

## Summer Job

### A Coming of Age Story

By Julie Ethan

In a rich but somber baritone, much like an evening news-anchor, Josh announced, "Sorry kids, there's not going to be an Easter bunny this year." Then, in a high pitched shrill he replied, "Oh no! Miss Sadie! Don't squish us...oh no!"

She wanted to cry—but God—he was making her laugh now. Sadie had an awful feeling in the pit of her stomach. Sorrow mixed with sick humor. It's the last thing she ever would have done on purpose, but it was too late now. Shawn, the crew leader, verified the horror. They were all dead. All six, tiny, baby bunnies. Shawn put his hand on her shoulder and gave her a sincere look that said, "I'm sorry this happened to you," as he walked away. She could feel the warmth linger on the spot where his labor callused hand had rested. If only she could curl up in his burly arms, and soak in more of that warmth on this chilly, only-in-Minnesota-could-it-be-this-cold-in-August, morning.

Everyone called her Sadie, but Sage was her real name. Even though it was an odd name, she liked the inner sense of uniqueness it gave her. She planned to tell everyone she met—her name was Sage—when she left for her freshman year of college in the fall. Her mother said, "Not Sage like thyme and basil, Sage like a person with ancient wisdom." Her parents had nicknamed her Sadie-lady almost from the moment she took her first breath.

She was her mother's third and last child, born at home with a midwife and raised on organic produce. Her hippie mom was something of an oddity in their Midwest suburb. Her notions of nurturance had included home-birthing and if necessary, home-schooling when one of her siblings needed extra attention in learning how to read. She appreciated her mom's idiosyncrasies, even if they were unconventional and *even* if they were frowned upon by aunts, uncles or teachers. These were the things that made Sage's life unique and she prided herself on her openness to other cultures and customs, as a result.

These days her parents were openly giddy about having their last child standing on the brink of the nest. They still held hands every night as they went for their walks, chatting about their travel plans once she graduated from college—when they would finally be free of tuition bills. They dreamed of selling the house she grew up in, a fact she could hardly fathom. It just seemed wrong to disrupt her notion of home; her place of comfort and security. How could they be so excited about leaving? It seemed selfish. Her mom complained incessantly about living in the suburbs. "I feel so isolated from the real world. You have to get in your car to go anywhere! I'm ready to ride my bike to the market for fresh vegetables and fruit. I want a pedestrian lifestyle." Her mom would make these proclamations with a dreamy look in her eyes. Sadie couldn't relate, but then again, she imagined that college would cure her of her desire to make her parents stay frozen in time. She knew it was an unrealistic fantasy, and the absurdity made her smile.

Josh was beginning to launch into an Elmer Fudd impersonation when Sage swung her fist at his arm and punched him square on the shoulder. Only a few years her senior, Josh was her uncle. This was due to divorce and remarriage and step-children via her grandparents. Josh worked full-time for her dad, a painting contractor. She laughed after Josh feigned pain from the punch, but quickly sobered as her mind replayed the look on the bulldozer operator's face as he walked away after finding out his save-the-bunnies mission had gone completely awry.

The bulldozer had been moving a pile of dirt between two buildings; townhomes under construction. The driver told Sage, during their brief but painful encounter, that he saw something in front of his rig—so he stopped and climbed down for a closer look. Sure enough, it was a little burrow of baby bunnies. He had carefully scooped them up and carried them toward the side of the building near a window. Sage could picture his stout, already soiled fingers working to put the bunnies out of harm's way. *At least that's what he thought.* Sage began to imagine him climbing back into his seat, not a small effort with that beer belly, and smiling like a dirty Jesus, who had just saved some helpless souls from the depths of the abyss.

And then she came along. Sage didn't see the bunnies.

She had been helping Josh tape off the windows on the exterior of the building, just like her dad had taught her. During the summer season, dad preferred the windows be kept open with the screens removed, masking tape and plastic sheeting applied to the openings. She and Josh teamed up that morning—she on the outside and he on the inside. They finished the lower level windows on the south wall and moved to the east

wall. The elevation dropped sharply near the window. When Sage planted her foot, it dropped further than she expected as all of her weight came down on the hidden, temporary bunny shelter. The sudden sinking of her right boot caught her off guard for a moment, but she regained her footing and never looked down.

The bulldozer driver had seen her round the corner to the building and stopped what he was doing. He maneuvered his excessive weight off the side of his seat, and once again, climbed off the rig. She hadn't seen him coming toward her.

"Uh," he stammered, "you didn't just step on those bunnies, did you?" Sage turned to look over her shoulder, surprised to hear a voice behind her.

"What?"

He leaned over to get a closer look at the shifted dirt, where he had deposited the precious cargo. His words came sharp and quick, "Did you step on the bunnies?"

"What bunnies?" Sage asked. Suddenly, the hair on her arms raised and prickled.

"Right there," he pointed.

Sage looked. In disbelief, she drew in a gulp of air and breathed out the words, "Oh my god. I didn't know they were there." She could see the guts coming out of the little bunny on top. Mere moments later, after he explained the situation, the driver took one last look and shook his head as he walked back to his rig. Meanwhile, Josh covered his mouth to hide his laughter. Sage gave him a fierce look of disapproval and took off running toward the entrance of the building to get Shawn. She needed someone to do a closer inspection and it wasn't going to be her. Maybe some of the bunnies had survived.

Shawn was busy priming a sprayer with lacquer. He already had his full-shield facemask in place and the carbon filtered respirator secured over his mouth and nose. When he saw her coming, he immediately loosened the straps and slid the mask over his head.

This was Sage's second summer working in the field for her father. There was no better way than construction labor to make enough money in a short amount of time so she wouldn't need to work during the school year. She had learned the fundamentals of the painting trade last summer, riding around with her dad, getting firsthand training by the master. He demonstrated how to stain doors in the most efficient manner and talked about the various processes as they went from job to job. He would point out to the crews where they were losing time, and how to team up to make the most of their day. He would tell her, "I always tell the guys to pair up and never go into separate rooms to work on things. They get lost on their own little islands and productivity goes down the drain." Then he would heave a deep sigh. She could sense the pressure he faced to maintain a slim profit margin in a demanding and under-appreciated trade.

This summer, Sage had taken a position on a crew instead of riding from job to job with her dad. She was pretty impressed with her abilities and how quickly everything came back to her. The first day on Shawn's crew, she engaged him in a race of who could sand cabinet doors the fastest. Shawn made her laugh by copying her dad's mantra, "I said pair-up! You're wasting time! Pair-up, I say, Pair-up!" In truth, it made everyone want to try harder. Partly because Sage was there, and she was the boss's

daughter, and partly because she could handle being teased by the crew leader—and throw it back at him.

Shawn was 24 with thick, curly blond hair and a spunky personality that seemed to contradict the sadness in his blue eyes. He had strong arms and more importantly, a cute butt. She knew he had been married and was now divorced. He didn't have kids. One time, at lunch, he had voiced his anger unexpectedly when one of the guys had asked Shawn about his ex. "That bitch sucked the life out of me and every earthly possession I had." He went on to complain about the snowmobile he had to sell to pay for an attorney and how she stole the boat from him and got away with it. "She had everything planned before she even served me with papers. Her sister helped her plan everything," he said. According to Shawn, his ex was so confident in her plans for his demise that she slept with her new boyfriend right under his nose. He said he'd never forget the day he found them. "That weekend after she and her sister stole my boat and moved it to over to her parent's cabin in Wisconsin, that son-of-a-bitch was in my bed!"

Sage knew she was merely crossing paths with Shawn in the grand scheme of things. In contrast, her life was all about maintaining a 3.8 grade point average and heading off to a college business program with a chance to study abroad. But she still found the tenderness under his rough demeanor magnetic. In another life, she would gather his sadness and his broad shoulders into her arms and love him. She wondered if he ever thought about her in that way. She wondered, but she also knew. There was definitely a spark, a spring in his step when she came into the jobsite every morning.

Shawn waited for her to approach so he could hear what she had to say over the noise of the paint pump. When she asked him to come outside with her, he readily complied. She watched him lay the gun to the sprayer in a bucket of lacquer thinner and carefully arrange the hose in a coil so no one would trip over it. She admired his conscientious nature.

“Sadie, could you grab me a rag out of the box over there?” He motioned to the corner of the room. She bent over the stack of buckets to snatch a clean rag for him and without looking up, she overshot his hand and grazed the soft, furry hair on his forearm. He took the rag and wiped his hands. They stepped away from the paint pump and made their way around the maze of buckets and pieces of loose trim board on the floor.

“What did you do now?” He teased.

Sage walked in silence to the side of the building as he followed. She pointed and covered her eyes, “I can’t look Shawn, are any of them alive?”

“Jesus,” Shawn blinked to clear the dust particles in his eyes. “What the hell am I looking at?” He bent down to take a closer look. He grabbed the rag out of his back pocket and pushed the bunny with the insides out, over to the side. He nudged a few other heads, but it was clear. Nothing was moving. Their frail bodies had been thoroughly squished.

The rest of the day went by quickly. Sage didn’t have much of an appetite for lunch and passed on going with the guys to the sandwich shop for a bite to eat. She thought she caught a look from Shawn, when she declined the invitation, like he was

about to open his mouth but decided to stay quiet. She felt his eyes give her a knowing confirmation that she needed to take her break alone.

Later, when the guys returned from lunch, Josh needled her with the information that she was the topic of conversation at lunch. “You and the bunnies,” he chuckled. Sage decided to change the subject by challenging Josh to a masking tape race. They started in the same corner of the room and began taping off the base trim in preparation for the wall painting. “Whoever covers more lineal feet, wins!” Sage proclaimed. After she won in a narrow victory that required double checking with a measuring tape, Sage packed up her bucket-buddy, feeling victorious.

Just as the crew walked out to their cars, Sage’s dad pulled up in his white pick-up truck. He called out to Shawn, “I’m going to need Sadie down in Rosemount tomorrow. That crew has a heavy day of prep and they could use an extra hand. Is that going to work with you?”

“Okay with me, boss!” Shawn turned to give Sadie a wink and said, “I think we can make do without her.”

Sage felt a rush of disappointment, which she nursed on her drive home. Her favorite thing about waking up at the crack of dawn, when she’d rather sleep in, was knowing she’d get to work with Shawn. As she pulled into the driveway at her parent’s home, she could see her mom through the window over the kitchen sink. She turned off the ignition and started to gather her things when it occurred to her that the first thing her mom would ask when she walked through the door would be, “Hey Sadie-lady! How was your day?”

Sage sat back in her seat for a moment. She took a deep breath and pressed her head into the headrest as she pondered how to answer her mom's question. How could she commingle killing baby bunnies with having a great day? Both were true. As the implausible notion sunk in, she rolled her eyes back and let out an involuntary, "Ha!"

Just as quickly, tears welled in her eyes. She grabbed the bottom of her paint-stained T-shirt and wiped them away, trying to compose herself. She hoped her mom wasn't watching. And then, she thought about Josh. She thought about his fake news-anchor voice. She replayed the words in her head. "Sorry kids..." She giggled as she opened the car door.

The End

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