

*A Corner of the Universe* by Ann M. Martin, pgs. vii-xi

Last summer, the summer I turned twelve, was the summer Adam came. And forever after I will think of events as Before Adam and After Adam. Tonight, which is several months After Adam, I finally have an evening alone.

I am sitting in our parlor, inspecting our home movies, which are lined up in a metal box. Each reel of film is carefully labeled. WEDDING DAY – 1945. VISIT WITH HAYDEN – 1947. HATTIE— 1951. FOURTH OF JULY—1958. I look for the films from this summer. Dad has spliced them together onto a big reel labeled JUNE-JULY 1960. I hold it in my hands, turn it over and over.

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The evening is quiet. I feel like I am the only one at home, even though two of the rooms upstairs are occupied. I hear the clocks in Mr. Penny’s room, and footsteps padding down the hall to the bathroom. The footsteps belong to Miss Hagerty, I’m sure of it. I know the routines of our boarders, and now is the hour when Miss Hagerty, who is past eighty, begins what she calls her nightly beauty regime. Outside, a car glides down Grant Avenue, sending its headlights circling around the darkened living room. It’s warm for October, and so I have cracked one window open. I can smell leaves, hear a dog barking.

Mom and Dad have gone with Nana and Papa to some big dinner at the Present Day Club, their first true social event since Nana and Papa’s party on that awful night in July. On this first night to myself, Dad has entrusted me with his movie projector and all the reels of film. I made popcorn and am eating it in the parlor where technically I am not supposed to eat anything, following the unfortunate deviled egg incident of 1958. Really, you can only see the edges of the stain, plus I’m twelve now, not some little ten-year-old. I would think the food ban could be lifted, since Dad feels that I am responsible enough to operate his movie equipment.

He said I could do everything myself this evening, and I have, without a single mistake or accident. I set up the screen at one end of the parlor. I lugged the projector out of the closet, hoisted it onto a table, and threaded it with a reel of film, making all the right loops. Turned on the projector, turned off the light, put the bowl of popcorn on a pot holder in my lap, and settled in to watch the film labeled HATTIE— 1951. It’s one of my favorites because my third birthday party is on it and I can watch our old cat Simon jump up on the dining room table and land in a dish of ice cream. Then I can play the film backward and watch Simon fly down to the floor and see all the splashes of ice cream slurp themselves back into the dish. I made Simon jump in and out several times before I watched the rest of the film.

But now I am holding the tin from this summer. I consider it for a long time before I take out the reel and fasten it to the side of the projector. I thread and loop and wind, doing everything by the light of a little reading lamp. When I finish, my hands are shaking. I draw in a deep breath, turn on the projector, turn off the light, sit back.

Well. There is Angel Valentine, the very first thing. She is standing on our front porch, waving at the camera. We have an awful lot of shots of people standing on our front porch, waving at the camera. That's because when Dad pulls out his camera and starts aiming it around, someone is bound to say, "Oh, Lord, not the movie camera. I don't know what to do!" And Dad always replies, "Well, how about if you just stand on the porch and wave?" So there is Angel waving. Pretty soon Miss Hagerty and Mr. Penny step out of the house and stand one on each side of Angel and they wave too.

And then later, on another day, in dimmer light, I see Nana and Papa standing on their own front porch, waving. They are dressed for a party. Papa is in his tux with shiny shoes, and Nana is wearing a long dress, all the way to her ankles, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. I don't remember where they were going, dressed like that. But they are happy, smiling, their arms linked, Papa patting Nana's hand.

And then suddenly there is Adam. He won't smile or wave at the camera. He would never do anything you asked him to do when the movie camera was out. So he is standing in our yard tossing a baseball up and down, up and down. When the front door opens and Angel steps out, looking fresh and cool in a sleeveless summer dress, he drops the ball at his feet and stares at her as she waves at Dad, then sits on the porch swing and opens a book. I play the scene backward, then watch it again. Not for the entertainment value, but so I can see Adam once more.

Next comes the carnival. I sit up straighter. There's the Ferris wheel. Mom and I are riding it around and around, feeling awkward because Dad won't turn off the camera. We smile and smile and smile some more, huge smiles that eventually begin to look branded onto our faces. And there's the Fourth of July band concert, our picnic spread in front of us. Adam is eating in a machine-like way, refusing to look at the camera. Everyone else dutifully makes yummy motions, pats their stomachs, grins in Dad's direction. I let out a quiet burp, for Adam's benefit, which makes him laugh.

Finally there is my birthday party – the one Mom and Dad gave, not Adam's. Adam's was private. And it was a once-in-a-lifetime event. This party is the one we have every year. I look at the cake, the presents. No Simon now. He died when I was five, and we never got another pet. Everyone is laughing – Mom, Nana, Papa, Cookie, Miss Hagerty, Mr. Penny, Angel, me. Everyone except Adam, who is focused on the decorations on my cake. We don't know it yet, but this is the beginning of the sugar rose incident, and Adam is about to storm off and Dad is about to stop filming.

Presently the reel clicks to an end and the tail of the film flaps around. I turn the projector off and sit in the dark for a few moments, thinking about all those happy images. The smiling, the waving. I want to cry. My father's movies are great, but they don't begin to tell the story of the summer. What's left out is more important than what is there. Dad captured the good times, only the good times.

The parts he left out are what changed my life.