

Light at
SUMMER'S END

KIM BALLARD

© 2007

Visit Kim's website at: www.storykim.com.
Visit OakTara at www.oaktara.com.

Available from:

- [www.pearable.com/oaktara](http://www.parable.com/oaktara)
- www.barnesandnoble.com
- www.buy.com
- www.amazon.com
- www.booksamillion.com
- www.target.com
- and other national retail outlets.

\$15.95, 5 ½ x 8 ½ Paperback, 116 pp., 978-1-60290-047-9
F1C000000 **FICTION** / General

Published in the U.S. by:

OakTara Publishers

P.O. Box 8, Waterford, VA 20197

One

Vellie came out of the house looking for a breeze, a bowl of vanilla ice cream in her hands. She kept the screen door from slamming—she timed it instinctively and intercepted it a mere millimeter before it hit—without looking. Lowering herself into her “favorite” rocker (it was her only rocker), she managed to keep the ice cream in the bowl. She pulled the skirt of her pink flowered sundress up to her knees. Though she was a true Southern lady, she reckoned it was all right not to have anything on her legs or feet on such a hot, Georgia afternoon. In fact, while no one questioned she was a lady, she had a balanced sense of not allowing what was *proper* to be out of proportion with what was *comfortable*.

She ate that first spoonful of ice cream as if she'd never tasted it before, savoring the cool sweetness with her eyes closed. As she swallowed, she looked out across the land. Her land. Nothing seemed to move out there in the sun. The longer grasses in the far-off meadow rippled occasionally. Though there had been little rain, humidity would come and settle thick as dumplings. And the sky seemed just as white.

This had been her husband's favorite time of year. She smiled to think of Post. Actually, every time of year was his favorite. He had loved life and loved to farm. He had been well educated and could have become anything. In fact, his father had been a doctor and, as the only son, Post was expected to be

likewise. But Post had other plans. He loved to be as involved in life as he could, whether it was with people, animals, or the land. He talked of working the land as being the highest form of healing for the human soul. Other farmers in the area looked at him as though he was a little loony. They farmed because that was what was theirs to do. Yes, they loved the land. Some were better businessmen than others. But for the most part they just shook their heads at Post's "philosophical notions."

Vellie chuckled and put her empty ice cream bowl on the table an arm's length from her. She picked up the TV section of the newspaper she'd left out there from that morning, relaxed, and began to rock and fan herself. An unfelt breeze carried the faint scent of honeysuckle. And everything—even the birds—was quiet. The only sound was her wooden rocker rolling back and forth against the narrow wood planks of her immense front porch. The rough wood against wood rhythmically, repeatedly kinked through her body—so familiar it went unnoticed.

She heard the car come up the hill at the same time Jasper did. The old basset hound gave himself a partial push-up to bark and howl.

"All right, Jasper, I can see it comin'." Jasper was inspired to continue. As the canary yellow sedan barely came into view, Vellie shaded her brow with the newspaper and squinted. "Jasper, that's just Bill comin'." Jasper waddled to the edge of the porch and paid close attention going down the steps.

The car chewed the gravel and spewed dust clouds billowing behind it before it scrambled to a halt.

"Mornin', Mama." Bill accented his greeting with the slam of his car door. Vellie noticed a young girl in the backseat.

"Mornin'. Who you carryin'?"

"Ah, that's Melissa," Bill replied.

Vellie raised her chin and peered suspiciously at her son. He always sounded a little too excited when trouble was close at hand. He opened the back door and a girl who looked about

fourteen climbed out of the backseat. She held her head high and her body had a determined rigidness about it, but Vellie saw uncertainty, perhaps fear, in her eyes.

“Melissa, that there’s Miz Evelyn Bagley. Most ever’body calls her Miss Vellie. Mama, Melissa’s Wanita’s girl.”

“Glad to meet you, Melissa. Y’all come on up here outta that sun,” Vellie called.

“It sure is hot.” Bill finally knelt and gave Jasper some scrubbing behind the ears. Vellie watched Melissa eye the house, its width and height, the porch, and the steps as she came up. She rubbed the handrail and the post on her way as if she were a visiting princess in another queen’s castle. Paying no attention to Vellie as she paraded past, she took a seat, a white wicker chair, at the round table near one end of the porch, almost with her back to Vellie.

“Are you thirsty, Melissa? I have some sweet tea in the refrigerator. I’d be glad to get you a glass.” Vellie smiled, waiting.

Melissa sat like a statue, staring into the distant hills. Her thick dark hair shone auburn streaks in the sunlight that crept over the railing. She did not say a word.

Vellie’s smile faded to concern. Puzzled, she eyed Bill, who had also noticed the silence and looked up from his playing with the dog. He glanced first at Vellie and then at Melissa.

“Melissa, honey, Mama wants to know if you’d like some tea.” He stood up and sauntered toward the porch. Jasper waddled alongside.

“No, thank you,” she said politely. Stoically.

“All right, then,” Vellie said quietly. “Son?”

“Yes, Mama, tea sounds lovely.”

“I’ll be right back.” Vellie dropped the newspaper in her rocker behind her. She gave Bill a strong questioning, perhaps even slightly disapproving, look as she passed into the house.

Bill forced a toothy smile at her, more like a grimace. Then

she disappeared.

“Melissa,” he almost whispered so Vellie couldn’t hear through the open windows, “I thought you were looking forward to coming to the country for the summer.”

“*You* were looking forward,” she accused. Her deep brown eyes were fierce. “*She* didn’t even know I was coming. You’re such a jerk.” Melissa returned to her statue pose, having said her piece.

“Look—I’m sorry. I just didn’t know what to tell her.” Bill waited for a response. Any response. “It’s gonna be okay, you’ll see. It’s gonna be fine for you to stay here.”

Another silence.

Melissa continued to stare off in the distance.

“Melissa, please don’t be difficult. You promised me you’d try to get along with her. Come on, what do you want from me?”

Vellie suddenly appeared through the screen door. “Maybe I should be asking that question of you,” she said in the motherly tone that seemed to prove she hears all. She carried the tray of three glasses of tea toward the table. Bill and Melissa glanced at her, interrupted. Again Melissa turned away.

Bill took the tray and set it gently on the table. Vellie took a glass off and handed it to Melissa. “It’s mighty hot out here, Melissa. You don’t have to drink it, but I brought it out in case you change your mind.”

Bill grabbed a glass and plopped himself back in one of the chairs at the table, taking gulps of cold tea. “That’s real good tea, Mama.”

Vellie smiled at her son, pulling out a chair for herself. Bill quickly leaned up to gesture a gentlemanly help as she sat. “Never you mind, Bill.” Vellie scooted her chair up herself, throwing a sideways grin at her firstborn. “So what’s your answer?” she asked playfully.

Bill stared at her blankly. “My answer?”

“What’s this little visit all about?”

He chuckled, setting his glass on the table. “Good ol’ Mama, always right to the point.”

She waited for his reply.

“You know you’d make a great salesman, Mama. Always waiting for the other guy to talk hisself into a sale. Except I don’t believe I want the competition.”

“Himself,” she corrected him, with the fluid reflex of a true English teacher. But her expression didn’t change.

“Right. Okay, here’s the beef. Wanita—you remember Wanita, don’t you?”

She nodded. She glanced at Melissa who stirred slightly, twisting to see less of them and more of the fields.

“Well,” Bill continued, “we need a trip away from everything right now...”

Melissa picked up her tea and took a sip. Vellie noticed but did not look in her direction. Vellie feigned attention to Bill, hearing the words, but it was Melissa she was tuned to, watching, as it were, her movement, trying to sense her feelings.

Bill continued without distraction. “It’s just that she’s under a lot of pressure at work and we have this opportunity to go to Cancun, Mama...”

Melissa quietly rose from her chair and circled behind them toward the steps. Vellie’s mind raced through whether or not to stop her, show that she noticed, or just how to respond. She decided to let her go right now. Melissa continued walking away from the house, but she was still within Vellie’s peripheral vision.

“So whataya say, Mama?” Bill pleaded.

“Say?”

“About Melissa’s staying with you for the summer.”

Vellie leaned back a little, taking in a breath. “I don’t know, honey. She doesn’t seem to want to be here.”

“Nonsense! She’s just hot and tired from the long drive. She’s really not such a bad kid...where is she?” He stretched around suddenly to see off the porch.

Vellie motioned toward Melissa. She was almost as far as the pasture, near the fence that kept in the ponies which were no longer there.

Vellie leaned forward. “Darlin’, do you really think it’s good for her to be out here for the entire summer?”

“No, Mama,” Bill cajoled, placing the glass on the table and rising from his chair, “you know Wanita’s been through a lot the last couple of years. I just wanna do somethin’ nice for her. Take her out of all this for a while.” He began to walk the length of the porch, choosing his words carefully. “It’ll be good for Melissa, too. And you. I don’t like you livin’ out here alone. And Melissa needs somebody like you right now, too.” He came up behind Vellie and put his hands on her shoulders, squeezing, pleading. “Please do this one thing for me, Mama. For Melissa’s sake, if not Wanita’s.”

Vellie looked again at Melissa who was approaching the far side of the pasture and would soon disappear over the hill near the creek. It had been a long time since she had had children in the house. She had just gotten to where she enjoyed not having another person besides herself to look after. She had looked forward to retiring. Thirty-five years of channeling teenage energy into the world of English and American literature was wonderfully rewarding. But now she was ready to enjoy her days full of what she called the three *Rs* of retirement: reading, writing, and rocking. In fact, she had quite a number of projects on her desk that needed her attention. Now that time belonged to her, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to give it up!

But there was something about this young girl that touched her. Perhaps it was the memory of herself as a young girl.

“What about what Melissa wants?” she challenged.

“She’s fourteen, Mama. She doesn’t know what she wants.”

He walked back behind his own chair and leaned on it.

“Besides, this isn’t about what *she* wants, is it, Bill?”

“I wasn’t thinking that.”

“No, but it’s true.”

“Okay, Mama, it’s true. I want some time alone with Wanita, and Melissa is nothing but trouble.”

“She’s her daughter.”

“Yes, and she gets attention.” He threw his arms in the air and turned to the porch railing.

“Bill.” Vellie looked down, trying to put the right words together. “If you really love Wanita and want to make a life with her, you’re gonna have to share her with Melissa. In fact, you’re gonna have to make friends with Melissa. She is not a threat to you. She’s a little girl who’s lost her father. She’s probably scared to death she’s going to lose her mother, too.”

Bill threw his head back and laughed. “Scared? Melissa? That girl ain’t scared of nothin’. She’s rude to me and downright mean to Wanita. I’m tired of her being around. I’m tired of seeing Wanita cry because of that girl.”

Even when he was a little boy, Bill always tried to create a mood he thought would get him what he wanted. But it usually backfired, because he never quite learned when to quit. Nor did he have a firm handle on when extremes contradicted themselves and trapped him by revealing his true, and generally selfish, motives.

Vellie never could manage to keep from trying to make a point by playing on his melodrama. “So you thought you’d just dump her on good ol’ Mama? A girl like that. Weren’t you concerned she’d be too much for me? No, you have to think about having Wanita all to yourself instead of working things out with Melissa and helping Wanita work things out with her.”

Bill huffed, “You do *not* understand—” He started pacing again.

Vellie wrapped both hands around her glass of tea. The ice had almost completely melted and the glass was covered with moisture. “Bill, sit down for a minute.” She picked up her glass with one hand and wiped the cold sweat off with the other, spattering the wood slats below.

He paused, as if debating, then took his chair.

Vellie continued. “I don’t think you’ve handled this situation well. And I don’t approve of you and Wanita going off like this. But...I will keep Melissa—for *her* sake, not for you and not for Wanita.”

Bill took her hands in his and kissed them. “Thank you, Mama. Y’all’ll get along great, you’ll see. Here, let me get her bags out. I got to be back in town to get Wanita from work. This is great, Mama!” He started down the stairs. The excitement stirred Jasper to barking and following Bill. “You’ll see, Mama. Melissa’s a great girl—really, she is.”

Vellie shook her head at Bill. Squinting toward the pasture, she saw nothing more than she did every day. Toward the Timmermanns’ there were thick-trunked live oaks and maples, sprinkled with dogwood. Toward the creek were meadows of wild grains, which at one time boasted tobacco. Though she couldn’t actually see the creek from the porch, she knew right where it cut through her property on its way to the Ocone river. She couldn’t see Melissa either, but she knew Melissa was just beyond the edge of the hill.

“Here’s all her stuff, Mama,” Bill called as he stacked two big suitcases at the top of the steps and grabbed another overnight-type bag. “I’ll just take ’em on up to Mark and Mike’s old room—that’s okay with you, isn’t it?—and then I’ll be on my way. C’mon Jasper.”

The screen door squeaked, immediately followed by a *bang!* that shattered Vellie’s thoughts and reminded her of former days. “Sorry, Mama!” Bill’s apology filtered down and out the door as he bounded upstairs. *At twelve or thirty-two,*

she thought, *some things never change*. She smiled.

Vellie collected tea glasses back onto the tray to take in when she noticed Melissa wandering back toward the house. Vellie stood straight up, catching Melissa's eyes. Melissa stopped walking for a minute, then continued a little faster, looking down, playing with some weeds in her hand.

"Where's Bill?" Melissa asked, coming up the steps.

"Inside. Putting your things upstairs."

"So I'm staying." She sat down in Vellie's rocker.

"Disappointed?"

Melissa just shrugged, staring out over the land.

Vellie leaned back against the table. "Melissa, you're welcome to stay with me." She stopped a minute, debating what to say. "I know you're angry. It's no fun being left behind."

"Look—the way I see it, we're in sort of the same boat. I get dumped. And you get dumped on," Melissa said stiffly.

"I don't *feel* dumped on."

"Oh no?"

"No. I had a choice. And I chose to have you here for the summer. You have a choice."

"No way. I was dumped," Melissa countered.

"Maybe. But you can choose whether or not to like it—"

"I hate it."

"—or whether or not we become friends."

"Spare me the down-home routine, okay? I'm not a child. And I don't need you for a friend!" Melissa growled.

Bill and Jasper burst out the front door.

"Hey, women—" he drew the words out as if trying to scoop up a heavy load—"I hate to just run off like this, but you know how it goes." He went to Vellie, arms outstretched. "Thanks, Mama. I owe you one," he said softly, hugging her.

Vellie turned up her face for him to kiss her cheek. "When will you be back?"

"I dunno." He headed for Melissa. "But we'll be in touch, so

don't you worry none." He leaned over to give Melissa a kiss, but she turned away. "Fine," he teased. "I give you a free summer's vacation in the country and this is how I'm treated. Well—" he took the steps down in two jumps and leapt to the car—"so long, you two. Have a great summer and keep smiling."

He roared off, leaving Jasper in the orange dust, barking.

Vellie took the tray inside. Melissa watched the pillows of dirt slowly rise like a rusty mist and spread thinner and thinner toward the sky

Later that night, as the half moon shone brightly through her window, Vellie lay awake, turning the events of the day over and over in her mind. Then, against all the familiar sounds in the darkness, she heard Melissa cry. Softly. She longed to go in and hold this angry, confused child, but she did not yet have the right to intrude.

Two

The next morning Melissa came downstairs to the kitchen. Vellie was nowhere to be seen. On the table were two bowls, spoons, and a box of homemade muesli-type cereal. Orange peels on the counter confirmed that the orange juice in two glasses was fresh.

Vellie came in the back door, sweaty, carrying a gray pail full of milk. “Mornin’,” she said. She set the pail down and closed the door.

“Hi,” Melissa responded, surprised at her own eager tone. “This is real country, isn’t it?”

Vellie chuckled. “Well, I’m not exactly sure what you mean. If it were real country, you’d be getting scrambled eggs, grits, biscuits, ham—with red-eye gravy, of course, and bacon and sausage, if there’s company, along with this juice and milk. And coffee. Since it’s just me these days, I’ve cut back a bit.” She took a cup and dipped out milk into two glasses of ice. “Cereal’s enough for me. If I’d known you were coming, I’d have prepared better. But that’s not your fault.”

“This is fine.” Melissa took the glass of milk Vellie handed her.

“Did you sleep okay last night?” Vellie asked. They sat on opposite sides of the table.

“Yeah,” Melissa answered, shrugging.

“It’s tough getting used to a new bed,” Vellie empathized.

“Are those your horses on the other side of the creek?” Melissa asked. She filled her bowl and began to eat.

“No, those are the Timmermanns’. They breed thoroughbreds and American saddle horses. Their son is ten or eleven and could sit a horse at three. You can’t see their house from here—you can from the garden, though.”

“Garden?”

“Mmm-hmmm. Just follow that road out back there, and you can’t miss it.”

Melissa nodded.

They ate much of their breakfast in silence. But silence has a way of bonding. And Vellie’s attention to Melissa, to remembering what it was to be fourteen and living introspectively, helped create comfort in the silence.

“How come you don’t have any horses?” Melissa tipped her bowl to spoon out the last bit of milk.

“I have Tavish. He’s a good old horse. There’s a small corral for him out behind the shed. In fact, that shed was really four stalls at one time. I just keep one now for Tavish. I took off the back so he can come and go as he likes. I let him roam in the pasture out yonder mostly, though.”

Melissa took her bowl and glass and rinsed them off in the sink. “Do you ride him a lot?”

“When I go into town.” Vellie took her bowl and glass to the sink, too.

Melissa moved closer to the back door.

Vellie continued, “It’s about five miles, so it’s good exercise for him. And if I go visiting, I sometimes ride him then—if it’s not too far and if I’m in no real hurry. He can keep a fast pace, though. He’s got energy! I’m the one who likes to move a bit slower.”

“I think I’ll go down to the river,” Melissa said when Vellie paused. Melissa had been playing a little with the doorknob but not rudely. She seemed to be listening, but she rarely made eye

contact with Vellie. And when she did, it was brief.

“Don’t wait lunch for me; I may not be back by then.”

“Well, then take something with you.”

“No—,” Melissa started to protest.

But Vellie had already grabbed a small paper bag off the counter and started dropping in a red-delicious apple and banana and other fruits from the basket by the refrigerator. “I’ll have no argument. Just take these goodies with you so you’ll have them when you get hungry. The creek water is clean enough if you get thirsty.”

“Thank you.” Melissa smiled, in spite of herself. She took the bag and left out the back door so she could walk by the shed to see Tavish.

Vellie swiftly tidied the kitchen before going to her desk to tackle some work. She sighed as she sat and faced the stack. She’d just received the editor’s comments on a few chapters she’d written for a new textbook of English literature for the tenth-grade level. And now before her lay the task of incorporating those changes, as well as her own.

She sat staring at the stacks. They weren’t big, but intimidating nonetheless. Her eyes wandered over to the corner table, almost adjacent to her desk. There were the members of her family, caught forever and framed. All different ages. Vacations. Her only daughter Carol’s fourth Christmas—and first real doll. Bill and Mark on one of the Timmermanns’ horses next door. Michael hanging from his knees on a tree branch.

She shook her head at Bill’s seventh-grade graduation picture. At twelve he was still such a small guy. His hair was straight and brown, and he could never quite make it do anything in particular. He had an enchanting smile, though, and seemed to have lots of friends. He could really make things happen. Science and math were his favorite things, and he had gone on to Georgia Tech to study engineering. Now he sold

software packages.

There was a picture of Mark at seven in his Red Devils football uniform in the same stance as his senior year in high school football picture. The only difference was that, at seven, he was simply a miniature of eighteen.

When Carol was born, Mark was two. From the moment they laid eyes on each other they were almost inseparable, until he went to Clemson on a football scholarship. They fought like normal kids growing up, but Mark always seemed to give in, mostly to get her off his back. Carol could be a real bossy kid. Post always called her “Princess,” and she used that any chance she got.

Then there was Michael—such a fat baby. Vellie picked up a picture of all four children. Bill was ten years old, Mark was six, and Carol four. Michael was ten months old. She touched the image of his fat little body with her index finger. He was laughing. He made everyone laugh as he grew up. Always the center of attention, making up songs and rhymes. He liked to play jokes on people but wasn’t vicious. Bill had played jokes growing up, too. But somehow he never learned when to quit. Michael had a better instinct for people.

Though she loved all her children, she and Michael had always been the closest. Maybe by the time he came Vellie was really feeling confident about mothering. She was more relaxed with him—Bill and Carol brought that up to her constantly, accusing her of spoiling him rotten. “You didn’t let *us* do that when we were kids.” That mostly came from Carol. Bill thought Carol *and* Michael were allowed to get away with everything. It seemed to Vellie that Bill should have handled things like that more maturely since he was the oldest—and ten years older than Michael, in fact. But Bill had such a temper. Such a chip on his shoulder.

Her eyes fell on a picture of Post and Bill when he was three. Billy, still rather bald, poor dear, was on his daddy’s

shoulders, holding fistfuls of hair. Post had been bouncing him around, giving him a camel ride. They were both laughing. Post must have been—she looked randomly at the wall, counting—forty-two. That's right. He was not quite forty when Bill was born.

A picture of Michael on his sixteenth birthday brought tears to her eyes. So handsome in his red sweater and black jeans, he was mounted on his new motorcycle. A black Yamaha.

She picked up her wedding picture. Post was so thin then. Even at thirty-eight. She had been only twenty-three. Her father had warned her not to marry such a *liberal*, especially one so much older. Vellie smiled. Post may have had his own way of thinking and doing things, but he was loyal and definite in his deep faith in God, in the land, and in his family. Liberal was the last thing her husband was.

When he died, she took consolation in his having lived a tremendously fulfilled life. There were no regrets. She had learned from him to do everything with full commitment and a sense of humor, and give her best to whatever she did. Those same qualities had somehow been born in Michael, too. And since Michael had been the only one still at home, they grew closer to fill the enormous gap of life Post had left behind.

She took a deep breath, setting the picture in its place....

For more of the story, read...

Light at
SUMMER'S END

KIM BALLARD

Visit Kim's website at: www.storykim.com.
Visit OakTara at www.oaktara.com.

Available from:

- [www.pearable.com/oaktara](http://www.parable.com/oaktara)
- www.barnesandnoble.com
- www.buy.com
- www.amazon.com
- www.booksamillion.com
- www.target.com
- and other national retail outlets.

Also by Kim Ballard

Julia's Quest

**An emotionally riveting tale
of one woman's courageous search
for her true identity.**

Julia Mason has searched for her birth parents since she was a teenager. Years later, lies, dreams, confrontations, and a confession from her adoptive mother lead Julia down a troubling path to find answers to the questions that have plagued her most of her life.

The trail will lead her deep into the mountains of North Carolina...into the heart of a strong family, burdened with a dark and painful secret.

*Set in Appalachia, rich in folklore and simple lifestyle...
a world where using herbs and home remedies
is essential and unassuming,
religion is inseparable from everyday life,
and art and craftsmanship are a means of living.*

**For more information:
www.oaktara.com**

About the Author



KIM BALLARD graduated from Wheaton College with a B.A. in English Literature and completed her Masters work in English Literature at the University of Central Arkansas and the University of Georgia at Athens. In addition to *Light at Summer's End*, Kim is also the author of another novel, *Julia's Quest* (OakTara), and has published non-fiction essays and short stories. Her love of the written word affords her a broad interest, covering many genres for storytelling. As a literature and writing teacher, she enjoys passing on her passion for World Literature, American and British Literature to junior and senior high-school students.

Light at Summer's End is dedicated to all the children who grieve the loss of their siblings because of abortion," Kim says. "The story explores the power each of us has to face painful things in our lives. Yet, God never leaves us alone in our struggles, but provides the right people at the right time to enrich us and enable us to heal."

Kim loves to hear from her readers. You may write her at: inkieballard@hotmail.com.

For more information on Kim Ballard:
www.storykim.com
www.oaktara.com