mistake killing him off and I’m really sorry about that. Truly.” My voice cracked and I was in serious danger of crying, which I did a lot at that age because I hated it when the world got complicated and upsetting.

“Pvt. Bravo dying didn’t bother me if that’s what you think,” he said.

“I thought maybe it did.”

“No.”

“Mrs. Gumenick said, well...”

“Yeah?”

“She said you were upset by it and I feel really bad about that ’cause I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Mrs. Gumenick made too big a deal out of it,” he said. I wasn’t sure what this meant but figured T.J. was trying to save face so I didn’t say anything. Then he added, “You shouldn’t change it, Quint. It’ll ruin the book. It’s always cheesy when someone does something like that in a book or TV show. When something’s dead it stays dead... unless it’s a zombie of course. But don’t make Pvt. Bravo into a zombie because that would be worse.”

“I promise I won’t make it cheesy. I got it all figured out and it’s going to be so cool.”

“Seriously, it’s fine the way it is.”

I dropped my folders on the ground, pulled out the crinkled copy of *The Blood Moons* and handed it to him as a bundle. “I already did it,” I proclaimed. “Look at the last few pages.”

He took the papers and flipped to the back where the chapter I had cranked out the night before was waiting for him. It was entitled “The Triumphant Return of Pvt. Bravo.” I felt my eyes getting wet and T.J. looked at me sympathetically and for a moment we were miserable together.

“Thanks,” he said softly.

“You can keep that as long as you want,” I said. “Let me know if you like it and if you don’t I’ll change it so you do.”

He thanked me again and we gave each other polite goodbyes. In the weird way of sixth grade boys, the issue had been resolved without ever being directly addressed. T.J. and I went back to being polite strangers and Monkey seemed satisfied by this. The following year, T.J. went to a

different junior high school and I never saw him or my copy of *The Blood Moons* again. But now, two years later, he keeps popping into my head and I don't know why.



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About the Author:

Marsh Myers is an author, artist, filmmaker and photographer. Over the years, he's worked in fields related to the protection of children, animals and the natural world, and these themes can often be found in his works of fiction. Marsh is also an unabashed nerd, toy collector and fanboy.

Marsh is the author of the young adult paranormal thrillers, [His Life Abiding](#) (2013) and [The Men in the Trees](#) (2014). In late 2016, he launched *Dark & Fevered Dreams*, a series of young adult supernatural graphic novels supported by online materials. Learn more about this series at [darkandfevereddreams.com](#).

When not writing, Marsh can be found exploring the wilds of the Pacific Northwest or the cluttered aisles of local bookstores and comic book shops. Visit him online at [marshmyers.com](#).