

Private Lessons

Cynthia Salaysay

In a standout debut for the #MeToo era, a young pianist devotes herself to her art — and to the demanding, charismatic teacher she idolizes.

After seventeen-year-old Claire Alalay's father's death, only music has helped her channel her grief. Claire likes herself best when she plays his old piano, a welcome escape from the sadness — and her traditional Filipino mother's prayer groups. In the hopes of earning a college scholarship, Claire auditions for Paul Avon, a prominent piano teacher, who agrees to take Claire as a pupil. Soon Claire loses herself in Paul's world and his way of digging into a composition's emotional core. She practices constantly, foregoing a social life, but no matter how hard she works or how well she plays, it seems impossible to gain Paul's approval, let alone his affection. Author Cynthia Salaysay composes a moving, beautifully written portrait of rigorous perfectionism, sexual awakening, and the challenges of self-acceptance. Timely and vital, *Private Lessons* delves into a complicated student/teacher relationship, as well as class and cultural differences, with honesty and grace.

Pg. 177 (Claire & Lee – another teenager)

think. Just do. Do things like Lee might.

He texts. My heart beats in double time. *Hey. Free later? Wanna kick it?*

I'm in the practice rooms. Come on by.

I play back my performance, wince, take off my glasses, try again.

I move on to Brahms, then Shostakovich — hardly sexy, but it's flashy. It'll be a good one for him to walk in on, but he doesn't. I'm playing the ballade when he walks in.

"Impressive," he says from behind.

I jump and look at him, then down at his violin case. "Hi."

"Nice dress."

"Thanks. It's Julia's."

He glances at the phone. "Smart to do this in a practice room." He sits abnormally close. A bit of my dress is pinned beneath his thigh.

"Do you feel like playing?" I ask. "I'm not sure how we'd do that. I don't have any of the right sheet" — he kisses my neck, and my little bird heart starts going thumpity-thump — "music. The phone's still recording." I giggle. I turn it off and put it in my bag, though not before I take a picture of us together.

I kiss him back, wondering how my body knows what to do. It's like when you start singing along to a song on the radio that you didn't know you knew. All I have to do is follow his lead and brush away my

fear.

Time slips into another gear. He goes and flips the light switch and locks the door. I'm a little bit scared but not enough to stop anything. The melody from the piece I just played repeats over and over in my mind, like it's never stopped.

The kisses deepen, his teeth graze my lips, but I guess I always knew that he kissed like this because of the way he moves when he plays. The fabric of my dress brushes my legs as it moves up. He's picked up the hem, slid his hand beneath it. I press against him. Our breathing makes a strange antiphonal call and response, one breath of mine following at the heels of one of his. He finds his way between my legs.

"You're okay with this?"

"Mm-hm." At last. My voice has taken a strange, high-pitched tone.

He puts his hand beneath my dress and a finger slips beneath my panties. I lean into him, rest my forehead on his shoulder. The music has stopped. "You are so wet." His finger pushes inside of me and I hold my breath. "Are you a virgin?"

I nod, and because I'm not sure he can see my face, I tell him so. "Yes."

I'm disappointed when his fingers withdraw.

It's true what they say. Nobody wants to be someone's first.

So he puts my hand between his legs. I pretend not to be scared, like I know what I'm doing, and touch him through his jeans, which he unzips, and I do what I've seen on the Internet, what people who don't talk to me at school talk about in the hallways. Or at least what I think they do. When his breathing gets louder, I go on with it, figuring it out as I go by the look on what I can see of his face and me thinking, knowing, that this is what I've been missing all this time. And I don't mind, actually. It's kind of nice. There's a strong odor of sweat, and then he comes, his hand touching my arm, like he's reaching out to me.

We hear footsteps outside, and for no reason I can logically comprehend, it makes me giggle. I grab a Kleenex from my bag and touch it to his thigh; the semen slides along his skin, slimy, and doesn't soak into the tissue. He doesn't move while I do this, as if he doesn't want it to spread. It's disgusting, and the look on his face is slightly revolted, too. For a moment, I think he may be revolted with me but then he takes over, wipes his thigh briskly, folds the Kleenex carefully over it as if trapping a dead, crushed bug inside.

He zips his pants up, and in a sweet, serious, slightly possessive way, he kisses me, and asks if I'm hungry in a low, different voice. I've never heard that tone before.

Pg. 197 (Claire & Lee – another teenager)

The end of one kiss predicts the beginning of the next. They slur together like notes. His hands press on the small of my back and I can feel my nipples tighten against his chest. I pull off my shirt. There's no

way I'm going to stop this. It's definitely the way things should be, even if it's supposed to be something I shouldn't do. In this case it feels really good to be doing something I shouldn't be doing. I'm digging the music and the feel of his bedsheets — soft and old — against my back.

My skirt comes off in one tug. He doesn't say anything about my underwear. I don't think he even notices it — it just slides right off, after the skirt. I turn to face him. He pulls off his shirt, his eyes running over me at the same time.

"You're beautiful," he says. Two words and I change. Suddenly I feel safer. His body is long and white, his spine curved like a bow. He kicks free of his jeans. I look between his legs, wishing I could take a longer look without seeming pervy.

The next song isn't really to my taste, but I try not to think about it. We get under the covers. His sheets are cold. I wiggle closer to him to warm myself. I can feel his erection against the ridge of my pelvis, between my legs. I feel kinda weird. I feel like we should be talking more. His lips are unbearably soft, and all I can think about is where we touch. Beneath my hands, his shoulder blades are smooth, curved like river stones. I imagine he's soft inside, the way he feels outside. I'm nervous — there's nothing to stop us but me saying no. Not that I would. There's something bright here, something that keeps me afloat.

The music. The fact that things feel good. How nice it is not to be alone.

I feel his fingers between my legs, and my eyes widen. They're cold and rough at first, but I don't want him to stop. I can't get close enough. I want him to go slower. I want him to go faster. I slide a hand between us, and he holds his breath when I reach into the dark space and grasp him, damp and soft skinned as a baby, and firm. I forget my part in things, and let him do all the work. Sweat collects between my forehead and his shoulder.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

A yes beats in me like an insect's wing. I nod. He turns over onto his side and reaches into his bedside drawer. An awkward, almost formal pause. He struggles to open the wrapper and push the condom down around him. It looks silly and gross, but I don't laugh.

He turns toward me again, and his fingers return. No, not his fingers. His breath catches. All the bonds between the cells of my body break, and I'm not me anymore. I'm the space between stars. I'm the color of my eyelids, when I've shut them against the sun.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod, pinned down and holding him to me at the same time. He starts to move. I shut my eyes tight. It feels like I'm not breathing, even though I am. I'm amazed by the noises I make. I don't know

where they've come from — I've never heard them coming from me. It doesn't hurt. I'm surprised it doesn't hurt. It feels good, though not the way I thought it would. The fear doesn't leave me, but it doesn't matter as much as what's happening. Bright dark burning shining wetness ache need to be loved. It feels like I'm finally doing something I've wanted to do for a long time.

The record starts to skip. His eyes flick to mine, but he breaks his gaze when he catches me staring at him.

He won't look at me for the rest of it. After a while I give up and look away, too. For some reason, it's easier.

He makes a noise like someone punched him in the gut, and stops. I look over his shoulder at the ceiling, continuing to hold him because there isn't anything else to hold on to.

The fridge's buzz from the other room kicks on. The soft sound of a car as it passes. Normal things that don't sound normal right now.

He looks at me. I look at him. He smiles without teeth, touches my cheek. I try to keep very still, as if it would keep him from moving away from me. Then with an awkward movement, so that the condom stays on him, he rolls over. There is a small mole on his back that looks penciled in with a brown crayon. A moment with a tissue. Then he reaches and flips the record.

Music. Back to regular life. "Where are you going?" I attempt to put

a smile on my face, but it won't stay.

"Nowhere." He gets up with a grunt, fishes his boxers out from under the sheets, and stretches the neck of his T-shirt as he shoves it over his head. Fumbles with the buttons of his jeans. He feels me staring and he looks at me, gives another smile. The space between us hangs like it's on crutches. For a moment I remember, of all people, Julia. Is this what sex was like for her?

Pg. 257 (Claire with Paul her piano teacher)

empty, and gets up. "If you ever fall in love, don't fuck around. It's not a game."

"I thought you said I should play with boys." I watch him pour another inch of Pernod onto the melting ice.

"You're young," he says.

My heart deflates. "I guess." He flops back on the couch. His swallow is audible, grandiose. I sit down right next to him. We touch. I take a tiny sip of my drink and try to look at him casually. Not staring. "Anyway, I do like people, you know. Love people."

He stares down at his drink, which he holds in both hands.

This isn't at all how things were supposed to go. We were going to

play music, eat cookies, I'd dazzle him with what I'd learned while he was gone, and then he was going to nudge me playfully, and I'd nudge him right back. And then I was going to kiss him.

I put my drink down. "I should go," I say.

"Oh, you don't have to go. And leave me to my misery?" He nudges me with his thigh. "I haven't seen anyone I actually wanted to see in a month."

I nudge him back.

"I could finish your drink. I know you don't like it."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Wonderfully obvious." A little smile pulls at his lips. "Do you want to finish your nap?" he says. "I feel bad I interrupted."

"Well, I guess I haven't been sleeping well." A lie. "Can I nap here?"

"If you like. I'm probably going to take a shower in a bit. You'll have the couch to yourself."

"Well, I'm small. I don't need a lot of space."

I curl up on my end of the sofa, pulling my dress up high so the air hits my thighs. Tease him a little. I close my eyes. "It's too hot," I say.

I feel a cold glass on my leg and squeal. He laughs.

Okay, this is definitely going in the right direction. I close my eyes again. Ice rattles. A glass knocks the coffee table. The familiar, polite

rhythmic padding of cat paws, and a rippling meow. The cat asks, demands, to be touched. He murmurs softly to him. Love words. Someday I might hear such things in my ear. I curl up tighter in envy and fear. I hold myself so tightly, my body begins to hurt as I hear him settle, his breathing slow.

I stretch out my leg, sticky with sweat, and nudge his thigh with my toe to see what he'll do. Nothing. He doesn't move. I stay where I am, keeping contact. He isn't as warm as I am. His skin is tepid. The cat curls up on top of my feet, all slinky and silky and seductive. I fight the urge to kick him off.

I concentrate on the sensations in my toes, where the pads of them rest on his thigh, it resists reassuringly. I won't sleep.

He said once, "Boys, they'll just flock right to you. All you have to do is stand there long enough, put yourself in their way, and don't move. They can't help themselves."

He's fallen asleep. His face is peaceful-looking, slightly bored. Without his glasses on, his eyelashes look darker and longer. Crosshatches are etched beneath his eyes. His hand cups his chin. His glass and mine are drained, except for watery milky puddles at their bottoms.

Don't be timid now.

I move closer, pushing the cat away, who resists and then gives in,

jumping onto the carpet with a look of scorn. I lower myself down next to him slowly, so he doesn't wake up.

I'm not ready. No, I'm ready. I want to be ready, even if I'm not.

The skin of his lips is transparent and smooth, and shines a bit like rice paper. I pencil the ridge of his upper lip with my finger. It gives like a sponge.

He flicks his head to the side, as if shaking off a fly. For a second I think he's waking up, but he doesn't open his eyes. And what if he did wake up? I aim carefully. Our lips touch. I feel a thrill of daring. I've given him a secret blessing. His breath smells of coffee and bread and licorice from his drink.

My heart thumps. It hurts a little. This is too much. I'm scared. I curl up beside him, my cheek against his arm, and close my eyes.

Absorbing his warmth, I relax. When he inhales, I rise like I'm riding a swell of the sea, and I sink when he breathes out.

I kiss him again, more firmly this time, placing my lower lip between his — *what am I doing?* — I hear him inhale a deep breath, he's waking up. I jump back.

For a split second, I worry that I've made a mistake. Or done a really bad thing.

But he doesn't seem upset. He just blinks, a little amused, as if he just told himself a joke. His eyes flick down over the curves of my

body, then settle on my face, crystallizing as they focus.

He brings his right hand to my face, and brings me close again. Falling onto his chest, I giggle nervously, but he just keeps kissing me, these short, full kisses that curtain off the rest of the world.

He slips the straps of my dress off my shoulders.

A hand drifts lower, to my arm, to my rib cage, where my bra would be. Cooler air touches my belly. Tension spreads from any place he touches. I tighten, shrink. My stomach muscles have contracted so hard, it's like they've been punched. He opens his mouth, and I think we're about to stop. I wouldn't mind if we did. I want to talk to know how he feels, if he's been hoping, too, and then I could tell him how much I'd been hoping, ever since Lee, since he showed me Billie Holiday. How at last I felt loved.

But instead he draws me up along his body. I'm on my knees, straddling his rib cage, and can see the top of his head. He kisses my nipples, and when I put my hands on his shoulders, they're so unexpectedly soft that I feel like I'm the grown-up. He's the child.

His breath rides across my belly. His fingers follow, touch me between my legs. It cuts my breath. His lips trace the span of my hip bone where it protrudes. "You have the softest skin." He slides down between my legs, kisses the inside of my thigh, and then moves upward, touching the darkest place I have, defining it for me.

Thunder in my ears. My body burns like a wire. This is so easy. It's easy to be in love. It does just happen to you, the way they say. And he's so gentle, the way he touches me, nothing like Lee.

My thighs begin to shake uncontrollably and I draw him up — we're face-to-face — and he starts to pull his pants down, his pale-blue boxers. I lean over to kiss him, and he shifts his body, pushes gently on my arm.

I know what he's asking me to do. He smiles, and I brush my fear away like a stray hair and move lower on his body, kissing him on the way down. Trying to make it slow.

He smells of salt and the way bedrooms smell in the morning. His cock rests between his legs, a blind, soft-bodied sea creature. It's ugly. It has nothing to do with Paul, except that it is, in fact, Paul's. It's smaller than Lee's. I wasn't expecting that, for some reason.

I look up at him, and his face is inscrutable, harsh.

Blow jobs look easy enough on the Internet. I try an uncomplicated movement. Is it really that simple? It isn't like kissing at all. Pretty unromantic.

"You're really good at that," he says softly.

I'm surprised. I keep going. My hair shields me from his face. It gets wetter and wetter, and more uncomfortable. The hair on his thighs is dark and stubborn-looking. My hands feel slick. I try to make this an

act of love, but my arms ache and my jaw is locked open.

I push my hair out of my way, risk a peek at his face. It's soft and greedy. Terror blooms in my belly when I see his eyes. Irises like fractured sea glass. I've never seen his face look so strange. It's like he's not here.

I must be reading things wrong.

I wish there were music.

Alarm bells are ringing in my head. *Isn't this what I wanted? This doesn't feel good anymore. This is weird. I feel weird.*

I think I want to stop —

I pause for a moment to get my breath, looking down at him — the line of muscle a cushion against his hip bone. I lift my eyes to see his face. I don't know what I'm going to say. I've never told him no. Never protested a word of guidance, never questioned him. "Paul —"

His hand pushes lightly on the back of my head and pushes me forward on him. I cough. A feeling of shame washes over me. I don't want to fight. If I did, what then? Would he be angry with me? Refuse to teach me? His hand stays where it is, directing me.

I can't not try to please him.

So I start again, ignoring the growing feeling of foreboding. It feels wrong, but I just keep going. It isn't at all what I thought it would be.

I feel like a machine. It's really repetitive, and I slow down, tired.

His breath starts to become ragged and chokes in his throat. Relief washes over me. I wait and wait, hoping it will be over soon. He taps my shoulder rapidly, a little more urgently every time — *what do I do now?* He comes, watching my face. I can't stand it and push away.

His breathing quiets. He looks so weak, covered in goose bumps. It's spattered him — his thigh, his pubic hair — I touch my cheek — it's on my cheek.

"Could you please find us a towel?" he asks, as polite as ever. More polite even, as if I've done something wrong.

I start to stand up, then crouch, picking my dress off the floor and putting it back on as fast as I can, which isn't fast at all. It's slow. My body just won't do what I want it to do.

In the bathroom, I splash water on my face over and over again. In my mind, we should still be lying together. The rest of the day, and most of the night, too. I pull a towel off the rack and press it to my face, then rinse my mouth, noting the scary look in my eyes. I go back out and hand him the towel. "Thank you," he says.

He systematically dabs at himself. I sit next to him.

"You okay?" he asks, looking at the silk painting on the wall. Lily pads as large as berets. Surprised carp. He pulls his pants up, buttons them quickly.

"Yeah."

On the Come Up by Angie Thomas

Fuck: 61
Ass: 104
Shit: 217
Damn: 150
Lord's name in vain: 49+
Piss: 9

m.s. & mp

With the language in this book there is just too much to choose from for excerpts...

Pg. 20

"That shit is fire," Aunt Pooh says.

"*Fire?* That shit is legendary! Biggie single-handedly proves that delivery is key. Everything isn't an exact rhyme, but it works. He made 'Jesus' and 'penis' rhyme! C'mon! 'Jesus' and 'penis.'" Okay, it's probably offensive if you're Jesus, but still. Legendary.

Pg. 29

The beat starts again. I nod along. There's nothing but me, the music, and Milez.

The words have strung themselves together into rhymes and into a flow, and I let it all come tumbling out.

*Ready for war, Milez? Nah, you fucked up this time.
Should address this cipher to the writer,
The biter, who really wrote them rhymes.
Come at Brianna, you wanna get buried?
Spit like a legend, feminine weapon,
I reckon your own father's worried.
Bow down, baby, get down on your knees.
You got paper, but I'm greater.
Ask your clique, and while you at it ask Supreme.
Straight from the Garden where people dearly departin'.
Screw a pardon, I'm hardened,
And Milez's heart is on back of milk cartons.
It's MIA, and this is judgment—*

Pg. 41

"Man, fuck your li'l lollipop-head-looking ass," a boy in a bubble vest says. "Bet you won't get off that bus and say shit to my face."

Pg. 77

*Pin me to the ground, boy, you fucked up.
Wrote me off, called your squad, but you lucked up.
If I did what I wanted and bucked up,
You'd be bound for the ground, grave dug up.
Boys in blue rolling all through my neighborhood,
'Cause I guess that they think that we ain't no good.
We fight back, we've attacked, then they say they should
Send in troops wearing boots for the greater good.
But let me be honest, I promise,
If a cop come at me, I'll be lawless.
Like my poppa, fear nada. Take solace
In my hood going hard in my honor.*

Pg. 177

Your song is   
Fuck what they say!

You my new favorite rapper ¹⁰⁰

"Thanks for the support," I tell them, and a hundred more people are suddenly watching. "As you may know, there's a petition to get my song taken off Dat Cloud. Besides the fact it's censorship, it's stupid as hell."

Hell yeah, somebody writes.

Fuck censorship!

"That's right, fuck censorship," I say, to three hundred viewers. "They don't get it because it ain't for them to get. Besides, if I am strapped like backpacks, maybe it's 'cause I gotta be, bitch. Ain't my fault if it makes you uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable every goddamn day of my life."

Four hundred viewers. People respond with ¹⁰⁰ or high-five emojis.

"But check this," I say. "I got something for everybody who wanna come at me 'bout my song."

I lift my middle finger without hesitation.

Imagine Me by Tahereh Mafi

H.S.

Pg. 341

He smiles.

He smiles and I stare—two dimples, straight teeth, shining eyes. A sudden, incomprehensible heat rushes across my skin, sets me aflame. I feel violently hot. Sick with fever.

Finally, he says: "So you *are* in there."

"Who?"

"Ella," he says, but he's speaking softly now. "Juliette. They said you'd be gone."

"I'm not gone," I say, my hands shaking as I pull myself together. "I am Juliette Ferrars, supreme soldier to our North American commander. Who are you?"

He moves closer. His eyes darken as he stares at me, but there's no true darkness there. I try to stand taller, straighter. I remind myself that I have a task, that this is my moment to attack, to fulfill my orders. Perhaps I sh—

"Love," he whispers.

Heat flashes across my skin. Pain presses against my mind, a vague realization that I've left something overlooked. Dusty emotion trembles inside of me, and I kill it.

He steps forward, takes my face in his hands. I think about breaking his fingers. Snapping his wrists. My heart is racing.

I cannot move.

"You shouldn't touch me," I say, gasping the words.

"Why not?"

"Because I will kill you."

Gently, he tilts my head back, his hands possessive, persuasive. An ache

"Yes," he says again, his own voice rough with feeling. His hands leave my face and I'm lost in the loss, searching for warmth. I press closer to him without even meaning to, asking him for something I don't understand. But then his hands slide under my shirt, his palms pressing against my back, and the magnitude of the sudden, skin-to-skin contact sets my body on fire.

I feel explosive.

I feel dangerously close to something that might kill me, and still I lean into him, blinded by instinct, deaf to everything but the ferocious beat of my own heart.

He pulls back, just an inch.

His hands are still caught under my shirt, his bare arms wrapped around my bare skin and his mouth lingers above mine, the heat between us threatening to ignite. He pulls me closer and I bite back a moan, losing my head as the hard lines of his body sink into me. He is everywhere, his scent, his skin, his breath. I see nothing but him, sense nothing but him, his hands spreading across my torso, my lungs compressing under his careful, searing exploration. I lean into the sensations, his fingers grazing my stomach, the small of my back. He touches his forehead to mine and I press up, onto my toes, asking for something, begging for something—

"What," I gasp, "what is happening—"

He kisses me.

Soft lips, waves of sensation. Feeling overflows the vacancies in my mind. My hands begin to shake. My heart beats so hard I can hardly keep still when he nudges my mouth open, takes me in. He tastes like heat and peppermint, like summer, like the sun.

seizes my muscles, holds me in place. My eyes close reflexively. I breathe him in and my mouth fills with flavor—fresh air, fragrant flowers, heat, happiness—and I'm struck by the strangest idea that we've been here before, that I've lived this before, that I've known him before and then I feel, I feel his breath on my skin and the sensation, the sensation is—

heady,

disorienting.

I'm losing track of my mind, trying desperately to locate my purpose, to focus my thoughts, when

he moves

the earth tilts, his lips graze my jaw and I make a sound, a desperate, unconscious sound that stuns me. My skin is frenzied, burning. That familiar warmth contaminates my blood, my temperature spiking, my face flushing.

"Do I—"

I try to speak but he kisses my neck and I gasp, his hands still caught around my face. I'm breathless, heart pounding, pulse pounding, head pounding. He touches me like he knows me, knows what I want, knows what I need. I feel insane. I don't even recognize the sound of my own voice when I finally manage to say,

"Do I know you?"

"Yes."

My heart leaps. The simplicity of his answer strangles my mind, digs for truth. It feels true. Feels true that I've known these hands, this mouth, those eyes.

Feels real.

I want more.

I take his face in my hands and pull him closer and he makes a soft, desperate sound in the back of his throat that sends a spike of pleasure directly to my brain. Pure, electric heat lifts me up, outside of myself. I seem to be floating here, surrendered to this strange moment, held in place by an ancient mold that fits my body perfectly. I feel frantic, seized by a need to know more, a need I don't even understand.

When we break apart his chest his heaving and his face is flushed and he says—

"Come back to me, love. Come back."

I'm still struggling to breathe, desperately searching his eyes for answers. Explanations. "Where?"

"Here," he whispers, pressing my hands to his heart. "Home."

"But I don't—"

Flashes of light streak across my vision. I stumble backward, half-blind, like I'm dreaming, reliving the caress of a forgotten memory, and it's like an ache looking to be soothed, it's a steaming pan thrown in ice water, it's a flushed cheek pressed to a cool pillow on a hot hot night and heat gathers, collects behind my eyes, distorting sights, dimming sounds.

Here.

This.

My bones against his bones. This is my home.

I return to my skin with a sudden, violent shudder and feel wild, unstable. I

stare at him, my heart seizing, my lungs fighting for air. He stares back, his eyes such a pale green in the light that, for a moment, he doesn't even seem human.

Something is happening to my head.

Pain is collecting in my blood, calcifying around my heart. I feel at war with myself, lost and wounded, my mind spinning with uncertainty. "What is your name?" I ask.

He steps forward, so close our lips touch. Part. His breath whispers across my skin and my nerves hum, spark.

"You know my name," he says quietly.

I try to shake my head. He catches my chin.

This time, he's not careful.

This time, he's desperate. This time, when he kisses me he breaks me open, heat coming off him in waves. He tastes like springwater and something sweet, something searing.

I feel dazed. Delirious.

When he breaks away I'm shaking, my lungs shaking, my breaths shaking, my heart shaking. I watch, as if in a dream, as he pulls off his shirt, tosses it to the ground. And then he's here again, he's back again, he's caught me in his arms and he's kissing me so deeply my knees give out.

He picks me up, bracing my body as he sets me down on the long, steel table. The cool metal seeps through the fabric of my pants, sending goose bumps along my heated skin and I gasp, my eyes closing as he straddles my legs, claims my mouth. He presses my hands to his chest, drags my fingers down his naked torso and I make a desperate, broken sound, pleasure and pain

stunning me, paralyzing me.

He unbuttons my shirt, his deft hands moving quickly even as he kisses my neck, my cheeks, my mouth, my throat. I cry out when he moves, his kisses shifting down my body, searching, exploring. He pushes aside the two halves of my shirt, his mouth still hot against my skin, and then he closes the gap between us, pressing his bare chest to mine, and my heart explodes.

Something snaps inside of me.

Severs.

A sudden, fractured sob escapes my throat. Unbidden tears sting my eyes, startling me as they fall down my face. Unknown emotion soars through me, expanding my heart, confusing my head. He pulls me impossibly closer, our bodies soldered together. And then he presses his forehead to my collarbone, his body trembling with emotion when he says—

"Come back."

My head is full of sand, sound, sensations spinning in my mind. I don't understand what's happening to me, I don't understand this pain, this unbelievable pleasure. I'm staining his skin with my tears and he only pulls me tighter, pressing our hearts together until the feeling sinks its teeth into my bones, splits open my lungs. I want to bury myself in this moment, I want to pull him into me, I want to drag myself out of myself but there's something wrong, something blocked, something stopped—

Something broken.

Realization arrives in gentle waves, theories lapping and overlapping at the shores of my consciousness until I'm drenched in confusion. Awareness.

Terror.

Imogen, Obviously by Becky Albertalli

H.S.

Fuck: 62
Shit: 30
Piss: 3
Dick: 5
Himbo: 14
DILF: 5

Pg. 31

Tessa steps out of the elevator as soon as we pass it. "Fancy meeting you here."

Lili arches her brows. "Too good for the stairs?"

"The himbos wore me out." Tessa's gaze flicks to me, cheeks going red.

"Not. You know. Sexually. I'm not—I'm a lesbian. Who can't stop talking."

Pg. 35

By the time we settle in at the table, Declan, Kayla, and Mika are almost entirely done eating. But no one seems to be in any hurry to leave. Lili slides in next to Declan. "All good on the gaping-wound front?"

Kayla raises her eyebrows. "Do I want to know?"

"Fully healed, thank you," Declan says, patting his stomach and yawning. "Also, you literally just missed security escorting two Chi Phi bros out the back."

"Um, you're really going to bury the lede like that? Tell them why they were escorted out." Kayla shakes her head. "These dudes were *on a table* performing a striptease—"

"Half a striptease," says Declan.

Mika leans in. "They're both missing the point. The striptease was just misdirection. They're up there baiting the security officers, and meanwhile, their accomplices are strolling out of here with a vat of ice cream. And you know who it was?" They turn to Lili. "The sex carnival guy."

Lili gasps. "It was *not*."

"Who's the sex carnival guy?" I ask, and everyone laughs. Which makes my cheeks go warm, even though I know—I *know* they're not laughing at me. But I feel so out of the loop. Two steps behind. Like I'm visiting another country and I only know half the language.

"Yeahhhhhh," Lili says, pressing the heel of her hand to her forehead. She turns to me. "Did I ever tell you about Sydney's party?"

"Sydney, your roommate?"

She nods. "Yup. So this was, like, October, I think? Sometime in the fall—Sydney was still there, obviously. And I was out somewhere that night—"

"It was the Halloween party!" Kayla interjects.

The Halloween party. My heart tugs sharply at the memory. Waking up to pictures of Lili and her friends grinning in their coordinated costumes, piled onto someone's extra-long twin bed. I'd gone to a house party with Gretchen, but it was boring and weird, and no one understood our costumes. We were home and in pajamas by ten.

"Right, right," Lili says. "So it's—I don't know—two in the morning. I'm just getting home—Tess is there, too. And it turns out, in our absence, Sydney's decided to have an orgy."

I feel my eyes go wide. "Oh—"

Lili pats my shoulder. "Not a literal orgy. But yeah, my room looks like a bomb went off. The whole place reeks of beer. Sydney's *nowhere*. Meanwhile, you could hear people throwing up in the bathroom. The retching noises." She shudders. "And I'm here totally sober, totally speechless. Tess is standing there with her jaw on the floor—"

"It's true." Tessa nods solemnly.

"And then I realize"—Lili claps her hands together—"there's a pair of total strangers hooking up in my bed."

"Oh no . . ."

Lili hangs her head. "Right in front of Puppy."

"Okay, tell her the next part," says Kayla, eyes dancing.

Lili mutters something under her breath.

"What was that, babe?"

Lili sighs. "I said, 'The sex carnival is over.'"

"Said?" Tessa bites back a smile. "I think it was more of a bellow."

"And then I washed my sheets eight times."

"And the world gained an iconic new concept," Kayla concludes. "Sex carnival."

Pg. 67

Texts with Gretchen

GP: IMOGEN

GP: WHO ARE YOU SCISSORING

GP: WHAT'S HAPPENING

IS: Wait

IS: What?????

GP: 

GP: Don't get me wrong, I'm happy for you 

IS: OMG

IS: I would NEVER

IS: Post that online I mean!!!!

GP: 

IS: GRETCHEN NO

IS: Hahaha omg

IS: I just meant like

IS: I don't want you to think I'm saying OMG I WOULD NEVER, like
I'm grossed out or scandalized

IS: By a very natural and beautiful expression of intimacy

GP: This

GP: Wow

GP: This is my favorite conversation

IS: Should I edit the caption

IS: Like would other people read it like that? 

GP: Haha depends

GP: Are they gay

GP: You know, this could actually be the test

GP: What do u think of when you see ✂

GP: Gay Rorschach!!!!

IS: Please say you're joking

IS: I tagged Tessa in this

GP: Aww is Tessa gay??

GP: Then I guess it's a grand gesture!!!!

GP: Promposal walked so public scissoring invitation could run

IS: GRETCHEN PLEASE

GP: ☠☠☠

GP: Immybean it's fine

GP: You're YOU

GP: No one thinks you're dropping sexmojis on the main

IS: ☹

GP: Okay also can we just acknowledge TESSA

GP: She's actually so hot??

GP: She used to have longer hair, right?

GP: I recognize her

GP: From Lili's page

GP: Kind of a soft butch vibe now, huh. I like it

IS: I don't know what soft butch means, but she did have longer hair

GP: Sweet heteropotamus

GP: ✂

Pg. 69

When we reach Lili's room, Kayla's leaning in the doorway like a catalog model—legs crossed, hand grazing the doorframe, locs swept into a ponytail. But she steps into the room when she sees us, leaving space for us to follow.

"Oh, hey!" Lili looks up from her desk chair. "How was the scissor?"

My cheeks flood with heat. "Good. Yes! It was great."

I sneak a quick glance at Tessa, who seems completely unfazed. Then again, Tessa's not the one dropping coded sex solicitations into her Instagram captions.

God, I don't even one hundred percent know what scissoring is. All I can picture are naked Barbies with interlocked legs mashing up against each other. Which, clearly—

It occurs to me, suddenly, that Kayla just asked me a question.

"Oh! Sorry—I zoned out."

"You're good!" Kayla says. "Just gauging your opinion on the issue of small German sausages."

I stare at her. Has it always been like this? Has everyone been constantly talking about sex this whole time, and I've just never picked up on the code?

I clear my throat. "You mean—as a euphemism?"

"Oh, she means a literal sausage," Lili assures me.

Pg. 83

"What's tomorrow?" asks Lili.

"Costumes! For Friday. The dark academia party."

Kayla claps. "Yes! I want to do a thrift store run. Remember that store in Waterloo I went to with Audra and that guy Dill? Audra's my roommate," she adds, glancing at me.

"His name was Dill?" Tessa laughs, short and incredulous. "Like . . . a DILL?"

"Is he a DILL?" Lili asks.

"No idea. I think it's just a nickname?" Kayla shrugs. "I *hope* it's a nickname. He's that white guy with the eyebrow ring and the really light blue eyes, who kind of looks like a cult leader? And he has a bong named Creature?"

Pg. 102

"This is where we're eating?" Lili squints down at the sofa.

"Ooh, don't sit there. That's a sex couch." Tessa unzips her duffel and takes out an actual red gingham picnic blanket.

Pg. 143

Getting dressed feels like I'm sleepwalking. My weather app says it's chilly out. Sweater weather. As in, the actual weather outside. Not "Sweater Weather" the song, which TikTok says is yet another code for being bisexual. Kind of like lemon squares and cuffed jeans and not being able to sit in chairs normally.

Pg. 146

capital-E Event? *Please rise for the momentous occasion of Imogen Scott confirming her heterosexuality via online quiz.*

I tap one of the links—an ad pops up for meeting singles in my area.

Then: a rainbow-flag stock photo that hasn't been formatted for mobile, followed by a paragraph of intro text. I keep scrolling until I reach the first question—though it's really more of a fill-in-the-blank statement.

I'm _____ attracted to people of my own gender.

only

sometimes

never

Only. Sometimes. Never. Only sometimes never.

I read it again.

I'm _____ attracted to people of my own gender.

It's a trick question, right? If I knew the answer to that, why would I be taking this test? I don't need the definition of bisexual. I want to know what it *feels* like. How do you know what counts as attraction?

Second question:

I have romantic daydreams about _____.

Only one gender (not my gender).

Only one gender (my gender).

Multiple genders.

No one.

Okay, got it, but . . . how literal am I supposed to be here? Do I round up to the choice that's most generally applicable? Or do I count every tiny little exception?

And what counts as an exception?

Also, how many exceptions until it's not really an exception?

I think about Clea DuVall and Kristen Stewart and Nisha and le dollar bean. And maybe the felt rainbow girl from Girl Scouts. And that girl Ilana, probably. And—

Tessa.

Pg. 181

"But it's not about criticism of her work." Edith sets her roller on the paint tray. "They're mad that she said she was straight—"

"Right, because—"

"And now they're tripping over themselves to find reasons to still be pissed about it! We've already got Twitter randos questioning her motivations for coming out. 'Oh, she's just saying she's bi to get out of valid criticism!' 'Oh, she's doing it to get more press for the coven show!'"

Otávio wrinkles his nose. "That's kind of gross."

"Can we just be happy for her?" Edith shakes her head. "Plus, the shit she's getting from other actors. You know the girl who played the gay trombone player in that battle of the bands movie?"

"Jeanette Jaymes?"

"Yeah. So, like, five seconds after Kara's announcement goes live, Jeanette drops this shady Instagram post about how straight-passing bisexuals love to tweet about how queer they are from their boyfriends' beds." Edith scowls. "And then she dirty deleted, but seriously? Let the woman live!"

Pg. 212

"Well," Gretchen says slowly. "If you had a crush on her, it would feel like a crush."

"I think it does, though? Just a different kind of crush."

Gretchen draws back, eyeing me appraisingly. "Okay, how about this?" she says finally. "Do you want to fuck her? No? Then you're safe."

I open my mouth and then shut it, head spinning in a million directions at once. *Safe?* Like being queer is some kind of dreaded outcome?

And is "wanting to fuck" the only indicator of attraction? That can't be true, right?

I try to imagine what sex with Tessa would feel like, but my brain won't even go there. Kissing? Yeah, maybe. But sex?

There's no way she'd want that. And even if she did, I'm pretty sure I'd be awful at it.

"I don't know," I say finally, voice barely louder than a whisper. "I haven't really thought about it."

Gretchen smiles, squeezing my shoulder. "Then I think you have your answer."

Pg. 259

Waiting for the elevator is agony.

But when it arrives empty, Tessa smashes the button for the third floor, and then we kiss the whole way up. Kiss in the hallway. She's got one hand in my hair as she fumbles with her carabiner in the other, and then we kiss again as soon as the door shuts. Aching and frantic, like a movie. Every surface of the room is draped in the laundry she set out to air-dry. We kick our shoes off. I drop the blazer.

"So you've never kissed a girl," Tessa says, smiling and breathless.

"No, I have."

"Wait—"

"Tonight," I say. "Right after we left the party. Really cute freckle-faced girl from Philly." I touch her cheek.

Tessa touches my mouth. "How are you real?"

The way she's looking at me gives me this liquid-gold feeling. I sink back until I'm sitting on the edge of her bed, pulling her down with me. She tucks a lock of hair behind my ear and kisses me again, until I can barely sit upright. She kisses my forehead, my cheeks, the crook of my neck, and I don't know if I'm falling or blooming. The way our ankles overlap. The ache below my navel. I kiss her again, and my mind's as quiet as snowfall.

A week ago, Tessa was just a face in Lili's college pictures. A week ago, I'd never been kissed. A week ago, I thought I was straight.

Pg. 260

I pause. "Speaking of whether or not clothes stay on—"

"Also interesting," she says, eyes going wide.

"I don't mean—" I blush. "I'm not saying, like—get *naked*—"

"You sure?"

"Oh—"

"I'm joking!" she says. "Sorry. I mean—I'm not joking. I want to—like, I definitely want to, but not until you want to. Or *unless* you want to. You know what I mean. Now I'm shutting up."

Pg. 261

"You're my favorite," she says, and I laugh. Then I sit up just enough to peel my tights off. And my cardigan. "Not trying to get overheated," I explain.

"Oh, yeah. Good point. Very dangerous." Tessa pauses—then taps her belt buckle. "Should I, um—"

"Yes. I mean. Belt. Pants. Whatever. If you want—"

"Okay. Yeah." She nods quickly, and I could swear it's my heart that's unzipping.

I shut my eyes for a moment, letting the music fill every crack in my surface.

This must

be the place.

Pg. 262

My words melt away when I see her. Tessa in an undershirt, white with short sleeves, the straps of her sports bra faintly visible underneath.

Nothing on bottom but boy shorts.

My heart's spinning cartwheels. I don't think I realized until this moment just how much clothing she usually wears. Hoodies and jeans and shorts. Even her dark academia clothes had extra layers. I guess she was *technically* naked under a bathrobe when we met, but if I think about that too long, my heart might combust. She's so pretty, it's actually kind of unbearable. Boyish and girlish, all at once. She's a little huskier than I realized. Narrower than I am, but with an unexpected softness.

What would it feel like to touch her bare skin with mine?

Pg. 263

She lets out a quick, breathless laugh. "Oh my God, this is—you know that part of *The Lion King* where they're having sex in the forest—"

"People had sex in *The Lion King*?"

"No, lions had sex in *The Lion King*—"

"What? Sorry—when?"

"Can You Feel the Love Tonight"! Imogen, they were rolling around the whole jungle—"

"I thought . . . I thought they were just, like—being in love?"

"Yeah, but then Nala gives him that look—remember? Like. *Heyyyyyyy*."

Tessa leans in and kisses me. "And that's us! We're lions having sex! Except we're *not* having sex, because we're not gonna rush!"

"To be clear, we're also not lions," I say, shooting her a smile that turns into a yawn halfway through. "Sorry—"

"No—geez—what time is it?"

I crane my neck toward the pair of phones on Tessa's nightstand. "Almost three in the morning. Yikes—sorry! I can give you your bed back —"

"I don't want my bed back. Sleep here."

I look up at her. "Really?"

Pg. 279

"I guess." I scrunch my nose. "Why do I feel like I'm just making all of this up?"

"Probably because of toxic-ass Gretchen. Or the five million other Gretchens out there on the internet. Some queer people just really seem to love shitting on other queer people. Every day, someone's out there weighing in about whether bi and pan girls even count as queer to begin with. Or we're only queer under certain circumstances. They'll say it with their whole chest. Absolutely zero awareness that their very specific queer experience isn't one hundred percent universal. And it's almost always this very white, very Western framework—completely rooted in colonization. No acknowledgment of regional differences, generational differences—just the same people relitigating the same semantic fuckery. But it still gets in your head! I feel like half of us are just drowning in imposter syndrome all the time. More than half, probably. I know I've been there."

I look at her. "Really?"

"Why do you think I made up the whole thing about us dating?"

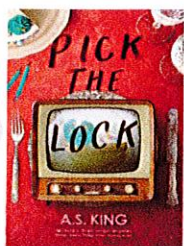
"Yeah, but that was pretty much right after you came out. You seem so

confident now.”

“Sometimes I am,” she says, “and then ten minutes later, I’m convinced I’m somehow faking it in my own head.”

“That’s how I feel!” Suddenly my eyes brim with tears.

“It’s the worst. And it’s such bullshit.” She shakes her head. “And like, there’s this whole other part of it where I’m pretty sure I’m panromantic asexual, actually. Or demisexual. I don’t even know. And I haven’t dated anyone. Which isn’t *because* I’m asexual.” She shrugs. “Sometimes I feel like, oh my God, why am I giving this so much mental energy? I’m literally home watching Netflix. Like. Who the fuck even cares? But I care! It matters.”



Pick the Lock by A. S. King

Fuck: 58 Bitch: 9 Asshole: 5 Bastard: 2 Piss: 1 Dick: 1

Pg. 79

I said, "Vernon, turn signal."

He said, "Jesus, Jane, you sound like your mother."

I said, "You still need to use your turn signal."

He said, "I'm a better driver than your mother, anyway."

I said, "Are you not using it now because I asked?"

He said, "Yes, Jane. I am rebelling against you. We have switched roles. You are my mother now. I shall call you Punk Rock Jane and you shall spray the audience with menstrual blood and tell them all to go fuck themselves."

I said, "Jesus, Vernon."

Pg. 90

Estrangement is all kinds of complicated when one is confined in a tube and one's sister is outside the tube, fucking one's husband. It really is a scandal.

Pg. 95

I decide, two pages in, to contact the school district. This is serious. This is my future. *Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua, Belize...*

I will say *Dear School District, Vernon Cook is holding me and my brother hostage in our house at 1111 Spruce Street. I am sixteen, and today I took the same test on North American geography as I did in elementary school. Please do whatever you can to save us.*

Sadly, no one will be sent to save us because this letter is in my imagination. Instead, Vernon arranges another suitor. My twentieth, I believe.

SUITOR #20: JED FROM THE ORCHESTRA

When Vernon took me shopping at the family department store in Philadelphia on my sixteenth birthday in March, he made sure to stop by

the lingerie section and told the woman working there to “set me up with whatever she needs.” This meant lacy panties and bras, all of which felt too old for me but I went along with it.

That’s what having suitors is all about, Vernon told me. *Going along with it.*

Pg. 143

The music is beautiful and the blankets are warm. I look at Todd periodically and he is smiling, and I can’t believe I’m experiencing this. I know every note of this symphony. Mother played it a lot when I was a child.

Vernon hates Mozart. Todd is lucky he didn’t tell Vernon what symphony it was. He has his hands under the blanket that we’ve wrapped over our laps. His hand finds mine and just like that—I am holding hands with Todd from the library.

During the minuet, the third movement, Todd leans into me a bit and I rest my head on his shoulder. I can’t stop my mind from thinking like Gemma does. *Maybe this is the one.* And then Todd very suddenly moves his hand from mine and cups and gropes my crotch. I mean—vise-grip gropes.

I inhale sharply. The people near us all look at me.

Todd keeps his eyes on the orchestra and his hand on my crotch, pressing hard against it and trying to find a way in under my dress. He pinches my labia between his fingers until I can’t hold it in.

“Ouch!” I bark.

I move the blankets off my lap as fast as I can, shove them in his lap, and start walking toward the park exit.

I didn’t think Todd followed me until I hear, “Hey! Hey!”

I turn around, more for safety than anything. He’s not running—looks genuinely concerned.

“I didn’t mean it!” he says. “Your dad told me nothing was off-limits!”

Pg. 155

So, ignore your doubt and laugh at Jane. It’s easy. She is sixteen and stupid and she hasn’t been laid and she’s never filed taxes and you will always be superior to her because you are taught to think life is a baseball game and the bases are things like sex, money, and what kind of car you drive.

Pg. 208

See, it's a woman's job to keep a family together—even if her husband is terrible. Even if he throws tables at her. Even if he fucks her sister. Even if he slaps her daughter. When she files for divorce, the women in town gossip about how she couldn't keep a man and the men in town think she's a heartless bitch.

Pg. 278

"Jesus fucking Christ!" someone says as they enter the bathroom. It's Porter—the best kickball shortstop you ever saw.

.....

Porter throws her stuff on the floor and puts her face close to the mirror and breathes on it until there's steam enough for her to write *Got laid* in the steam.

"Whaaaat?"

"Giiirl!"

I stay quiet. I don't know what to think about Porter getting laid. Last time I hung out with Porter, we were gluing macaroni to pieces of cardboard in fifth grade art class.

"It's seven thirty in the morning!" Gretchen says.

"My dad dropped me off at six," Porter says. "And my mom thinks I'm at the gym."

"Wait," KZ says. "You legit had sex *this morning*?"

Porter nods with her eyes closed. Gretchen and KZ grill her on details and she says she's not sharing. She's mid-mascara when KZ says, "You're so lucky to have parents who hate each other."

Pg. 280

The two of them look at me. I wave and go back to reading my mother's old Twitter feed, which I located only this morning on Milorad's emergency phone. She's completely badass.

**@MinaPlacenta: ABORTION IS HEALTHCARE.
MOTHERS ARE DYING.**

**@MinaPlacenta: FORCING 11-YEAR-OLD RAPE
VICTIMS TO GIVE BIRTH IS THE NEW PORN.
YOUR SENATORS ARE JACKING OFF TO IT ON
YOUR TAX DOLLARS!**

**@MinaPlacenta: NO ONE SHOULD HAVE TO
PAY TO BLEED. MENSTRUATION RELIEF NOW!**

Pg. 283

DON'T WANNA BE A FOOL?
DON'T GO TO ACTUAL SCHOOL.
DON'T WANNA BE A DOLT?
REJECT THIS STUPID CULT.

(Fast guitar solo)

JANE

THIS PLACE IS FULL OF YOU PRETENDING TO BE YOUR PARENTS
AS IF YOU DIDN'T NOTICE CHILDHOOD'S CLEVER DISAPPEARANCE
AND DESCENT INTO A CHAOTIC SERIES OF QUESTIONS YOU CAN'T ANSWER
STOP PRETENDING YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN; YOUR NODDING HEAD WILL CAUSE
YOU CANCER.

THIS PLACE IS ALMOST OVER; THEY'VE REMOVED THE BOOKS AND TEACHERS
MAY AS WELL CALL IT CHURCH AND BRING IN THE FUCKING PREACHERS.
THROW ALL THE OTHER LEARNING SHIT INTO THE INDOOR SWIMMING POOL
BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT YOU GET AT ACTUAL FUCKING SCHOOL.

Pg. 355

Then I find *Safe House* and pick up the record sleeve.

QUICK START GUIDE

I reach in and pull out a six-inch square of laminated paper with a weird logo on it that looks like a maze and the heading QUICK START GUIDE.

As I read, I start understanding the last year of my life and even more than that. Let me show you. Here's side one:



Ordering Tips

- Order any woman for any reason by logging into your account, and then click Ordering on the menu.
- If you require a woman for a task not listed, click Special Order and tell us what you need in the text box.
- You may not order women younger than 16 for love needs. (See Love Needs link in the menu.)
- Women under age 18 are accompanied by an adult woman for jobs requiring sexual, medical, or psychological know-how.
- If the woman sent to you is not the right woman, log into your account, click on Return Order and give as many details about what's wrong with your woman as you can so we can build your personal profile, then return the woman through the System. A new woman will be sent as soon as she is available.
- Make sure the bank account that is linked to your account is under your name. Any bank accounts that do not match will not be charged or credited.

Here's side two:



Offering Tips

- Log into your account, click on Offering in the menu, and then List Your Offering.
- Know the worth of your product. The most sought-after women in the System, outside of Love Needs, are tutors, cooks (foreign cuisines +1), nannies, cleaners, and shoppers.
- You may not offer women under age 16 to suitors. See Rules for Suitors link in the menu for more information.
- Women over age 17 are high value to both suitors and families and are often in short supply.
- If your offering is harmed in any way by a customer, you are entitled to compensation. Click on File a Claim and follow instructions. Most claims are processed within five days. If the claim involves criminal behavior, it could be ten days.
- Use common sense. If your offering is damaged or defective, do not list them as an offering. After five consecutive returns, your product will be examined and future offerings must be approved on an order-by-order basis.

Pg. 383

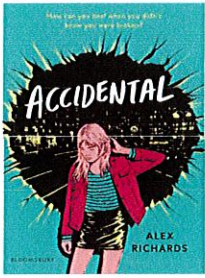
"I've seen *Beauty and the Beast*," he says.

I nod, and he dances away, singing, "No one walks like Gaston / no one talks like Gaston / no one makes girls he likes fuckin' bawk like Gaston!"

Pg. 422

ACT FOUR: SPRING

Reclaiming / Do Not Fuck with My Mother



Accidental by Alex Richards

Fuck: 40

Bitch: 9

Asshole: 9

Pg. 25

"It's killer," Gabby says, still holding a handmade mod dress on its hanger. "Kind of on the sexy side, though. What if Gran says you look like a hoochie?"

"I would give *anything* to hear my grandmother use the word *hoochie*."

She grins. "True. But she's never going to let you out of the house in that. I mean, what would God say? Plus, I can even tell you've got boobs under there. Do your grandparents *know* you have boobs?"

"Boobs!" Leah squeals. "Oh man, you are *stacked*!"

I swallow a grin. "You guys, stop. They'll hear you."

"Will they, Jo? *Will* they?"

"I bet they don't even know you got your period," Leah mutters.

"*Four years ago*," adds Gabby.

Pg. 39

"Go talk to him," Leah whispers.

"*You* go talk to him!" I whisper back.

She gives him a fleeting glance. "His boobs aren't big enough."

"So vulgar," I scold. "And I thought you were bi."

"Do you *want* me to charm the pants off him? Because I will."

Pg. 41

"Bagel and a scone," he says. "Thoughts?"

"Bagel. Definitely. I don't trust a pastry that can be either sweet *or* savory. Too big of a mindfuck."

"I said, you look like Debbie Harry."

"Oh!" I brighten. "Thanks!"

"But almost futuristic," adds Leah. "Like a cyborg porn star or something."

"Did you just call me a *cyborg porn star*?"

"What even is that?" asks Gabby.

"It's a porn star with, like, mechanical boobs. I don't know."

I smirk. "Mechanical Boobs would make a great band name."

"Leah, are you saying Jo's new *bangs* make her *boobs* look *mechanical*?"

"Hey, at least she looks like she *has* boobs. I told you they're growing."

"Shut up about my boobs," I whimper as quietly as possible, firing a baby carrot across the table. "And I do *not* look like a cyborg."

I snort with laughter. "You're such a bitch."

"A bitch is a female dog," she taunts. "And I love dogs."

And just like that, Gabby burrows her way back into my heart. As always.

"Can we change topics?" Leah whimpers. "You guys want to raid the liquor cabinet? Remember last time? With the peach schnapps?"

"I don't think Jo's in the mood for a sexy, drunk photo shoot."

Before I've reached the door, Milo pulls it wide open and stands there, grinning. "So, *you're* the curbside stalker. My mom was getting nervous. New town, new weirdos."

"Oh my God. Shit. I didn't mean—"

"Hold on," he murmurs. "You look like you're freezing."

He tugs the sleeve of my sweatshirt and pulls me into his house, shutting the door softly behind us. There are boxes stacked up in the living room, but the place already has personality. Purple accent wall, a funky driftwood coffee table, a needlepoint in the hallway—which would remind me of Gran except this one says Polite as Fuck.

The song ends and Milo pulls away, lips rubbing together. "And

there was definitely a lot of talk about how beautiful you are."

"Millie Redbone again, huh?"

He laughs. "Not Millie. This one guy—I think he's a transfer. He could *not* stop staring at you. I bet he was undressing you with his eyes."

"The new guy?" I say, giggling and shivering and exploding all at once. "He's pretty hot. And you think he was undressing me with his eyes?"

Milo's face reddens as he smiles faintly.

I kiss him again. Deeper this time, lips on fire, desperate to give him everything. When he pulls away, we're both breathless. His eyes search mine and tell me he loves me—even if neither of us has said it out loud yet. Things are moving at warp speed, but it's also the only thing keeping me grounded. I need this to be my silver lining. With an exhale, I lean back, slow and deliberate as I undo each button on my leopard-print shirt, my eyes steadily on his.

Milo gulps. His mouth opens as if to say, *Are you sure?* or some other generic bullshit guys think they're supposed to say to virgins. But I bug my eyes out, pursing my lips as I give him a death glare.

He takes the hint with a laugh.

"The new guy is going to be *really* jealous," he murmurs and pulls his T-shirt over his head.

When I get home, Gran is expertly mashing the potato crust of her shepherd's pie with the tines of a dinner fork. Which seems like an anticlimactic meal after losing my virginity. Not to mention, I've

"You feelin' feverish?" Gran asks, cradling her shepherd's pie between two potholders.

Holy Lord. I am thinking about orgasming. *In front of my grandmother.* "Oh, uh, nothing," I stammer. "Is dinner ready?"

"You okay?" Milo asks.

It's Friday afternoon and we're on his bed, all naked and sweaty and kissing, and I'm trying to forget about school and all the dirty looks ... but. Apparently, it isn't working.

"I'm fine," I lie, forcing a smile. "How 'bout you. What are you thinking about?"

"Me?" He snorts. "Guys don't think after sex. We basically turn into cavemen."

there was definitely a lot of talk about how beautiful you are."

"Millie Redbone again, huh?"

He laughs. "Not Millie. This one guy—I think he's a transfer. He could *not* stop staring at you. I bet he was undressing you with his eyes."

"The new guy?" I say, giggling and shivering and exploding all at once. "He's pretty hot. And you think he was undressing me with his eyes?"

Milo's face reddens as he smiles faintly.

I kiss him again. Deeper this time, lips on fire, desperate to give him everything. When he pulls away, we're both breathless. His eyes search mine and tell me he loves me—even if neither of us has said it out loud yet. Things are moving at warp speed, but it's also the only thing keeping me grounded. I need this to be my silver lining. With an exhale, I lean back, slow and deliberate as I undo each button on my leopard-print shirt, my eyes steadily on his.

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"The new guy is going to be *really* jealous," he murmurs and pulls his T-shirt over his head.

She raises one eyebrow; challenge accepted. Leah tosses her a Bic from my desk drawer, and Gabby flips over one of my gun statistic printouts, guiding ink along the page, slow and unsteady. When she's done, Leah and I lean closer, eyes bulging.

"What the frig is that?" Leah asks.

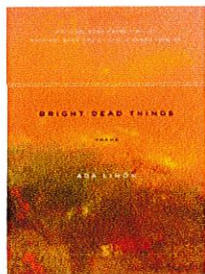
I squint. "It looks like a penis. With wings."

"What?" Gabby angles it back toward herself, milk coming out of her nose as she laughs. "It's supposed to be a tulip!"

"That is *so* not a tulip."

I snatch the pen from her and add some hairy balls to the stem. Leah puts a cigarette in its mouth and gives it an eye patch. We literally roll on the floor laughing like complete idiots. Completely perfect idiots, back to being *us* again. As if something invisible has clicked in the universe.

"Watch your fucking mouth!" I roar.



Bright Dead Things by Ada Limon

THE WILD DIVINE

After we tumbled and fought and tumbled again,
he and I sat out in the backyard before his parents
came home, flushed and flowered and buzzing
with the quickening ripples of blood growing up
and I could barely feel my hands, my limbs numbed
from the new touching that seemed strikingly
natural but also painfully kindled in the body's stove.

Oh my newness! Oh my new obsession, his hands!
I thought I could die and be happy and be humbled
by luck of a first love and a first full-fledged fuck.
I wanted to tell my ma. I wanted to make a movie.
I wanted to blast out of my bare feet to sky-town
as we passed the joint in the soupy summer's air
too-spiced with oak leaves, eucalyptus, and smoke.

I thought I might have a heart attack, kind of craved
one, kind of wanted the bum-rush of goodbye
like every kid wants when they're finally on fire.
Then, out of the stoned-breath quiet of the hills,
came another animal, a real animal, a wandering
madrone-skinned horse from the neighbor's garden,
bowed-back, higher than a man's hat, high up
and hitched to nothing. He rustled down his giant
head to where we sat, baked and big-eyed at this
animal come to greet us in our young afterglow.
He seemed almost worthy of complete devotion.
We rubbed his long horse nose, his marble eyes turning
to take us all in, to inhale us, to accept our now-selves
and he was older, a wise, hoofed, grizzled, equine elder
and I thought, this was what it was to be blessed—
to know a love that was beyond an owning, beyond
the body and its needs, but went straight from wild
thing to wild thing, approving of its wildness.

ORANGES & THE OCEAN

Valencia in the nineties, nowhere
were the oranges, except one slight
site from the train's blur. I burnt
my nipples right off the bat. No way
you could be as pretty as the girls
in Valencia, topless and tanned
all over. Pale blue hostel sheets
were barely bearable. All night
I thought I'd die when the moon
came in and I'd wake to the pinching
skin. But I didn't die. I went right
back the next day, but in a t-shirt
and didn't try to be pretty, just
swam like something ordinary,
something worthy of the sea.

THE TREE OF FIRE

The tree comes to me
for the first time in weeks.
When did all its colors,
like some commercial for dying,
start shooting out of its skin?
This morning, we fucked
each other into a regular
backyard bonfire—cold wood
turned to coal in the fine,
fine flame. And now, this tree
breaks into view, lurid red leaves
that demand a clanging,
screaming alarm, and I think—
this tree has been here
all this time, and I didn't notice.
I swear, I'll try harder not to
miss as much: the tree, or how
your fingers under still
sleep-stunned sheets
coaxed all my colors back.

SERVICE

Somewhere outside of Albuquerque, I was all fed up with the stories about your ex-girlfriend's Guess billboard in New York City, and to make matters worse, I had to pee like a racehorse, or like a girl who'd had too much to drink way too far away from home. You stopped at a friend's body shop to talk about a buddy who was stuck someplace in Mexico. You were talking, pulling strings and taking pulls off a brown bottle, and no one told me where the restroom was, so I walked back to where the hotrods were displayed like dogs ready for a fight, baring their grills like teeth. I was hungry, the air smelled like hot gasoline and that sweet carnation smell of oil and coolant. A girl pit bull came and circled me as I circled the cars; she sniffed my ankles like I was her kin or on some kind of rescue mission. You were still talking, not a glance in the direction of me and the bitch working our ways around the souped-up Corvettes and the power tools. The pit was glossy, well cared for, a queen of the car shop, and when she widened her hind legs and squatted to pee all over one of the car's dropped canvases, I took it as a challenge. That strong yellow stream seemed to be saying, *Girl, no one's going to tell me when to take a leak, when to bow down, when not to bite.* So, right then, in the dim lights of the strange garage, I lifted my skirt and pissed like the hard bitch I was.

THE GOOD FIGHT

What's the real story?

I had to hurt someone. A woman.

I had to hurt someone who had loved
him before I did, 6 years earlier.

I had to do it with a knife in my teeth.

[Pulls out the knife, turns it in her palms.]

My knife said, *I'm so sorry*, and *I love you*,
and *Please understand*. And *You're married*.
And *Give me this*.

How did you do it?

I crawled on my hands and knees,
and there were dead bodies on the rocks,
all over the rocks, on the red rocks,
picked apart by the seagulls, and I didn't care.

And before?

We were friends. Close.

[Looks out the window, watches storm.]

Maybe I've done it before; maybe I've hurt a woman
and maybe it's fitting that I'd be the low ugly
alive thing doing my living all over the place.

You knew it would hurt her?

Yes and I knew there would be bodies.

Yes and I knew that I'd lose her forever.

Yes and I chose that and I chose to lose her.

How do you love?

Like a fist. Like a knife.

But I want to be more like a weed,
a small frog trembling in air.

[Cries a little.]

Did you live?

Even better, I lived. Even more, I lived.
Even better, I am living.

And fear?

I'm not afraid of hate anymore.
What do we do with grief? Lug it; lug it.

I would do it again.

And later?

I had to come to terms
with how they loved, that they loved.

I couldn't cut it out of me.

And now?

I thought after the first stab, I'd learn to take it,
but even now, I hold the hot blade in the mouth
in case anyone comes to destroy the bloom.

[Puts the knife in her teeth.]

See? The knife I carry?
It cuts my smile even wider.

CALL TO POST

Even the grass
smells like horses
that smell like
sex and sweat,
and it makes
the whole day
feel sticky wet
with what's next.

He's betting
in the living room,
which T calls
the drinks room,
and I don't know
if I'm made up

of mama material.

The race goes off.

I take the dog out
so I can't hear
who wins. Either
money or none,
but we'll still be
animals shoving
our bodies in air,
racing no one
but ourselves,
the grass thick
and trembling
at our speed.