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Spring Comes With The Years

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Abstract

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Winner of the Focus Award, 1975

Spring Comes With The Years

by
Jonathan Engel
Journalism 3

*So wind, go off and fetch the snow,
To freeze my shiny tears;
And I will stay, and wait and know,
That spring comes with the years.*

**To Mrs. Nettie Foster,
One of the gentle people.**

LAST PERIOD in Mrs. Lubell's sixth-grade social studies class was always hard to sit through, especially on the warm spring days when subtle lilac fragrances and sparrow soliloquies were lifted through the flung-open windows of the second-floor classroom. The oasis beckoned. But her students, shackled by Ohio state law, whispered and fidgeted, straining against the centrally-controlled clock dominating the pale walls. Not much had changed since their fathers and mothers similarly weathered the dryness of Mrs. Lubell's geography. For she was enduring; sphinx-like, except for silence. In this and other impotent classrooms the dust was once again brushed from the values of upper-middle-class America, mores of continued importance to the conservative parents of Infellisburg Falls. And somehow this morality included a guilty sense of responsibility for those less fortunate, which perhaps explained the sixth-grade's going-away party for poor razor-strapped Lonnie Howard, a party ending quickly to allow many of those attending to make their five-thirty ballroom dancing class.

But that had been the previous week, the end of April. Now into May, the town had just celebrated its annual Flower Festival, heralding spring to the surrounding

valley, when the flowers and shrubbery blossomed into a colorful, green-framed array. Inflated by more than the crisp spring air, community organizations sponsored such grand events as a beauty-queen contest, parade and carnival, as well as activities for the littler children: bike-decorating, pet-showing and pie-eating. One of the more perceptive class members wrote a poem dedicated to this festival:

Yes, winter has ended.
Spring has arrived.
Friendships pretended.
Lawns fertilized.

The class didn't consider it a good poem, perhaps because the festival possessed an almost sacred enchantment impervious to the wand of criticism. And most twelve-year-olds were particularly spellbound. In fact many sixth-graders employed this yearly extravaganza to arrange their first date, a confused encounter with the object of their most recent romantic fantasy, including a promise to ride all the rides together during the carnival's Dollar Night, a crowded neon hoopla opening the week-long festival.

And as a sixth-grader contemplating the infectious emotions of spring, Clifton Gabriel sat relaxed in the back of Mrs. Lubell's class, thinking about Susan Heinrich, sitting two rows over. Clifton was a tall boy, with black hair forming crooked bangs above his dark, deep-set eyes. His face, like the rest of his body, had grown too long for its width, so when he smiled, his mouth pushed his other features aside. An easy smile, for he was usually good-humored, although visited occasionally by moods of sadness. But confidence was not lacking. As the fifth child in a string of successes, Clifton was expected to be outgoing.

He had asked Susan to the carnival, but Susan's mother objected, believing her daughter should attend with girlfriends. Clifton sighed, failing to share Mrs. Lubell's enthusiasm for the Andes Mountains. He won-

dered if Susan had enjoyed Dollar Night; they had met once accidentally on the midway, but hadn't talked long. He thought the Heinrichs liked him; as their paperboy he saw them every week. But they had just moved to town, Mr. Heinrich being a physician in a Cleveland hospital, and Clifton thought they probably wanted their children to choose their new friends carefully.

Mrs. Lubell's gray eyes roamed over the impatient faces, then found Susan. A question on rivers. Perfect answer. Must have memorized Chapter 14, Clifton thought. He didn't know too much about the already popular Susan; yet he liked her. She inherited a quick comic-book smile and pretty dark hair which bounced above her shoulders. Still hiding a baby plumpness beneath her Villager skirts and dresses, Susan dramatized femininity as a controlled, jubilant enchantment with things she enjoyed, and quiet indifference to those she didn't. From eavesdropping on her girlfriends, Clifton knew she practiced piano and every summer vacationed in Maine, but besides these slight details, and the sketchy impressions he received from riding his bicycle back and forth near the Heinrichs' home, Clifton little understood the purposes and meaning in Susan's life.

He didn't actually consider Susan a friend, but rather a crystal glass of a girl, a chalice he would someday escort to parties, compose poems for, call up on the phone. But aside from their limited contact in school, or the awkward moments when he interrupted her piano playing to collect for his paper route, Clifton rarely talked with Susan. They reflected a star's relationship, clouded by ignorance of distance, yet unfettered in romantic vision.

The final bell shattered Clifton's intermittent daydreaming, and he pushed up from his desk to speak to Keith Emery, a boy he wanted to know better. Keith sat across the room. Both boys had previously acknowledged each other years ago, even though the educational tracking system had separated their intellects and rearranged their loyalties. Since kindergarten, Clifton spoon-fed at an upper level, mingling with the same

classmates, while Keith struggled along in a similar but less competitive academic world. By some administrative fiat or scheduling decree the tracks had intersected in fifth grade, and since no collision resulted, were allowed to criss-cross into grade six.

Lifting his desk top, Clifton shuffled papers, searching for the books he needed. He glanced across the room at Keith, who sat straddling a desk while talking with two friends. Probably about baseball, Clifton thought. Then Clifton noticed Keith motioning to him, as Keith's friends entered the stream of other pleasant faces leaving class. Edging around two classmates blocking the aisle, Clifton opened his locker to grab his blue jacket and brown leather baseball glove, nodding to Keith as he did so. Wants to see me, he thought.

Keith was a well-liked, personable boy, who moved in a different plane. Brown-eyed and buck-teethed, he ran easily in the circle of sixth-grade athletes, a world long closed to Clifton for his lack of natural ability. In his own right, Clifton was a sensitive, intelligent boy with an eager mind for knowledge and a diligence for schoolwork not shared by Keith's friends. But Clifton knew this achievement also separated him from those who spurned books as mousetraps of afternoon freedom. A few weeks earlier, he had quietly battled tears after striking out in softball and being criticized by a coarse teammate, "I'd rather be able to hit a softball than get straight A's!" That single remark had cut Clifton sharply, for it deepened the chasm he felt separated him from his peers. Later, in examining his own status, he believed he was not readily accepted by anyone he really cared about. Popular, yes, he was considered popular, but not by anyone of significance in his perceptions of sixth-grade society. Through Keith, Clifton hoped to bridge that gap, and gain favor in the eyes of the boys who were always together, playing tackle football on the icy playground, or softball during the warmer days in spring. Now it was softball, every afternoon recess.

Clifton pulled the old glove from the locker shelf, smoothing his hand across the worn dark leather. His

father's glove. It had been Clifton's since he was first able to form the long, flexible fingers into a deep pocket. But a new outfielder's glove, a recent present from his father, was waiting at home. Clifton stacked his books between his arm and his left side, wedging the old glove on top.

He often thought of his father, a man who found swelling pride in the accomplishments of his four older daughters, but who had always wanted a son. Ever since he had been a small boy, Clifton remembered being inundated with his father's talks on the hardships of the Depression, when the elder Gabriel struggled to help support his family and couldn't participate in either high school or college athletics, sports to which he had a natural affinity. During these laments, his father's subtle bitterness was softened only by the hope he held for Clifton to become what he was denied, to achieve the athletic success assured his unlucky father. Mr. Gabriel was indeed a successful man, good-natured and confident, but Clifton sensed a melancholy emptiness, a blind spot in his father's vision of accomplishment. And Clifton had long since understood he was to fill this void.

As he lounged against the blackboard, waiting for Keith to unearth a homework paper, Clifton recalled the hours of patient practice his father spent hoping to overcome his son's natural awkwardness. Clifton was big for his age, and a fair runner, but when it came to bat meeting ball, or receiving a forward pass, he lacked his father's innate finesse. So the small L-shaped backyard had become an after-work training camp for fielding grounders, catching passes, or running sprints, depending upon the season. Neighbors would always remember Mr. Gabriel, standing broad-shouldered with his thinning pepper hair brushed aside, throwing and re-throwing baseballs and footballs, coaching and re-coaching his clumsily-determined son.

While Keith checked his paper with Mrs. Lubell, Clifton heard the last students creak the wooden floor, and the door click shut. Did pretty well in softball today, he thought, smiling. He knew the years of struggling practice had produced a certain competency, and now he actually

enjoyed some of the games he played. But extreme competition bothered him; he liked sports for the sheer fun of participating. He knew his father wished him more aggressive, but Clifton, while understanding little of his life's purpose, knew the components of his character did not play aggressively. Besides, Clifton liked cats; and cats, especially kittens, had taught him a relaxed sensitivity.

He watched Keith bending over the teacher's desk. Strong arms. Stocky. Like Clifton's father, from an old picture. Could even have been the same room. The thoughts flecked in and out. Deep in Clifton's mind, somewhere beyond his ken, it seemed unusual that he should be seeking friendship with Keith Emery. But consciously he understood one thing; here was the chance to squirm into the ranks of the athletically adept, the inner circle, not entirely by skill, but through the emotional bonds of boyish friendship. His father would be pleased.

Keith was finished. He had motioned first, and Clifton was wondering why. "Going downtown?" Keith asked, as if expecting but one answer.

"Sure, let's go." Clifton pulled the door open, and followed Keith into the cool, green-tiled hall, then down the single flight of cement and metal steps. Friendship was a crowded two-way street, Clifton thought as they clattered down, and he questioned why Keith wasn't spurning his own cautious attention, but rather seemed so encouraging. This thought disturbed Clifton, for if Keith needed his friendship, perhaps Keith's own status in the athletic pecking order was crumbling. As they pushed through the doors into the sunlight, Clifton slipped the idea from his mind.

Outside, the air was light, supporting the parachuting milkweed clouds. Good to be out of class. Warm, carefree day, Clifton thought. He saw three sparrows chasing branch to branch in the massive oak beyond the reach of the black-topped playground. Good to share that freedom.

Clifton clutched his slipping books as he walked beside Keith toward M.T.'s Drug Store, the afternoon saltlick for students passing through town. Such a quaint

village. At least in tourists' affected lingo, he thought. And Infellisburg Falls attracted carloads: the overfed, overdressed pilgrims from the Cleveland suburbs. The curious rolled in to stare at the old sandstone buildings, the compact brightly-colored shops, but most of all, the languid, tawny river with its twin waterfalls flanking the original Main St. bridge. They ignored the town's natives; mostly younger families enjoying the quiet of a progressive small town, while the village fathers ascended Cleveland's double-helixed corporate ladder. And for their part, the townspeople tolerated the devout tourists, who usually only sang on Sundays.

Keith and Clifton sat small-talking on the built-in concrete flower boxes outside M.T.'s, gulping swallows of Seven-Up. "Ha, ha . . ." Keith laughed, "There's a million of those farmer's daughter jokes. I heard that one from Scott." Clifton laughed, too, but felt uncomfortable. Didn't like those jokes. Still chuckling, Keith jumped up and stuffed his empty can into an overflowing trash container, then turned to Clifton. "Hey, let's go down to the park and see what's left of the carnival. They're probably tearing it down today, and we could watch the carnies."

Carnies. Clifton wanted to ride his new bicycle that afternoon, hoping to see Susan as he rode beneath the Franklin St. trees. But this was the first time Keith suggested they do anything together, so he agreed, and they began walking the two blocks down Main St. to the park.

Each spring Riverside Park battled the Meagre Pile Carnival. The park was normally a beautiful, open expanse of flowers and grass, with overhanging willows regally attending the riverbank. Narrow in width, it extended about 250 yards, nestled between the river and the sloping backyards of Orange St. A recently-organized beautification committee had donated picnic tables and begun work on a patio-like Main St. entrance, and the bulbs they buried in the fall were puffing yellow and red.

The park's crowd-drawer, though, was the river, which flowed reluctantly by the grass-tufted banks until it vanished over the man-made dam and swept beneath the

bridge, there to tumble through the rocks of the natural falls and push past the cliffs of shale and clay to the west. But every spring, village officials chose the park site for the Flower Festival carnival, and each spring Riverside was invaded and destroyed. Blitzkrieg. It was this renewed wreckage Clifton and Keith surveyed as they entered the park, finding the carnival workers already gone. All about them the slender grass was torn from its roots, replaced by cosmetic sawdust and mud. The blemishes showed. Garbage and midway debris, the empty Coca-Cola cups, the flattened popcorn boxes, the hollow plastic poodle prizes, littered the once lush field. And tracks of hardened mud remained where lines of excited youngsters had pushed and jostled for one last stomach-turning ride on the Tilt-A-Whirl and Round-Up, for on Dollar Night the neon lights had screamed out their own rhythm to the cheap rock and roll. Now the plastic paradise was gone, and only the defiled grass was left to remember.

The grass used to grow back, fighting to pull through the parched, trampled earth. Through the heat of summer and the sympathies of the gentle people who walked softly, the grass would cautiously return. But recently autumn had brought the Crusaders. The father-organized junior high football team now practiced in the park; and the grass, although spiked and ripped away, remembered.

The coffee and cream river, though, flowed on, its memory clouded. Old Indian tribes named it "river of clear water;" but both clean water and Indians were now history, slim volumes preserved in dust of the colonial brick library. That was a dividend missing from the upstream paper mill and bag company's annual report. Sticks and other flotsam still occasionally clogged the river, but the real killer choked deeper, strangling the fish, rotting green plants.

Clifton and Keith trudged through the midway of muddy straw, kicking clods from their shoes, disappointed there wasn't more to see. Both had gone to the carnival, gripping the rides and laughing at the leering

pitchmen who blinked behind "three-balls-for-a-quarter" confidence. But the trucks weighed on the highway, rolling the gypsies toward another blossoming town anxious for a yearly dose of the atmospheric madness which seeped mysteriously from calliope pipes.

"You did pretty good in softball today," Keith shouted, running ahead to break a walking stick from a fallen branch. "What did you get, two singles and a double?"

"Two doubles," Clifton said. "And a walk." He caught up with Keith.

"Yeah, that's right, a walk." Keith paused, squinting. "Hey Clifton, why do you do so well in school . . . you know, grades and all?" The question surprised Clifton.

"Oh, I don't know. I kind of like it, I guess. You know, I have to work at it, but it's not that hard."

"I wish it came easier for me. It does for my sister, but I guess I just spend too little time at it. I like sports."

"You could probably be good at both," Clifton said. "It takes a certain way of looking at things, you know, as important . . ." He stopped, and let his voice fade as he looked beyond Keith. The Heinrichs' car swung around the corner onto Main St., by the park entrance. Can always pick it out, he thought. Clifton blinked his eyes back to Keith. The girl Keith liked, what was her name? Gloria something. Powell. Not at all like Susan. Still, he wanted to ask Keith about her. Something to talk about. "Keith," Clifton asked suddenly, "What do you think of Gloria Powell?"

"Oh, I don't know, she's OK, I guess." Keith was uncertain, not as open, not as loose. "Hey look, maybe there's some money scattered by the penny-pitch booth," he stammered, turning away.

Clifton stood still for a moment, confused. Then he ran after Keith. The booth was the only structure left standing, abandoned by its sponsor. The boys kicked about the wooden walls, finding eleven cents in dirty pennies. Beneath a broken plank, Keith uncovered a nickel. They noticed the darkening slate sky, and circled around once more before leaving the park.

As their shoes slopped the muddy ground, Clifton bent down and picked up an apple, apparently a discard from the caramel corn and candy apple concession. It was old, the inner mush already shrinking from the wrinkled skin. Suddenly his brown eyes found a bird, a robin, hopping over the torn grass, nearly twenty-five yards ahead of them. "Hey, watch me scare that bird," he grinned, cocking his arm to throw the apple. He hesitated, his mind intent on hurling a strong, center-fielder's throw, for he had often been criticized for throwing like a girl. High lofty tosses which took forever to reach their target. Head up and follow through.

Clifton leaned back and snapped his wrist down hard, launching a straight, arching throw, perhaps a bit too lofty. Immediately a sickening feeling gripped his stomach, as his eyes followed the descending apple. He had hoped to miss the bird by a few feet, scaring it into flight. The apple met the bird directly, thudding into the gray-feathered back.

Clifton just stared distantly at the crushed, hobbling bird. His thoughts ached back to earlier years, when with a brittle stick he had accidentally killed a chipmunk during a family vacation in Canada. He had cried all day, muffled in the blankets of his bunkbed, his first experience with death being inflicted by his own small hand. But now he wildly grabbed Keith's arm. "Oh, God, c'mon!" he yelled, sprinting toward the wounded bird.

The robin had ceased fluttering and just lay passively, its right wing extended at a broken angle. Its pathetic chirping hurt Clifton as he strained through hesitant tears to examine the bird, pitying the matted mass of feathers. Self-hatred flared within him, and he longed to carry the bird home, fix its wing and let it fly free again.

"That was a pretty good throw," Keith whispered sadly. "You shouldn't have been so accurate, though."

"Let's take it to Dr. Fotts," cried Clifton, sheltering the robin in his shaking arms as he ran, half-walked to the street. But there he stopped, wrestling with the doubt creeping into his own mind. Had he secretly aimed to hit the bird, to impress Keith with his casual attitude toward

life and thus gain a mantle of toughness? No, no he hadn't. But how, by accident? Was that what happened? No, no it wasn't. He assured himself. But if that had been the motivation, subconsciously vaulted into action, he now realized his deed misguided, for Keith, too, in his own way, seemed to care about the poor bird, although finding it difficult to express his true feelings. Clifton understood that now. "You shouldn't have been so accurate" was as close as Keith could come.

The two boys stood there, on the edge of the car-clogged street, oblivious to everything but the ruffled bird Clifton cradled in his hands. The robin was dying. It turned its puffy head from side to side, vainly trying to lift its beak and see its captors. But the apple had crushed beneath the feathers, damaging internally. The bird was obviously suffering.

"You'd better kill it," Keith said softly.

The thought of wantonly destroying the robin repulsed Clifton, but he was stabbed by each reluctant look at the bird's pain, and by its tiny squeaks of life. He slowly turned back to the park, and by the base of a tree discovered a wadded nylon stocking lying among the refuse. Unraveling the meshed nylon, Clifton dropped a few large river stones into the heel, and eased the straining bird inside. He then knotted the open end, and slid his way slowly down the bank to the stretch of river pooled above the dam. Praying softly, he threw the imprisoned bird towards the river, watching the rocks plunge the stocking downward to the water, where it disappeared into the muddy-brown depths.

As Clifton struggled up the sloping bank, he saw Keith hesitantly approaching. "I've got to be getting home," Keith said. "We're having an early dinner."

"That's OK. I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

Keith turned, and Clifton suddenly felt the tears, hot and salty. He watched Keith walk away, shrinking smaller and smaller while climbing the hill toward the Emery's house. Finally Clifton sulked home, moving down Main St., but averting his reddened eyes from those he passed. He only stopped when he reached Circle Park

in the middle of the town shopping district. Several young robins flew about the old wooden bandstand, celebrating the freedom of a May afternoon in 1967. Clifton paused momentarily, wanting to shout out to them, "I'm sorry, I really am! I didn't mean it!" But the birds continued their carefree glides around the ivy-covered railings ignoring his silent confession.

Clifton trudged homeward, his heavy feet scraping the flagstone sidewalks. Arriving at his own front door, he hesitated. He might go further down the street to see Susan, talk to her, finally talk to her as a friend. Forget the piano, forget the baseball, but confess about the bird . . . and what it meant to be tempted . . . and what it meant to have sinned. Then he remembered his father, and the hours spent sweating in the backyard. And he almost wondered where he was going. But then he remembered that, too. He was going home to find his new baseball glove and play catch. So he ran up the front steps, and closed the door behind him.