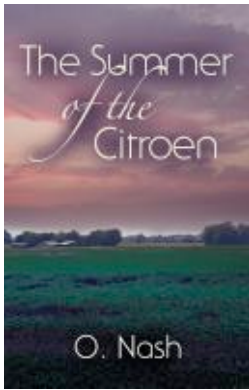




The Summer  
*of the*  
Citroen

O. Nash



*When Jean Russo and his beautiful wife Mina move into a north Alabama community driving "a funny lookin' French car," they set into motion events that forever change young Dex Morris and his family. The first of three planned novels that follow Dex over three decades, The Summer of the Citroen is a warm, engaging narrative that once started is hard to put down.*

# The Summer of the Citroen

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# **THE SUMMER OF THE CITROEN**

**O. Nash**

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**Prologue**  
**1952**



## To Hell With Superman

"I saw Mrs. Woodall today," his mother said, passing a plate of hot biscuits. "She said Harvey's been wanting you to come see him."

Dex ate his supper and said nothing.

"I told her you would."

"Aw, Ma, what'd you go and do that for?"

"Because he's your friend and he's sick and because it's the right thing to do."

"Aw, Daddy...?" he appealed to his father.

"Do what your mama tells you. That boy prob'ly ain't gonna make it till he's full grown, sickly as he is. It won't hurtcha to spend a little time with him."

"It's not catching, is it, what he's got?"

"No," his mother assured him, "you can't get it from being around him. It's a kind of blood disease. He's had it since he was little. I wouldn't want you to visit him if it was something contagious."

"Anyway," his father said, mopping his plate clean with half a biscuit, "I don't unnerstan' why you don't wanna go see your little friend when he's ailing."

"That's just it," Dex mumbled, "He's not my friend."

The thing was, Harvey Woodall was kind of a pain in the butt. His family had lived in the community for only three years, and from the beginning Harvey had been pale, skinny and weak. He had large eyes and ears, and a round little mouth that always seemed to be open and wet. This appearance prompted some of the older boys to nick-name him "The Sucker" after the much despised, bottom-feeding fish.

At first, Dex felt sorry for him and took his part against bullies and jokesters, but he soon began to suspect that

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Harvey liked being weak and picked on. In fact, he seemed to go out of his way to provoke his schoolmates. Exercising a vocabulary of curses and obscenities that most of the boys hadn't even heard before, he would deride and insult them until somebody got enough and popped him in the nose. His reaction was always the same: he would drop to the ground and sob, while a string of obscenities rolled out of his wet little mouth. It was all so incongruous that the attacker usually just walked away in disgust.

Harvey shared only two interests with his peers: movies, and comic books. Every Saturday, the boys would make their way however possible, the six miles into town. There, for a hard-earned quarter they could spend the rest of the day in a dark movie theater completely enthralled, as dream-tall heroes played out wondrous deeds across a thirty-foot screen. When they reluctantly emerged back into the late afternoon sunlight, blinking like miners coming out of the pit, they were full of what they had experienced. Tossing lines back and forth, explaining scenes to each other as if they alone had witnessed them, they prepared themselves for the next week's games which would be scripted from what they'd seen—except Harvey.

Harvey never saw a picture he liked. He would ridicule the story, the special effects, and particularly the actors, until the boys would walk away leaving him cursing and mumbling to himself. Dex would sometimes put up with Harvey's rant, but only to hitch a ride home with Mr. Woodall, who always waited for Harvey at the Busy Bee Café.

Harvey had a huge comic book collection, but unlike the other boys, he would neither trade nor lend any of them. He bought a new one every Saturday before going to the movies, but would not let anyone so much as look at it, not even Dex. His disdain for movie heroes paled against the vitriol he heaped on the comic he-men. The Phantom, Bat Man, but especially Dex's favorite, Superman, would come in for paint-peeling scorn.



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“If he’s such a ‘super’ person,” Harvey would sneer, “why don’t he help everybody twenty-four hours a day, instead of mooning around Lois Lane half the time? He don’t care about the world. He just helps the people he likes and anybody else who needs him can go suck rocks!”

Dex finally couldn’t take it anymore. “Durn it, Harvey,” he exploded, “if you don’t like Superman just don’t read him! And don’t spoil it for people that do!”

Harvey looked at him coolly for a long moment, then spat on the ground. “To hell with Superman,” he said, and walked away.

Despite his misanthropic nature, Harvey was also capable of surprising acts of generosity and sensitivity. He never hesitated to help someone with homework if they asked. He routinely bought lunch for Hanny Weems, the poorest boy in Dex’s class, and at the movies, he always bought two of whatever treats he was having, to share with seat mates. Sometimes Harvey would approach Dex at school or at the movies, and for no apparent reason, pat him on the shoulder and nod, as if approving some secret act. This never failed to discomfit Dex. He tried to anticipate such behavior and avoid it whenever possible.

Harvey had been sick for almost a month, but his parents had not formally withdrawn him from the fifth grade. It was assumed that he’d be able to return before the school year ended. So the day after his parent’s dinnertime urgings, when Dex got home from school, his mother handed him a covered plate of cookies. “Take these to Harvey and spend a little time with him,” she said firmly. “Take some of your school books too, and tell him what the class has been doing.”

Dex groaned inwardly, but knew from the tone of her voice there was no use arguing. He picked up his science book—the only one he had brought home—and set off the quarter mile to the Woodall place.

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Harvey's mother met him at the door and ushered him back to the sick-room. Harvey was propped up on several pillows, his eyes closed and sunk into his head. His face was white, almost translucent, the skin seeming so thin that it barely covered the dark veins moving the tainted blood through his frail body. Only his perpetually wet mouth had any color. The room was warm and stuffy, and it smelled of medicine, urine, and something else—Harvey's own personal odor; like something sweet, rotting in the sun.

"Dexter is here, honey," Mrs. Woodall said, and Dex stepped up to the bed.

Harvey's eyelids fluttered open and a small smile tugged at his mouth.

"Hey," he said weakly. "What'che been doing?"

"Nothing much."

Dex sat in the straight back chair next to the bed, and Mrs. Woodall turned and left them to their visit.

"Here's some tea cakes Mama sent you." Dex set the plate on the bed and removed the clean white cloth covering it.

Harvey's eyes lighted up, and he immediately stuffed two of the cookies into his mouth, the crumbs dropping down the front of his pajamas.

"I brought my science book. I can show you what we've been doing, if you want me to."

Harvey was going for another cookie. "I don't give a shit about that stuff," he said, blowing crumbs.

"I didn't figure you did. It was Mama's idea."

"Did you go to the show on Saturday?"

"Yeah. It was a Lash LaRue, and the second was Abbott and Costello."

"I hate Abbott and Costello," Harvey said, brushing the crumbs from his chest.

"I know you do, but I thought they were pretty funny."

Harvey seemed to tire suddenly. He had a cookie in each hand but let his head drop back on the pillows and closed his

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eyes. Just when Dex thought he had dropped off to sleep, his eyes suddenly popped open.

"Got any new comics?" he asked, stuffing another cookie in his mouth.

"I traded Bummy Upshaw for two Archies and the new Superman."

"Can I read them?"

"You hate Superman."

"Bring them to me...will you?" Harvey was finally filling up on cookies. He pushed the plate aside, and once again let his head fall deep into the pillows. "Will you?"

"Okay," Dex said.

"Tomorrow?"

"Well, I don't know..."

"Bring 'em tomorrow," Harvey whined, as if he were tuning up to cry.

"Okay, tomorrow."

Harvey's eyes closed, as if it had all been too exhausting. His mouth was covered in moist cookie crumbs and he seemed to shrink inside his clothing as he dropped into a shallow sleep. Dex sat watching him for awhile, then rose and tip-toed toward the door. Harvey's voice stopped him.

"Just the two Archies. To hell with Superman."

#####

Dex got home from school the next day, dreading another trip to see Harvey, but determined to keep his word.

"I'm in here, Dex," his mother called from the kitchen.

She was sitting at the kitchen table peeling potatoes, and when she looked up, Dex saw that she'd been crying.

"What's the matter, Ma?"

She took him in her arms. "Bad news, baby." She paused for a moment, then: "Harvey died last night."

"Died?"

"In his sleep, honey. He went easy, in no pain."

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Dex was stunned. His brain simply couldn't comprehend the words. Died? Harvey, dead? That was something that happened in car accidents, or to old people. Kids didn't just die in their sleep. Sure, he'd said that "Now as I lay me..." bed-time prayer a thousand times, but who really thinks about dying before they wake?

"They're bringing him back from the funeral home this evening. We should go up there and sit up awhile," his mother was saying.

"I don't want to."

"Nobody wants to, Dex. It's the right thing to do. We pay our respects to the family."

"I don't want to look at him!"

"It's all right, honey. You don't have to view the body if you don't want to. Just go and see Mr. and Mrs. Woodall. It'll mean a lot to them."

At supper, Dex only picked at his food. His parents exchanged looks but said nothing. When his mother had the food put away and the dishes were stacked, his father stood in the doorway of his room.

"Get your jacket on, Son. We hafta go up to the Woodall's."

Dex got up silently and did as he was told. The three of them loaded into the pickup and drove to the Woodall house, parking along the driveway already lined with cars. The front room was crowded and hot. A light blue casket was set up along the far wall flanked by large sprays of carnations, whose sweet cloying scent is the smell of all southern funerals. Dex tried to avoid looking at the casket directly, but even a quick glance revealed the small shadowy face beneath a white veil covering the opened lid. Mrs. Woodall spotted them and came over, her nose and eyes red from weeping. She threw her arms around Dex and hugged him close, sobbing.

"Oh, Dexter, your little friend is gone. We had him for a little while, but God needed him in heaven."

Dex could hardly breathe. The heat, and the smell of the carnations combined with Mrs. Woodall's strong floral perfume

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made him feel dizzy, and he thought he was going to be sick. As soon as Mrs. Woodall released him and turned to embrace his mother, Dex slipped away and went outside. The moon was a half-crescent hanging low in the west, and the early spring evening was

just crisp and clear enough to make the stars stand out like little frozen specks against the blackness of space. Dex sat on the top porch step and stared at the vast expanse of sky, as miserable as he'd ever felt in his life.

####

The funeral was the usual Reverend Billy Allgood fiasco. The good preacher just couldn't conduct a brief service. It wasn't in him. He would never stop until he got the immediate family, no matter how controlled, reduced to sobbing, wailing hysteria. This was no exception. He wouldn't let up until finally Harvey's mother screamed and threw herself on the casket. Her husband, his face stony and ashen, had to half-carry her back to her seat. Billy was ecstatic.

After the burial in the small graveyard at the back of the church, the close neighbors went back to the Woodall place with dishes of prepared food, where they set up a large table for buffet style dining. Dex sat in the front porch swing and picked at a plate his mother had made for him. He'd had no lunch, but felt like he couldn't force a bite down. The front door opened, and Mrs. Woodall came out carrying a large cardboard box.

"Dexter," she said, "this is Harvey's comic books. He threw a whole bunch of them away last week, but these are the ones he saved." She put the box on the swing beside Dex. "Harvey would have wanted you to have them."

Dex just stared at the box and said nothing. What could he say? Harvey would throw comics away before he'd let anyone else have them. What he'd have wanted was to have them buried with him.

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“Well, take them!” Mrs. Woodall suddenly shouted, her eyes filling with tears.

Dex jumped up spilling his plate and picked up the box. He was lurching down the porch steps when Mrs. Woodall’s voice stopped him.

“You didn’t like my boy, did you?”

Dex didn’t look at her—couldn’t look—but stood frozen for a moment trying to find the answer to her question.

“No ma’am, I didn’t,” he finally said, and continued down the steps.

“But why?” she wailed. “He was crazy about you. Why didn’t you like him?”

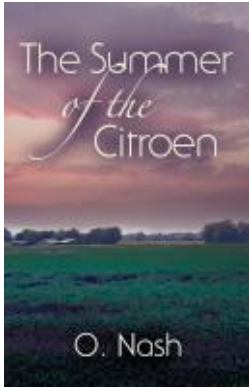
Dex turned to look at her twisted, grief-stricken face bathed in tears, and felt a sob rising in his own throat.

“I don’t know!” he cried, and ran down the drive.

He ran across the gravel road, over the open field beyond, and into a small grove of trees that hid the remains of a house burned to the ground decades before. There, he threw himself on the ground beside an old dry well, and finally overcome by his newly-mined knowledge of mortality and guilt, sobbed until he was exhausted.

When the tears abated, he sat up, blew his nose, and opened Harvey’s comic book box. It was stacked full of Superman issues dating back years. No others, just Superman. Dex started to cry again. This time the tears were for Harvey—Harvey, who despite his closet loyalty, lived, suffered and died a victim of Superman’s indifference. When Dex finally stopped crying, he felt purged and forgiven of some unknown transgression. After a moment, he expelled a long quavering sigh and picked himself up. He pushed aside the piece of sheet metal covering the old well, then picked up the box of comic books and dropped it in. When he heard it strike the bottom with a dull thud, he re-covered the well.

“To hell with Superman,” he said.



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