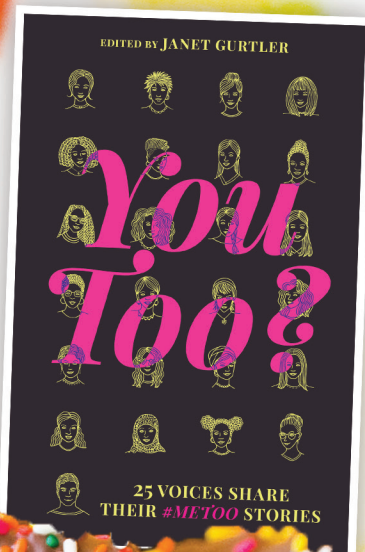


# Dip Into Your Next Favorite YA Read

## An Inkyard Sampler



*Forced to spend every other weekend in the same apartment building, Adam Moynihan and Jolene Timber begin an unlikely friendship. Soon, the weekends he dreaded and she endured become the best part of their lives. Heartbreak has pushed them together, but will love pull them apart?*

Keep reading for a sneak preview of  
EVERY OTHER WEEKEND  
by Abigail Johnson.

# First Weekend

September 11-13

adam

The pigeons blanketing the parking lot took flight into the setting sun when we pulled up to Dad's apartment building. I kind of envied the little flying disease bags for escaping until Jeremy killed the engine and they settled back down behind us. As though in sync, my brother and I leaned forward to peer out the windshield and get our first look at Oak Village Apartments, aka Dad's new home and the place we'd be forced to stay every other weekend until we turned eighteen.

*Forced* wasn't the word Jeremy would use, but it was exactly how I saw the situation.

"Huh," Jeremy said, his blondish brows smoothing out as my reddish-brown ones drew closer together. "I thought it'd be worse." Mom's piano teacher salary and Dad's handyman business might have been a great combination for summers spent slowly restoring our old farmhouse, but it didn't leave much for Dad to live on after he decided to move out last month.

Built just over a century ago, the six-story apartment building looked as if it was one bad day away from being condemned. Water stains from window AC units ran down the walls, and several windows were covered with warped and weather-beaten boards. Describing the green paint on the doorframe as peeling was like saying a tornado was a windstorm.

I could only imagine that the inside was equally as inviting. No wonder the owner, an out-of-state friend of Dad's, had been eager to trade a rent-free apartment in exchange for Dad fixing the place up.

I turned slowly to face my brother. "I think it's perfect for him."

Jeremy jerked the keys from the ignition and pushed his door open. "We're staying with Dad for two nights, Adam. Cut the crap."

Normally, I couldn't let things go with my brother, even little things, but after the thirty-minute drive from the rural Pennsylvania I'd called home my entire life to the crowded, somewhat congested outskirts of Philadelphia, I was feeling too dejected to bother. As it was, I barely had time to grab my backpack from the trunk before Jeremy slammed it shut. His massive duffel was easily five times the size of my backpack. That about summed up our respective opinions on our parents' separation.

The full impact of our new residence—however temporary—hit me as we drew closer to the glass front doors. There was a tiny, spiderweb-like crack decorating one corner, and the maroon carpet inside was worn so thin by foot-traffic paths that it looked striped. Small metal mailboxes were built into the wall on the right, and unpainted plaster covered the left. Mom wouldn't have

lasted five minutes in here before peeling back the carpet to check for hardwood. Another ten and she'd have been chipping away at the plaster hoping to expose brick underneath. Dad would have been right there next to her, grinning.

He should have been, only not here, there—home. With Mom.

Two and a half years. Jeremy didn't seem to grasp the severity of the situation. Then again, at seventeen, maybe he was realizing that he'd have to hold out for only another year. Not that he viewed the inauguration of these weekends as something to endure. He was looking forward to seeing Dad, whereas I would have sooner slept in the alley outside.

I moved past Jeremy toward the elevator, but after pushing the button for a full minute, I started up the stairs. "You're right, Jeremy. This place is way better than our dry, clean, not-broken-down house, where Mom is alone right now."

My backpack wasn't nearly as heavy as Jeremy's duffel—unlike my brother, I was carrying only what I needed for the next forty-eight mandatory hours—so it was only reluctance that weighed my steps up five flights of stairs. We stopped at the sixth floor and peered down a surprisingly wide hallway with three doors on each side. One of the light bulbs was flickering in a seizure-inducing pattern that increased my nausea at having to be there.

"Which one is it?" Jeremy asked.

"Does it matter?"

Jeremy checked his phone, then pointed to the middle door on the right, 6-3. He was already knocking by the time I stepped up next to him. Each rap of his knuckles made me wince. I hadn't seen Dad in three weeks, and that was only when he'd been packing up the rest of his stuff. He'd tried to hug me before leaving, but I'd backed away. It was his choice to leave and mine not to help him feel okay about it.

"He's not here." Jeremy frowned at the door.

"Great. Let's go."

More door frowning from Jeremy.

"I'm not staying if he's not here. I'll call Mom to come get me if I have to."

Jeremy's head snapped to mine and he glared. "I'm so sick—"

The door to 6-5 opened, and a pretty Asian woman wearing sky blue yoga pants and a matching sports bra stepped out. "Oh, hi! You must be Jerry and Adam!"

The expanse of midriff on display rendered my brother mute. I was too pissed off by the whole situation to care much. "Yeah, but we were just leaving." I grabbed Jeremy's arm.

"Paul asked me to keep an eye out for you. He needed to pick up a few things, but he thought he'd be back by now." She peered down the obviously deserted hallway. "Anyhoo, come on in." She turned and called to someone in her apartment. "Jo, come meet the new neighbors."

Neither Jeremy nor I moved.

"Whoops. Probably should introduce myself. I'm Shelly, I live here with my boyfriend, Robert. It'll be so nice to have some new faces on the floor." She laughed and popped her hip against the doorframe in a way that drew my eye despite my mood. "Those are vacant." She pointed at the two apartments directly across from ours. "And then the Spiegels and their new baby live on the other side of you in 6-1, but don't worry, the baby doesn't cry a lot. There's a guy who lives in 6-2, but he's not around much and honestly he gives me a creepy vibe. That's mean, isn't it? It's just that this generally isn't the kind of place that attracts non-creepy people." She made a face. "I know your dad is going to fix it up, but it's kind of a dump right now."

She lifted a hand as if to shield her eyes from the flickering bulb. "We wouldn't be here if Robert's queen bitch of an ex hadn't taken everything in the divorce, and I mean *everything*. The

house, the cars, his sports memorabilia.” She started ticking things off on her fingers. “You wouldn’t believe what he went through just to get Jo every other weekend.” Shelly shook her head. “So this is it for now. It’s better inside though. We might still have some pizza left over, I think.”

She leaned back into her apartment, and I thought Jeremy was going to pass out at the rear view she presented. “Jo, did you eat all the pizza? Jolene?” Back in the hallway, she half rolled her eyes, then smiled. “She’s kind of a nightmare, and I’m not exactly her favorite person.”

I blinked at the sheer amount of information this complete stranger had just vomited at us. “Maybe you shouldn’t call her mother queen bitch.”

“I know, but…” Shelly shrugged. “It *really* suits her.” She stressed the word and laughed again. “Do you know she had their dog put down while Robert was out of town? I mean, who does that?” She leaned forward. “Just between us, she’s a drunk, too.”

I wasn’t sure that Jeremy was listening so much as he was watching the way Shelly’s chest rose and fell when she took a deep breath—which she did constantly.

I leaned into Jeremy while Shelly continued to grossly overshare. “You realize she’s probably wondering what size diapers you wear.”

Predictably, Jeremy reacted by slamming me into the opposite wall. His nostrils flared. “I’m so sick of your crap.”

“Yeah?” I straightened up from the wall with a smile. “I’m not exactly—”

Shelly had fallen quiet as soon as Jeremy pushed me, but she started up again as Dad crested the stairs behind us. “And here he is.” Her voice held a note of relief, like she expected my brother and me to fall in line at the sight of our father. Once, that would have been true.

Dad’s arms were filled with bags. Jeremy went to help him; I did not.

“Thanks, Jer.” Then he stared at me. Dad looked about ten years older than the last time I’d seen him, with a scruffy half beard and more salt than pepper in his light brown hair. His normally suntanned complexion looked paler, too. But he was smiling, and that made me want to knock his teeth out. “Hi, buddy.”

“Don’t worry,” Shelly called out, drawing all eyes once again. “They only just got here. We’ve been getting to know each other. Paul, you didn’t tell me how cute your sons are. Jeremy looks just like you, and I bet Adam has the sweetest smile.” She flashed an inviting grin at me, and I continued not smiling as Dad thanked her and led us inside his apartment.

That’s when I discovered Shelly’s first lie: it was *not* nicer inside. There were two tiny bedrooms, a small eat-in kitchen, and a slightly-larger-than-the-hallway living room that barely fit a couch and TV.

“So,” Dad clapped his hands. “Who wants a tour?” Jeremy and I kept silent. “Guess I should save the jokes for after dinner, huh? I’ve got a lot of plans and I’m hoping you guys can help me with some of them. This building has good bones, you’ll see.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said. “We’ll help.” He tried to catch my eye but I ignored him.

Dad pointed at the closed doors on the right. “I’m giving you guys the bedrooms. One has access to the balcony and the other has slightly more space.”

“Adam’s the youngest, so he can take the couch.”

“And you’re practically a hobbit,” I said. “I wouldn’t even fit.” Jeremy had nearly two years on me, but it’d been clear for a while that I’d gotten the height in the family. I’d grown two inches in the past year. Jeremy was five-nine with his shoes on and I was six-two barefoot. I enjoyed Jeremy’s reddened face before heading into the bedroom with the balcony.

“Okay then. Adam, I got a pillow for the lounge chair out there, but the balcony is probably held together by rust more than anything right now, so be careful.” He moved back to dig in one of his bags. “The lady at the store said it was fine to leave outside even in the snow—which it feels like we’re going to get early this year.”

I shut the door behind me and heard Dad’s voice trail off. The walls were paper thin, so Dad and Jeremy’s somewhat stilted conversation chased me onto the balcony. It shook but felt sturdy enough. The view was...well, it was the side of another building.

There was an apple orchard outside my window at home.

I pulled my phone out and hit Redial. Mom answered on the first ring. “Adam, sweetie?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Oh, is it that bad?” She could tell from my two-word greeting that it was.

“No, it’s swell as long as I breathe through my mouth.”

“Two days and you’ll be home. You can do anything for two days. And Jeremy’s there.”

My mother lived in denial about the state of my relationship with my brother. In her mind we were still the same little boys who’d built forts together. “Your dad misses you.”

I ground my teeth together to hold in my response to that oft-repeated comment. It wouldn’t do any good to remind her that if Dad missed us, he had no one to blame but himself.

She asked me a few more carefully worded questions about Dad’s apartment. For once I was less careful with my answers.

“It’s foul, like rats-wouldn’t-live-here foul.”

Mom laughed, which was what I wanted. “So I shouldn’t tell you I just saw a deer in the backyard?”

“Can you repeat that? I couldn’t hear you over the drug bust going on below me.” I heard a snicker—not from Mom—and moved forward, following the sound to the edge of the balcony.

“I miss you so much,” Mom said, then in a softer voice, “The house is so quiet.”

“Yeah, me, too.” Distraction leaked into my voice as I leaned around the dividing wall to look into the neighbor’s balcony.

There sat a petite girl about my age with olive-toned skin and a waist-length brown braid hanging over one shoulder. She was slowly panning a bulky camera past two pigeons that were perched on the railing in front of her.

“Mom, I gotta call you back.” I hung up. “Hey,” I said, waiting until the girl turned her camera toward me and then waiting longer until she lowered it. “You could have said something or, I don’t know, gone inside.”

“Sorry,” she said, giving no indication that she meant it beyond the word itself.

She was lounging in a foldout chair with her legs thrown over one side and the bright red glow of a cigarette illuminating her free hand. I was cold in my hoodie, so she had to be freezing in her jeans and black T-shirt that read SAVE FERRIS, but she didn’t show it.

“You must be Jolene.” Either that, or she was squatting on Shelly’s balcony.

She smiled. “I prefer spawn of the queen bitch.”

# jolene

It was kinda pretty, the way his face turned red when he realized that I'd overheard Shelly trashing my mom. One of the many perks of the Oak Village Apartments was the utter lack of privacy. "Which one are you?" I asked.

"What?"

"Are you Jerry or Adam?"

"Adam."

"In that case, thanks, Adam." When his reddish-brown eyebrows drew together, I elaborated, "You told Shelly not to call my mom 'queen bitch.' That was nice of you."

His eyebrows smoothed out. "Figured she might not be impartial."

I laughed. Then I did it again. It took a lot of effort not to go for a third. "That would be a no. I mean, my mom is awful, but so's my dad and his teenage girlfriend."

"Wait, she's not—"

"She was close to it when I first met her." I mentally and physically shook myself away from that chain of thought.

Adam made a face that echoed my sentiments.

"Yeah," I said.

"Is she for real?"

"Everything but her boobs. I'm pretty sure my dad bought those two—or was it three?—Christmases ago. I can't remember. Wait, it was three. We couldn't afford braces for me that year, but obviously my dad enjoys those more, so it was the right call." I smiled, revealing the slight gap between my front teeth. In hindsight, I liked my gap, but my dad was still a tool. "Hey, do you smoke?" I held up my cigarette.

Adam shook his head.

"That's too bad." I lowered it without taking a drag.

He flushed a little more. "Maybe you shouldn't either."

He was cute. "I don't." I flicked off the ash. "Shelly says the smell makes her sick and forbade me to smoke, so." I shrugged.

"But you *don't* smoke?"

I wrinkled my nose. “I tried, but I felt like throwing up afterward, and the smoke messed with my shots.” She nodded at her camera. “Now I just let them burn and enjoy the results. Still, it’d be a lot easier if you smoked. All the stink in half the time, you know? It’s not exactly warm out here.” He surprised me then by swinging his leg over and jumping into my balcony, sending the two pigeons flying off. Very cute, I decided. He lifted the cigarette from my hand and took several long drags, without hacking and coughing like I had. “Thought you didn’t smoke.”

It was his turn to shrug. “My mom used to. She caught me one time sneaking a cigarette from her purse, so I promised to quit if she did.”

My fingers itched to pick up my camera, but that might make him stop. When he hit the filter, he presented it to me like the diamond it was.

“And did she?”

“Yeah.”

Such a simple answer, yet the concept completely eluded me. “I’m guessing that means you won’t be my smoking buddy from now on?”

“Sorry,” he said, like he really meant it. “One-time thing.”

The problem with cute boys who valiantly smoke cigarettes for you is that they tend to be distracting. In my head I was shooting the scene of him leaping to my balcony with the fading glow of daylight outlining him. I would focus on his hands clutching the railing and zoom in to show how the rust would still be stuck in patches to his fingers when he picked up my cigarette. I was leaning forward to check the angles and was therefore completely oblivious to the fact that we were about to be invaded until the balcony door slid open.

“Jolene, I—” Shelley’s nose wrinkled and her gaze dropped to the cigarette butt in my hand. “Seriously? It’s like you deliberately do the things I tell you not to.”

Scene forgotten, I refrained from tapping my nose and making a bell noise, but only just. “When the sweet, seductive lure of nicotine calls, you have to answer.”

Shelly snatched up my pack and plucked the butt from my unprotesting fingers. “It makes it a lot easier not to sugarcoat things for you when pull this shi—” She broke off when she noticed Adam. “Where did you come from?” Her eyes went wide and her gaze shot to the balcony next door. “Are you out of your mind? You could have died!”

A thoroughly frigid breeze raked over us, and Shelly shivered. I looked at Adam to see if he was noticing what the cold air was doing to my dad’s not-so-little gifts. He glanced but didn’t linger. Cuter by the minute.

“Are you okay?” Shelly moved forward as if to hug him, but Adam stepped back.

“Yeah, I’d really rather you didn’t touch me.”

I grinned at him. “I’m going to like you, aren’t I?”

Shelly made a distressed noise.

“Calm down, Shelly. He’s fine, we’re fine. Feel free to go back inside where it’s warm before you put someone’s eye out with one of those things.”

Shelly did a decent Adam impersonation by going red and wrapping her arms across her chest. She took a step back. “I need you both inside right now.” I didn’t move and, much to my pleasure, Adam didn’t either.

“That’s gonna be a pass, Shel, but thanks.”

Shelly sucked her upper lip into her mouth and glanced upward. “Jolene, I thought we had an agreement.”

“And what agreement was that? The one where you break into my room whenever you want?”



“I knocked. You didn’t answer. And our agreement was that you were not going to smoke here.” She made an exasperated noise. “And to think I was going to talk to your dad about that summer film school—”

All my muscles tightened. “What are you talking about?” But I knew. I just didn’t know how *Shelly* knew. I didn’t go around sharing huge, personal dreams with anyone, let alone my dad’s prepubescent girlfriend.

“The film program in California. They sent this huge info packet. Honestly, I almost threw it away because you never mentioned that you were expecting anything, but then I saw your name when I opened it and...”

Shelly kept going but most of me shut down so that I could silently scream in my head without externally moving a single muscle. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Adam sucking in a breath. It helped, however slightly, to have someone else register the line Shelly had crossed without even thinking about it.

“... I thought you just liked watching old movies. Is that what you’re filming all the time?” She reached for my camera, and I snatched it away with a barely repressed snarl.

I guessed to Shelly movies from the ’80s were old. I preferred them, because they showed me a time before my parents met and lost their minds long enough to get married and have me. You know, the good old days. But I didn’t watch only “old” movies.

“Maybe if you didn’t hide every single aspect of your life from me, I wouldn’t have to go through your mail or barge onto your balcony to know anything. I’m just—” She gritted her teeth. “I’m sick of it. I can’t control what you do at your mother’s, but over here you need to follow your dad’s rules.”

I was almost done screaming in my head. Not quite, but almost. If she’d let me finish, I’d have been able to stay silent until she left, but then she had to go and bring up my dad. “He never gave me any rules. See, he’d have to actually show up once in a while to do that.”

One of Shelly’s eye muscles twitched and her voice softened. “He’s in the middle of a really big work—”

“So, Adam, seen any good movies lately?” I don’t know if Shelly stopped talking when I interrupted her, or if I just drowned her out. I’d heard that line from her before, and I wasn’t going to listen to it again.

“We agreed that I’m in charge when you’re here.”

Angry me rarely accomplished anything except to invite crying me to make a long, insufferable appearance. So, ignoring all instincts, I forced amusement into my voice. “I never agreed to that. What were the terms?”

Shelly’s arms snapped to her sides and her nostrils flared. “You don’t get terms when you’re fifteen, but fine, do whatever you want. You always do.” She tossed the pack of cigarettes at me and flung an arm toward Adam’s balcony. “Please do not climb over that when you leave.” Then to me she said, “I left the film program packet on your bed. Oh, and I came out here to tell you that your dad’s not coming home tonight. I can’t *imagine* why he wouldn’t want to.”

My eyes stung and the air in my lungs swelled painfully, but outwardly I didn’t react at all. Shelly closed the sliding door behind her without looking back. It took me two tries, but I managed to light another cigarette. I focused on the thin line of smoke that trailed up in front of me. Adam was staring after Shelly with a slightly agape mouth and wide eyes. “Just wait until you get yours,” I told him.

He blinked, then snapped out of his semi-horrified stupor. “Get my what?”

“Your Shelly. Or does your dad already have a girlfriend?”

“What? No. He doesn’t have a girlfriend. My parents are just separated. They aren’t even talking about divorce.”

“Since when does that matter? Shelly was in the picture long before the paperwork went through.” Christmas had been a hoot that year. Everybody knew that everybody knew, but since my mom hadn’t officially pulled the trigger yet, the holidays were in full swing at my house. This year, they were in an all-out war over who would get to celebrate the birth of our Savior with me.

“No,” Adam was saying. “It’s not like that with my parents. There weren’t any affairs or anything. I can’t imagine my dad having a girlfriend.”

“But you haven’t seen the way he looks at Shelly. Unlike you, he doesn’t back away when she tries to hug him.” Based on Adam’s expression, I was guessing he’d witnessed such an event earlier in the hall. “Or I could be wrong.” I wasn’t.

Adam was still frowning, but this time at me and not just the unpleasant idea I’d forced on him. “He’s not—you have no idea what’s going on with my family. Clearly yours is seriously messed up. Mine is…” he hesitated “...normal messed up. My dad isn’t going to start dating, and my mom isn’t some—”

“Oh I hope you finish that sentence. Considering your entire opinion of my mother will have been formed by Shelly’s, you must have a ton of insight.” I rested my chin on my hands and blinked at him with wide, waiting eyes.

The blush that stained his neck and cheeks wasn’t nearly as cute this time. He rotated his jaw like he was physically forcing himself to say something other than what he wanted to. “Our parents aren’t the same, okay? That’s all I was trying to say.”

“Then spill. You say no one strayed, but maybe they were just good at hiding it.”

Adam looked at me like I was something he’d stepped in. It wasn’t a new experience for me, so I let it go. “What’s wrong with you? You’re messed up, you know that?”

My cigarette had burned low by then, and I was reaching my suffer-in-order-to-piss-Dad-off-via-Shelly threshold in terms of temperature. My skin was covered in goose bumps, and I was rethinking all kinds of things about Adam. The movie in my head suddenly had an ominous, horror-themed score to it. “Fine, whatever. I’m going to slink into my room, but stay, smoke the rest of my cigarettes if you want.” I nodded toward the mostly full pack. “Maybe it’ll piss off your dad, too.”

“I’ll pass. I don’t need to resort to anything so petty to punish my dad.”

I grinned in all my gap-toothed glory. “Enlighten me, oh mature one—how grown up do you have to be to call Mommy two seconds after you get here?”

He didn’t say anything, just walked to the wall and started to scale back over to his balcony.

“Oh no. Leaving so soon? I have all these other petty things we could do together.”

Adam’s head popped back over as soon as he was in his own balcony. “Look, are you going to be around a lot?”

“Every other weekend.”

He hung his head. “Me, too.”

I didn’t bother with the fake smile. “Yippee.”

*Don't miss  
EVERY OTHER WEEKEND by Abigail Johnson  
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***Ready Player One* and *Warcross* meet *Geekerella* in Eric Smith's *Don't Read the Comments*, an #ownvoices story in which two teen gamers find their virtual worlds—and blossoming romance—invaded by the real-world issues of trolling and doxing in the gaming community.**

Keep reading for a sneak preview of  
DON'T READ THE COMMENTS  
by Eric Smith.

## Divya

“Mom. We’ve been over this. Don’t read the comments,” I say, sighing as my mother stares at me with her fretful, deep-set eyes. They’re dark green, just like mine, and stand out against her soft brown skin. Wrinkle lines trail out from the corners, like thin tree branches, grown over a lifetime of worrying.

I wish I could wash away all of her worries, but I only seem to be causing her more lately.

“I’m just not comfortable with it anymore,” my mom counters. “I appreciate what you’re doing with... you know, your earnings or however that sponsor stuff works, but I can’t stand seeing what they’re saying about you on the Internet.”

“So don’t read the comments!” I exclaim, reaching out and taking her hands in mine. Her palms are weathered, like the pages of the books she moves around at the library, and I can feel the creases in her skin as my fingers run over them. Bundles of multicolored bangles dangle from both of her wrists, clinking about lightly.

“How am I supposed to do that?” she asks, giving my hands a squeeze. “You’re my daughter. And they say such awful things. They don’t even know you. Breaks my heart.”

“What did I *just* say?” I ask, letting go of her hands, trying to give her my warmest, it’s-going-to-be-okay smile. I know she only reads the blogs, the articles covering this and that, so she just sees the replies there, the sprawling comments—and not what people say on social media. Not what the trolls say about *her*. Because moms are the easiest target for those online monsters.

“Yes, yes, I’m aware of that sign in your room with your slogan regarding comments.” Mom scoffs, shaking her head and getting to her feet. She groans a little as she pushes herself off the tiny sofa, which sinks in too much. Not in the comfortable way a squishy couch might, but in a this-piece-of-furniture-needs-to-be-thrown-away-because-it’s-probably-doing-irreversible-damage-to-my-back-and-internal-organs kind of way. She stretches her back, one hand on her waist, and I make a mental note to check online for furniture sales at Target or Ikea once she heads to work.

“Oof, I must have slept on it wrong,” Mom mutters, turning to look at me. But I know better. She’s saying that for my benefit. The air mattress on her bedframe—in lieu of an actual mattress— isn’t doing her back any favors.

I’d better add a cheap mattress to my list of things to search for later. Anything is better than her sleeping on what our family used to go camping with.

Still, I force myself to nod and say, “Probably.” If Mom knew how easily I saw through this dance of ours, the way we pretend that things are okay while everything is falling apart around us, she’d only worry more.

Maybe she does know. Maybe that’s part of the dance.

I avert my gaze from hers and glance down at my watch. It’s the latest in smartwatch tech from Samsung, a beautiful little thing that connects to my phone and computer, controls the streaming box on our television... Hell, if we could afford smart lights in our apartment, it could handle those, too. It’s nearly 8:00 p.m., which means my Glitch subscribers will be tuning in for my scheduled gaming stream of *Reclaim the Sun* at any minute. A torrent of social media notifications starts lighting up the edges of the little screen, but it isn’t the unread messages or the time that taunt me.

It’s the date.

The end of June is only a few days away, which means the rent is due. How can my mom stand here and talk about me getting rid of my Glitch channel when it's bringing in just enough revenue to help cover the rent? To pay for groceries? When the products I'm sent to review or sponsored to wear—and then consequently sell—have been keeping us afloat with at least a little money to walk around with?

"I'm going to start looking for a second job," Mom says, her tone defeated.

"Wait, what?" I look away from my watch and feel my heartbeat quicken. "But if you do that—"

"I can finish these summer classes another time. Maybe next year—"

"No. No way." I shake my head and suck air in through my gritted teeth. She's worked so hard for this. *We've* worked so hard for this. "You only have a few more classes!"

"I can't let you keep doing this." She gestures toward my room, where my computer is.

"And I can't let you work yourself to death for... What? This tiny apartment, while that asshole doesn't do a damn thing to—"

"Divya. Language," she scolds, but her tone is undermined by a soft grin peeking in at the corner of her mouth. "He's still your fath—"

"I'll do my part," I say resolutely, stopping her from saying that word. "I can deal with it. I want to. You will not give up going to school. If you do that, he wins. Besides, I've...got some gadgets I can sell this month."

"I just... I don't want you giving up on your dreams, so I can keep chasing mine. I'm the parent. What does all this say about me?" My mom exhales, and I catch her lip quivering just a little. Then she inhales sharply, burying whatever was about to surface, and I almost smile, as weird as that sounds. It's just our way, you know?

Take the pain in. Bury it down deep.

"We're a team." I reach out and grasp her hands again, and she inhales quickly once more.

It's in these quiet moments we have together, wrestling with these challenges, that the anger I feel—the rage over this small apartment that's replaced our home, the overdrafts in our bank accounts, the time I've given up—that anger is replaced with something else.

With how proud I am of her, for starting over the way she has.

"I'm not sure what I did to deserve you."

*Deserve.*

I feel my chest cave in a little at the word as I look again at the date on the beautiful display of this watch. I know I need to sell it. I know I do. The couch. That crappy mattress. My dwindling bank account. The upcoming bills.

The required sponsorship agreement to wear this watch in all my videos for a month, in exchange for keeping the watch, would be over in just a few days. I could easily get \$500 for it on an auction site or maybe a little less at the used electronics shop downtown. One means more money, but it also means having my address out there, which is something I avoid like the plague—though having friends like Rebekah mail the gadgets for me has proved a relatively safe way to do it. The other means less money, but the return is immediate at least. Several of the employees there watch my stream, however, and conversations with them are often pretty awkward.

I'd hoped that maybe, just maybe, I'd get to keep this one thing. Isn't that something *I* deserve? Between helping Mom with the rent while she finishes up school and pitching in for groceries and trying to put a little money aside for my own tuition in the fall at the community college... God, I'd at least earned this much, right?

The watch buzzes against my wrist, a pleasant feeling. As a text message flashes across the screen, I feel a pang of wonder and regret over how a display so small can still have a better resolution than the television in our living room.

## THE GALAXY WAITS FOR NO ONE, YOU READY DIV?—COMMANDER (RE)BEKAH

I smile at the note from my producer slash best friend, then look up as my mom makes her way toward the front door of our apartment, tossing a bag over her shoulder.

“I’ll be back around ten or so,” she says, sounding tired. “Just be careful, okay?”

“I always am,” I promise, walking over to give her a hug. It’s sweet, her constant reminders to be careful, to check in, especially since all I generally do while she’s gone is hang out in front of the computer. But I get it. Even the Internet can be a dangerous place. The social media threats and emails I get, sent by anonymous trolls with untraceable accounts, are proof of that.

Still, as soon as the door closes, I bolt across the living room and into my small bedroom, which is basically just a bed, a tiny dresser, and my workstation. I’ve kept it simple since the move and my parents split.

The only thing that’s far from simple is my gaming rig.

When my Glitch stream hit critical mass at 100,000 subscribers about a year and a half ago, a gaming company was kind enough to sponsor my rig. It’s extravagant to the point of being comical, with bright neon-blue lighting pouring out the back of the system and a clear case that shows off the needless LED illumination. Like having shiny lights makes it go any faster. I never got it when dudes at my school put flashy lights on their cars, and I don’t get it any more on a computer.

But it was free, so I’m certainly not going to complain.

I shake the mouse to awaken the sleeping monster, and my widescreen LED monitor flashes to life. It’s one of those screens that bends toward the edges, the curves of the monitor bordering on sexy. I adjust my webcam, which—along with my beaten-up Ikea table that’s not even a desk—is one of the few non-sponsored things in my space. It’s an aging thing, but the resolution is still HD and flawless, so unless a free one is somehow going to drop into my lap—and it probably won’t, because you can’t show off a web camera in a digital stream or a recorded sponsored video when you’re filming with said camera—it’ll do the trick.

I navigate over to Glitch and open my streaming application. Almost immediately, Rebekah’s face pops up in a little window on the edge of my screen. I grin at the sight of her new hairstyle, her usually blonde and spikey hair now dyed a brilliant shade of blood-orange, a hue as vibrant as her personality. The sides of her head are buzzed, too, and the overall effect is awesome.

Rebekah smiles and waves at me. “You ready to explore the cosmos once more?” she asks. I can hear the keys clicking loudly as she types, her hands making quick work of something on the other side of the screen. I open my mouth to say something, but she jumps in before I can. “Yes, yes, I’ll be on mute once we get in, shut up.”

I laugh and glance at myself in the mirror I’ve got attached to the side of my monitor with a long metal arm—an old bike mirror that I repurposed to make sure my makeup and hair is on point in these videos. Even though the streams are all about the games, there’s nothing wrong with looking a *little* cute, even if it’s just for myself. I run a finger over one of my eyebrows, smoothing it out, and make a note to tweeze them just a little bit later. I’ve got my mother’s strong brows, thick, black, and rebellious. We’re frequently in battle with one another, me armed with my tweezers, my eyebrows wielding their growing-faster-than-weeds genes.

“How much time do we have?” I ask, tilting my head back and forth.

“About five minutes. And you look fine, stop it,” she grumbles. I push the mirror away, the metal arm making a squeaking noise, and I see Rebekah roll her eyes. “You could just use a compact like a normal person, you know.”

“It’s vintage. I’m being hip.”

“You. Hip.” She chuckles. “Please save the jokes for the stream. It’s good content.”

I flash her a scowl and load up my social feeds on the desktop, my watch still illuminating with notifications. I decide to leave them unchecked on the actual device and scope them out on the computer instead, so when people are watching, they can see the watch in action. That should score me some extra goodwill with sponsors, and maybe it’ll look like I’m more popular than people think I am.

Because that’s my life. Plenty of social notifications, zero texts or missed calls.

The feeds are surprisingly calm this evening, a bundle of people posting about how excited they are for my upcoming stream, playing *Reclaim the Sun* on their own, curious to see what I’m finding... Not bad. There are a few dumpster-fire comments directed at the way I look and some racist remarks by people with no avatars, cowards who won’t show their faces, but nothing out of the usual.

Ah. Lovely. Someone wants me to wear less clothing in this stream. Blocked. A link to someone promoting my upcoming appearance at GamesCon, nice. Retweeted. A post suggesting I wear a skimpy top, and someone agreeing. Charming. Blocked and blocked.

Why is it that the people who always leave the grossest, rudest, and occasionally sexist, racist, or religiously intolerant comments, never seem to have an avatar connected to their social profiles? Hiding behind a blank profile picture? How brave. How courageous.

And never mind all the messages that I assume are supposed to be flirtatious, but are actually anything but. Real original, saying “hey” and that’s it, then spewing a bunch of foul-mouthed nonsense when they don’t get a response. Hey, anonymous bro, I’m not here to be sexualized by strangers on the Internet. It’s creepy and disgusting. Can’t I just have fun without being objectified?

“Div!” Rebekah shouts, and I jump in my seat a little.

“Yeah, hey, I’m here,” I mutter, looking around for my Bluetooth earpiece, trying to force myself into a better mood. *This is why you don’t read the comments, Divya.*

The earpiece is bright orange and yellow with white outlines, inscribed with the logo from the game *Remember Me*, a kick-ass sci-fi adventure with a lady protagonist that I adore. I don’t care if the series got canceled; I wear my earpiece to show my solidarity.

I *will* remember you, Nilin, you underrated heroine. You deserved better.

“You were really zoned out for a second,” Rebekah says. “Let’s go, it’s time.”

I hear her tapping a few buttons, and suddenly her little screen goes quiet, the video stream of her now bearing a circled microphone with a line through it in bright red. She’s muted, vanished from the recording part of the stream, preferring to stay behind the scenes, for personal reasons that belong to her.

I chuckle as she reaches off-screen and her hand comes back gripping a giant clear Starbucks cup with a huge froth of whipped cream on top, the beverage most definitely filled with pure chocolate and sugar. “Game fuel,” she likes to call it.

I swivel in my chair to make sure my room’s door is closed and take a quick peek at my window. Curtain drawn—check.

We’re good to go.



For a minute, I debate breaking out my Oculus. It's way more fun to explore the universe in *Reclaim the Sun* when you're using the VR feature, but then I'd have a giant virtual reality headset covering up my face, hiding my expressions while I'm playing. And all of that, blended with the gameplay, is part of the point of this. Plus, I want to see Rebekah in her side window. Maybe I'll plug it in later, when I'm gaming solo.

I look up at my webcam and shift around, trying to find the perfect angle for where I'm sitting, the old camera wrestling to adjust the light balance within the room. I keep my outfits on the stream simple—today I've got on a dark green t-shirt with a bright white *Halo* logo in the center, which makes my green eyes look even greener on the camera. Perfect.

I hit record.

"Hey, lovers and dreamers and streamers!" I exclaim, plastering a bright smile on my face. "It's DIV, coming to you live from the vast universe of *Reclaim the Sun*. Today we're going to be exploring the galaxy and seeing what we can find out here in the cosmos. Hopefully, as I'm out adventuring, I run into some of you! Feel free to hit me up on the *Reclaim the Sun* messaging network at letter D, number 1, letter V, and join the Armada as we claim planets for our own."

"As always, the fantastic and talented and beautiful Commander (Re)bekah is on the stream with us."

I point at the camera. There's an audible click, and the video stream switches to Rebekah, who gives a faux salute to the camera for just a second, and then switches back to me. Even in that quick clip, you can't see her face. She saluted while looking down. She's not a huge fan of the attention, and prefers to stay behind the camera, even though she's got tens of thousands of followers on her various social networks from working on this little show of ours. She mostly posts pictures of her coffee, her cat Gipsy Danger, or whatever book she's reading at the time. She's big into bookstagram, making beautifully artsy arrangements to photograph and showcase whatever book she's reading.

And no matter what game we're playing, if there's a customizable vehicle, she'll name it after a book she's really into. I've seen her share screenshots with authors on social media, and they always seem over-the-moon thrilled.

"She'll be on deck running around with us in her brand-new vessel, the Heart of Iron, recording our exploration from another angle to catch all the action. You can flag her ship, as well as mine, The Golden Titan, and track us as we travel the universe—and, of course, please feel free to join our fleet! Though be warned, if you fire on us, we will be forced to unleash upon you the fury of a thousand suns, as well as the fury of the thousand fans who are traveling with us. Your ship won't survive against my darling Angst Armada."

I glance over at Rebekah on the screen and catch her giving me a smile. She's the one who named our quickly growing fleet, which largely consists of teenagers like us, eager to do a little exploring outside the real world we're trapped in. And a lot of venting sure does happen on our hashtag and in the game, almost none of which has anything to do with video gaming. School. Breakups. Parents. The usual.

#AngstArmada it is.

Rebekah's been working on getting patches and pins done up for when we make our appearance at GamesCon later in the summer. She says we can potentially make a ton of money, even if we're only selling them for a dollar or two at our table. I wince at the thought of it—not the patches or pins, which frankly sound awesome, and I'm all about, because how cool would it be to see someone randomly in the mall rocking our fleet badges? And extra revenue to put away for college and help Mom? Yes, please.

But manning the table. Being in public. Sitting in one place where people can come up and talk to me, shake my hand, take pictures. The trolls and their emails and messages... They get so brutal. And the idea of being someplace in-real-life as DIV and not just as me, Divya, is terrifying.

But if Rebekah can be brave enough to do it, so can I. She's been through far worse than I have.

"Turn up the enthusiasm," Rebekah murmurs from her little window, on mute for everyone playing with us and for the stream, but still audible to me. "You sound like you don't want to be here today."

She's awfully perceptive.

"And...we're in!" I shout, lifting my hands up in the air, fingers wide and open. I beam directly into the webcam.

"Alright, alright, dial it back there on the performance, Priyanka Chopra," Rebekah snipes, and I grin, putting my hands back on the keyboard and mouse. The universe of *Reclaim the Sun* opens wide and beautiful on my massive screen, an expanse of sprawling black dotted with faraway stars, each a destination that's possible to fly off to. The fact that there's no beating this game, no end goal—that it's just nonstop exploration—makes it all the more fun. There's no real competition here, unless you're looking for a fight. We're all in this together.

I look down at the controls on my ship and take quick stock of what's on the read-outs, still feeling a little bitter that I can't have my Oculus headset on, as I have to navigate everything with my mouse instead of just physically looking at this stuff. I click on the little video window that contains Rebekah's floating head and drag it over, placing it atop one of the more useless control screens, there mostly for decoration. Seeing her there makes me feel like she's my real navigator, and in this ship with me. And really, she is—without her, there wouldn't be a proper show with sponsors and actual revenue or any of that. It'd just be me floundering around in front of an audience, one that wouldn't be nearly as big as the one we have now.

Or maybe I wouldn't be doing this at all. I'm not sure *what* I'd be doing right now without Rebekah's help, what with Mom and our finances the way they are.

I give my friend's video window an affectionate little click with my mouse and turn back to the open universe.

"It's that time, Angst Armada! Our coordinates are as follows... Quadrant Seti Six, 51.7, 92.2, 62.7, in the Omega Expanse. We'll wait here for approximately five minutes, and then take off and try to find an undiscovered planet. With any luck—whoa!"

The radar screen goes haywire, and Rebekah's video screen next to it shows her looking far more excited than I've seen her in recent memory. A smile explodes on her face, and her voice erupts in my headset, though her video is getting choppy as she talks.

"O-Oh my God, th-there has got to be like, a thousand ships in he-he-here!" she screams in my ear, making me wince. "How's your la-ag-ag? I swear my sys-system is go-o-ing to cra-cra-crash."

I check the latency bar, which monitors our connection, and it looks like everything is holding up okay on my end, even as vessel after vessel warps into view in front of my ship. Rebekah's video stream cuts in and out, her voice getting garbled and then clear and then static again. Spaceships of all kinds and shapes and sizes thunder in out of warp from wherever they were before in the *Reclaim the Sun* cosmos. Oddly bright pastel colors cast a contrast against numerous ships with cold metallic shades, some colored so black, so dark, they practically blend into the open space. Ships of gold and silver shimmer from the reflecting light of a nearby sun, and my radar screen is full to bursting with small glowing dots, each representing a nearby player.

The Angst Armada has arrived.

## Aaron

There are many planets in the universe, but this one is mine.

As my small ship bursts through the atmosphere, hurtling toward the planet's surface, the wind roars on the outside of my vessel, the chassis rattling with an intensity that makes me feel as though the cockpit is set to fall to pieces.

Two sights demand my attention—one, the control panel before me, consisting of a small screen tracking my speed and angle of descent, accompanied by a large surface map of what's below. But as the ship shifts to manual controls, and I grip the flight stick, my hands firm against the rubber handles, my gaze is inexorably drawn to the second sight looming out the cockpit window, filling my eyes with color.

The actual planet. Undiscovered. New. Mine.

The sky illuminates with bursts of ruby, purple, and blue, like paint that's been carelessly spilled over an impossibly giant canvas. To the right, forests bloom in what *look* like autumnal colors, although there's no way to know what the seasons are on this planet. The trees blaze with shades of yellows and oranges across the landscape, and a large mountain range interrupts the foliage with light browns and beiges. On my left, a long, bright blue river cuts through the wilderness, swaths of white streaking through the water.

Reluctantly, I drag my focus back to the controls. Rate of descent, good. Speed, good. Fuel—more than enough to get off the planet if there's any hostile wildlife. Readings dictate no humanoid life, which is important, as I'm not here to disrupt anyone's place in the universe or steal their home.

I take a deep breath and steady myself for the landing as a suitable clearing appears on the map display in front of me, followed by a glimpse of the landscape through the large cockpit window. A massive field of green, marred by a handful of large boulders scattered across it, like large gray marbles tossed by a child. I try to focus on them as my ship gets closer, lower to the ground. I'd like to avoid damaging my ship and getting trapped here if I can help it.

With a hum, the landing pads extend, emitting a soft rumbling under my feet. They click loudly into place with a hard snap, and my ship slows and slows until it comes to an almost standstill above the clearing, hovering in place. The roar of the wind is gone now, replaced by the hum of plasma engines behind and below me as they pulse softly, controlling the sway of the ship as I lower it to the ground.

I land gently, the ship jangling around just a little and letting out a soft hiss of air, decompressing. I peer out at the meadow for a moment, then scan the screens under the flight stick for any sign that the terrain before me might be dangerous. Breathable air? Check, just slightly thinner than back home or here in the ship. I'll need to be careful when climbing or running too much. Need to keep up my stamina. There's a water source not far away, though, so I shouldn't have to carry that much in the way of supplies.

But that wilderness out there. Those mountains.

I hit a panel under one of the screens, and it slides open, revealing a small blaster that I picked up on my latest supply run. I toss it in my pack, along with a canteen and some purification tablets for the water by that river. Then I push a button on the digital tracker on my wrist, and a menu pops up, displaying a dizzying array of options. I shake my head and quickly push the map button,

eager to figure out where I am, so I can start exploring. Details be damned. With a soft chime, the menu closes, and a small white light pulses on the edge of the screen.

Good. It'll map the terrain while I walk.

I stare out the cockpit window one more time, at the expanse of field and the boulders stacked around. A splash of color flickers in the corner of my vision, and I turn to see a flock of bird-like creatures taking to the skies, their wings a bright, emerald shade of green, their bellies the yellow of fresh corn and full of glimmering scales.

I press a few buttons on the screen near the flight stick and the cockpit opens, my heart pounding with anticipation as it slowly slides away, the view of the landscape sharpening. I hop out, the gravity normal, my feet cushioned by the grass-like plants beneath me. The sky shimmers with an odd mix of vivid colors, and the soft light from two suns dances in lens flare patterns through the glass on the ship's open door.

I gaze hungrily toward the mountains in the distance, then glance around for the rushing river that's apparently just a few leagues away. I can just barely make out the roar of the water as I check my canteen—half empty. It looks like a visit to the river is in order, so I can stock up on supplies and see what kind of food this new landscape offers before I trek out into the total unknown.

With a soft blip, I load up the menu on my wristlet, the display beaming up a holo of light orange text on a darkened background.

#### CLASS FOUR PLANET [ESTIMATED]

Status: Uncharted, Undiscovered

Life Support Capability: Positive

Would you like to claim and name this planet?

My heart races, and I feel warm all over. I've been waiting for that last option since I started exploring this galaxy. And a Class Four? Awesome. Not going to run and gun it—I'm going to take my time here, do things right.

With a wave of my hand, a keypad appears in the air above my wrist. But before I can decide on a name for my new planet, static rings in my ear. A flicker of worry runs through me as I adjust the small earpiece tucked inside. Did someone else land on the planet? Communication from my guild at our headquarters?

A more hopeful thought occurs to me. Maybe a supply vessel is in the area, which would be perfect. I could use some building material, maybe some food supplies until I figure out what I can and can't use—

Then the static breaks, and the sound comes in clear.

"The planet," a familiar voice says. "Name it Butts."

\*

I put my controller down and turn around to see my six-year-old sister, Mira, standing behind me, her hands over her mouth, eyes sparkling, a sure-fire fit of giggles set to explode. She hops back and forth on her feet, her thick black curly hair bouncing with her frantic, silly movements. I sigh, taking my headset off, the music from my exploration-meets-real-time-strategy game, *Reclaim the Sun*, quickly replaced by the sound of Mira's irrepressible laughter.

"Mira, come on," I mutter. "Get out of here."

"Planet...Butts!" Mira shouts, her hands leaving her face and quickly coming back up, as though she's trying to hide that *she's* the one who just screamed "butts!" at the top of her lungs.

Resigned, I smile and motion for her to come sit with me. She scurries over and squeals gleefully as I pick her up, then settle her on my lap in front of my computer. It's a massive gaming rig that I've slowly built piece by piece over the years, collecting parts off eBay and from discarded machines around my neighborhood—the latter much to my parents' disapproval. No parent likes seeing their kid drag home old, beat-up computers they've found in the trash, no matter how often they tell you to experiment and explore and all that.

But *this*—it's the perfect beast to explore galaxies in *Reclaim the Sun*. It's a massive game, with worlds that are randomly generated for exploration and a universe so big no one will ever be able to see all of it. And when you're playing a first-person exploration game that micromanages even the tiniest things—like upgrading vehicles, customizing armor, establishing trade routes, and slowly creating your own character to look way too much like yourself—you need a lot of power. Plus, my rig is great for working on the games I'm trying to write with my best friend, Ryan, at our part-time job with ManaPunk, a local game developer.

And I managed to build it without bothering anyone for upgrade money.

Not that my parents would give it to me, anyway. We might have money, but none of it is being used to support something they refer to as a “hobby,” a frequent point of contention whenever I come home with parts gleaned from dumpster-diving at Penn or Temple, the nearby universities, or discarded computers our wealthy neighbors toss outside, even though you're not supposed to toss computers in with the general trash. RAM, hard drives, better speakers...my rig is the Frankenstein's monster of PCs, only I nurture my creation.

When most people hear that I write video games, I think they imagine coding. Programming and all that. But no, I *write*. Story type stuff, dialogue, instructions. Ryan does the art, Laura handles the coding, and Jason, the publisher, does a mix of all of it.

We're a scrappy little team, and I love it.

My monster machine-of-a-computer helps process the beta code of the games-in-progress better than my regular old laptop, which I drag around to coffee shops when working on the story. But this beast also helps me play games like *Reclaim the Sun*—because not all of us can afford a prototype game developing console on our own, like Jason and ManaPunk can.

Though maybe I would be able to buy some new parts if he'd just pay me for our last project already.

“Beeeeeeee...” Mira mutters, staring down at the keyboard. She leans over the smooth white desk as she glances at all the keys, a single finger on her tiny fist sticking out, ready to jab the letter of her choosing.

“Here,” I say, unplugging my headphones from the PC. The music of the game blasts from the speakers behind the monitor, an epic, classical-sounding score that sounds like it's ripped straight from a *Star Wars* film, mixed with the sounds of my unnamed planet. The rustling plants, the soft din of the roaring river, the odd calls from those fluttering lizard-birds that have begun to circle overhead, and the hum of my ship's cooling engine.

Mira moves her hand out of the way as I reach for the keyboard next, painstakingly typing out the planet's name.

Would you like to claim and name this planet?

PLANET BUTTS

Are you sure you want to name this planet PLANET BUTTS?

Once a name is chosen it cannot be changed.

[YES] [NO]

I click yes, securing Planet Butts's place in *Reclaim the Sun* for as long as the game exists, set in a vast universe of trillions of planets. It's unlikely anyone will ever find it again, but if they do, I guess they'll be in for a treat of a name? Though it's more than likely scores of younger kids playing this game have come up with similar—likely far more creative and lewder—planet names.

For a moment, I wonder just how many Planet Butts there are out there. I grin, thinking about how much fun it'll be when Mira is old enough to play games like this on her own. How I could take her exploring. How we could name endless planets together.

The view of the landscape pulls away for a moment, bringing up a view of the planet in its entirety, stars dotting the sky as the big green-and-blue Earth-like sphere spins slowly in front of us.

### PLANET BUTTS

Discovered by Aaron Jericho

“Yay!” screams Mira, bouncing up and down, and then begins cheering like she's rooting for a sports team. “Pla-net Butts! Pla-net Butts!”

“Um, what's going on in here?”

I spin around in my computer chair and see my mom leaning in the doorway, her thick black hair tied up in a bun. She's dressed in a blue blazer, with thin glasses on the bridge of her nose. An ID tag dangles from her neck on a thin lanyard, though I have no idea why she wears it. She runs her medical practice in the tiny building connected to our house. She's the boss. Everyone knows who she is.

Mom stares at us, shifting the bundle of magazines under her arm, some of them still wrapped in the plastic covers they arrive in with the mail. Her eyes flit back and forth from me and Mira to the computer screen, an amused look on her face. Mira's mouth is clamped shut, a thin line barely holding back her laughter, and it's easy to see so much of my mother reflected back in her. She's got my mother's Honduran looks, while I look more like dad. Like we're little clones that just budded off them.

“Just exploring the universe.” I shrug.

“Okay, well... I left some money on the fridge. Maybe get a pizza or something for the two of you? I shouldn't be too late today,” she says, and I catch her absently fiddling with her ID badge. It's her tell, and I know that she *will* be late again, even though it's her office and it's connected to our actual house.

And judging by her expression, I know what's coming next.

“Aaron, you promised this summer—” she starts.

“Mom, can we just...not now?” I ask, my heart sinking. *Reclaim the Sun* has been out for a few weeks now, but this is the first day I've had any time to myself to do some intense, proper exploring, between end-of-the-year homework and babysitting-despite-mom-and-dad-being-right-next-door and my attempts at script-writing for ManaPunk. It's finally summer vacation, and I want to do what everyone wants to do with bright clear skies, warm beautiful weather, and all the freedom in the world.

Stay inside and play video games.

“Your father and I think it'll be good for you, especially for... you know. When it's your turn, and all.” She presses her lips together, and I fight the urge to audibly sigh at her mention of “your turn,” like she's suddenly going to finish being a doctor and I'm magically going to take her place. Like it's a kingdom and she can just pass me a scepter or something, and that taking over her

practice doesn't involve me spending an actual decade of my life studying something I don't want anything to do with.

"Just a few hours a week, that's all we're asking," Mom says pleadingly. "And then you can continue to work on your games and exist on..." She squints at the screen and smiles indulgently, shaking her head. "Planet Butts."

Mira erupts into a fit of giggling, effectively ruining any chance of having a serious conversation about all this. That *this*, these virtual worlds that I get lost in—it's all serious. That I want to make games. Write them. See my name in the credits at the end. That I don't want to be the next Dr. Jericho.

"Plus, your father could use some time to himself, away from all that paperwork," Mom says. "He's been in there really late at night and terribly early in the morning lately."

"Okay, okay," I mutter. "Guilt me with Dad, that's a good tactic." She gives me a look, and I shake my head. "But we're going to have to define what 'a few hours' is. And I get to write on my down time in the office."

Mom makes a face and fusses with her ID badge, and I can tell a "no" is coming.

"I can use Google Drive or Dropbox on that ancient computer at the reception desk," I add hastily. "No one will even know. Otherwise I'm just going to do it sneakily on my phone or something, and I know you don't like me using my phone behind the desk."

"That's not it, you can work on your games. It's just..." She sighs. "Aaron, has that boy paid you yet?"

I don't want to say no, but I can't exactly lie here. I'd wrapped up some freelance copyediting for ManaPunk right before the school year ended, and I have yet to see a check for it. Ryan, too. But I know Jason's good for it.

"He will," I insist. "And there will be even more money when the new game sells."

My mom eyes me for a moment, then gives a small nod. "Okay, well, you can fuss over your games as long as he's settling up soon. I don't want you getting taken advantage of," she says, looking away and down the hall. "Time to fly. Have fun exploring the universe."

She walks off, and I can hear her making her way down the stairs, her heels loud against the hardwood floor of our home, replaced by the sound of soft footsteps approaching my door. Dad leans in next, peering over from the side. He's in some loose-fitting sweatpants and a t-shirt, a mug of coffee in his hand.

"Hey, Doctor," he says, flashing a sleepy grin. His accent is thick, unlike everyone else in the family. His Palestinian looks certainly rubbed off on me, though, our faces both full of sharp edges and stubble.

"Not funny." But I smirk anyway.

"Just...do me a favor? Humor your mother?" he ventures, stepping into my room while sipping on his coffee. He walks over and ruffles Mira's hair, and she responds with a chorus of laughter. He's close enough that I can detect the faint scent of his cooking, the aroma embedded in the fabric of all his clothes, even though he doesn't work in a restaurant anymore. It's like he's keeping tamarind, garlic, and rice in his pockets.

"Dad—" I start.

"Just keep her happy," he says. "And in exchange, I'll watch the desk once and a while, give you a break."

"Thanks, Dad." He's always so much more supportive of these dreams of mine—making games, writing them—than Mom is. I smile, though the small victory feels bittersweet as I take in the sight

of his threadbare shirt, his disheveled overall appearance. “How late were you there last night?” I ask, curious.

“Ah, don’t worry about me,” he says, brushing me off with a wave of his hand. But I know he can’t enjoy being in the office that late, trying to cover for me so I can focus on what I actually care about, and I certainly don’t like being the reason he’s working so hard. Life would be so much easier if Mom would just give up on her pipe dream of me as a doctor and hire someone else to work the front desk.

“Is this that new one?” Dad asks, staring at the computer screen. “All that modern stuff... I don’t know how you kids do it.”

“You could totally figure this one out.” He loves to make these jokes, even though he’s perfectly capable of handling a computer.

“I’ll stick with Minesweeper.”

“Dad.”

He tussles my hair like he did Mira’s, and I squirm to get away. While I might not have inherited all his good looks, like his jawline sharp enough to cut the veggies he preps downstairs, we do have the same hair—thick, black, and wavy.

“Anyhow,” he says, walking toward the door. “I’ll get to look up recipes when your mom isn’t looking, and you’ll get to enjoy your summer. Everyone wins.”

“Dad, come on,” I groan. “You have to get mom to bring on an intern or something—”

“Deal?” he asks pointedly.

“Deal,” I huff, knowing I’ve lost this particular battle for now. “You know that’s just a temporary solution, though, right? Next year is The Year of College Applications. Remember, the ones we collected because of The Year of Sending Away for College Applications?” I glance over at the horrifying stack on my desk, one that teeters dangerously—or perhaps fortuitously—toward falling into the trash bin on the floor.

“Yes, yes,” Dad says, taking a sip of his coffee. “Who knows, maybe by then you’ll want to become a doctor.”

I glare at him.

He laughs, his smile as warm as that coffee in his hand. “We’ll figure it out,” he says with a wink. “In the meantime, I’ll take care of the office today. You go do... whatever that is. I want you to teach me how to do it one of these days. These spaceship games of yours look kinda fun.” He waves at the computer with his free hand, then disappears back to his and Mom’s bedroom, his footsteps soft on the hardwood floor, a major contrast to my mom’s. It’s always so easy to tell who’s coming and going around here.

I spin the computer chair back around and, much to the delight of Mira, let it rotate a handful of times before stopping it in front of the screen. I place my hands back on the keyboard.

“You ready, copilot?” I ask Mira, and her face lights up, her wide smile revealing the dimples in her cheeks.

“I’m the co-pilot?!” she exclaims, her hands coming together again in front of her face.

“Always,” I tell her, nodding. I grab the mouse and give it a shake, the since-gone-black screen returning to life with bright color, and the sight of my newly discovered planet.

Planet Butts still needed to be explored.

And I’m the one to do it.



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DON'T READ THE COMMENTS by Eric Smith  
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**A timely and heartfelt collection of essays inspired by the #MeToo movement, edited by acclaimed young adult and middle-grade author Janet Gurtler. Featuring Beth Revis, Mackenzi Lee, Ellen Hopkins, Sandra Mitchell, Jennifer Brown, Cheryl Rainfield and many more.**

Keep reading for a sneak preview of  
**YOU TOO?**  
Edited by **Janet Gurtler**

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## You Too?

In 2018, #MeToo stories began exploding across my social media feed, bringing back memories of the harassment I experienced as a young woman coming of age in the late seventies and early eighties. In addition to big hair and terrible clothing choices, I grew up believing that the Woman's Movement had "already happened." In North America, the Pill had become legal for single women in addition to those who were married. Many women were stepping out of the kitchen, beginning to make livings on their own. Gloria Steinman, a well-known feminist, was famously attributed with saying that women needed a man like a fish needed a bicycle (although she later clarified it was Irina Dunn who said it first). Glass ceilings for women were acknowledged and sometimes—though not often—shattered. Helen Gurly Brown, the editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, wrote a book about women "Having It All," which fed the illusion that women could have it all. That they *should*.

There was also an illusion that women were finally being treated equally to men. And yet, even in spite of all this "progression," I knowingly accepted less money because of my gender, and I was perfectly okay with it. I thought I didn't deserve to ask for more. I didn't want to ruffle feathers. So I listened to sexist jokes. Racist jokes. When I was harassed, I was a good sport about it.

And I didn't speak up.

For years, I kept silent, learning to smile and play nice. But as more and more women came forward to tell their #MeToo stories, a burning fire began to ignite within me, a fire fueled by anger and empathy—until one evening, when I found myself ranting at my husband and teenage son at the dinner table, I finally realized how passionate I felt.

I told them some of the things I went through as a teenager, knowing they couldn't possibly understand the scope of what happens to women *all the time*, or why this flood of #MeToo stories made me so upset. As I shared my own stories, I discovered that my son truly believed his world was not one where women were still paid less than men. Or were harassed for being women. To him, such injustice was a part of my lifetime and his grandparents' lifetimes, something long past.

I may have scoffed at him. Perhaps not kindly.

He didn't see the truth—not because he is a bad person, or because he didn't want to see it, but because he had not been properly shown.

I knew then that I needed to do a better job. As a mother, I needed to show him the truth about the world we live in. I needed to share my stories—and not just with my husband and son, but with anyone who would listen.

That conversation with my son made me realize I wanted to take action. I wanted to share #MeToo stories with other young people like him, so they could see where we were, and how far we still need to go to make this world a kinder, more just place for our children.

I'm not an expert; I hold no degrees in psychology or human behavior. I can't offer professional help, and I acknowledge that, as a white woman, I am speaking from a place of privilege. I am also becoming one of the older generation now, and sometimes I use outdated terms and think in old ways. I've been called out and challenged to look at the things I say and

think about how my wording might marginalize some groups of people. I often make mistakes, though I am trying to do better.

But one thing I do know for certain is that we need to stand together. To protect each other. To amplify the voices of those who are so often robbed of their ability to speak. There are still many #MeToo fights to be fought—and we need to fight them together.

So I set out to collect stories from a diverse group of writers who were willing to share their personal encounters—stories that have now found a home within the pages of this book. There are a range of experiences here, though not nearly enough. There are many other stories to be heard—from women *and* men, since harassment and abuse are certainly not exclusive to females. I've heard from men who were robbed of their virginity at an early age, by other men and by women. Men who were forced into sex because their physical response to stimulation was taken as consent. Men who feared talking about what happened to them, or speaking about how much it affected and hurt them. Because they'd been taught that “men should always want sex.”

We need to hear their truths, too.

As you read the stories in this book, it will become obvious that the world is not a perfect place. Sometimes adults don't do the right thing. Sometimes the people who are supposed to love us and protect us can't or don't. And sometimes, when someone tried to tell their story, others couldn't hear it. Or refused to.

Some of the contributors worried that their stories weren't enough. That what happened to them wasn't as bad as what happened to others. But I believe all these stories are important. It's not easy to go back and relive our most painful memories, and it's even harder to expose them to strangers. And yet—here we are. Sharing them with you. We have each done so for our own reasons, but mainly it's to keep important conversations going. We want to see things change. We want people to feel less alone.

We want *you* to feel less alone.

Maybe you believe you deserve the bad things that have happened to you. (You don't.) Maybe someone is blaming you. Or maybe you're too afraid to tell. Maybe it feels like your problem is too small to worry about, or too big to do anything about.

It's not.

Please know, no matter what—you are not alone.

If you have experienced harassment or abuse, you might find triggers in these pages. Rape. Incest. Exploitation. The #MeToo stories you will read here are hard, but there are people and organizations out there who care and want to help. Please use the resources included if any of these stories upset you, or if you've had similar experiences. Please reach out if you need support.

And finally, respect yourself, but please also respect the people who are brave enough to share their stories. In some ways, telling our truths is like standing naked in front of the whole world. It's intimidating and uncomfortable, and we may feel weird talking about it after.

But we need to keep talking. We need to keep listening. For that is the only way we'll be able to change the world.

—Janet

## It's Our Secret

Patty Blount

### *Secrets.*

What word can conjure up more magic than this? Secrets are a little girl's stock and trade, guaranteed to make eyes light up with mischief or excitement. Secrets are a game you play to test the limits of trust and of loyalty. Secrets are whisper campaigns designed to include only a chosen few, and if you're one of the chosen, suddenly you're special. You're favored.

You're *it*.

Secrets are important in most little girls' lives. I think this is exactly why the neighbor told me, "It's our secret. If you tell anybody, then they'll want to play our tickle game, too. It won't be special anymore."

I was five. I wanted to be special. I wanted to be the favorite.  
So I didn't tell.

I didn't tell anybody that this man lay me down in the back of his work van, took my pants down, and touched me *there*. But that's not the only reason I didn't tell. I didn't tell because at age five, I had no idea this was wrong.

I grew up in the Queens neighborhood of Flushing, in a small garden apartment complex near Francis Lewis Boulevard. When I was little, we didn't have *play dates*. In the summer months, you just went outdoors after breakfast and played with whichever kids were out. We had no phones, no internet. We had bikes and imaginations and very little supervision—which meant we got into trouble often. But always the innocent kind.

I wasn't allowed to cross any streets by myself, so I had to stay on our block. Riding bicycles was the preferred activity, but sometimes, it was too hot to do that, so we'd look for shady spots.

The best shady spot was in the garages under the building. There were three of them. Three two-car garages with stairway access to a specific apartment above. One of these garages was where our neighbor kept his work van. He was a house painter, so the van always had a bunch of paint cans smeared with drips in the back. He had two sons, the oldest of whom was the same age as me.

Five.

For the most part, I liked playing with this boy I'll call Billy. He had cool toys, like the cars we could sit inside and pedal around the garage, pretending we were racing. Billy also had a great imagination. He'd frequently make up games we could play, like Monster Tag. One day, when we were playing House, he said I should ask his dad to make my doll a cradle out of a box we found that was just the right size for a baby bed. So that's what I did. I took the box and the doll and went to the van where Billy's dad was loading those drippy paint cans. His clothes and hands were splattered with paint, too.

I asked him if he could make a doll bed out of the box, and he said, "Sure. But first, I want to play with you, okay?"

Play with me? Sure! I nodded happily.

"But it's a secret," he said. "You can't tell anybody, or they'll want to play, too."

A secret? Oh, boy!

He picked me up, set me on the floor of the van, pushed me back, and took off my pants. They were shorts, actually. I could even tell you what color, but that's not important. He had a cigarette clamped in the corner of his mouth as he put his hand between my legs and rubbed.

“Does that tickle? Does that feel good?” he asked.

I wasn't entirely sure if it tickled or felt good. I was too busy thinking about the doll bed he was going to make me. After what felt like a long time passed, I said, “Can I go play House with Billy now?”

He gave me a little pat on my leg, put my clothes back where they belonged, and lifted me up. “Remember, you can't tell anybody. This is our secret.”

Then he took out a tool from his pocket and began slicing through the cardboard box I'd given him, shaping it into the perfect bed for my doll.

I was five.

I can't remember how many times this happened. And I can't answer this one burning question that still haunts me: Did his son know? Did Billy send me to his father, knowing what he'd do to me? Was he a victim as well? Does he remember?

I remember eventually seeing a pediatrician because it hurt every time I peed. I had an infection and had to take medicine that looked like M&Ms and turned my pee orange.

Still, I kept the secret. I can't remember how long. But, as I said, secrets are a form of currency to little girls. One night, when my mother wasn't paying enough attention to me, I sang, “I've got a secret and I'm not telling.”

Oh, boy, did that get her attention.

So I told her all about the van and the paint and the tickle game, and that it was supposed to be a secret.

She went completely still. She asked me to say it again. And again. For a moment, I worried I'd done something wrong. That telling my secret was wrong. Then my mother told me *keeping* the secret was what was wrong, but I didn't understand why.

Finally, my mother collected herself and tucked me into bed, and I fell asleep, content once more—until later that night, when she woke me up and took me to the living room.

There were several men waiting for us. Men I'd never seen before—and Billy's dad. He stood just inside the door, arms folded across his chest, scowl on his face. My mother said I had to tell the men in the living room everything I told her about the tickle game secret. I did, but I think I spent more time talking about the doll bed Billy's dad had made for me.

Nobody laughed. Nobody even smiled.

One of those men asked, “Are you lying? Are you pretending?”

I shook my head and turned to Billy's dad, hoping he'd back me up. I didn't understand this was bad. I didn't know that *he'd* lie.

I was five.

He lied.

My mother told me to go back to bed. I obeyed, but stayed awake for a long time. I was crushed by the things I'd heard in that living room. He told them I bothered him. That I kept playing with his tools and his paint, and he'd threatened to spank me if I didn't get lost.

That never happened.

He lied.

Later, there were lots of whispered arguments between my parents. I couldn't hear most of it. But I did hear this: “Why was she playing in those garages in the first place?”

I remember baths. Lots of baths, where I was scrubbed raw.

There were many looks aimed at me—looks of accusation, blame, and even disgust. I felt wrong. Guilty. I'd told my secret.

And he lied.



\*

Billy and his family moved away in the middle of the night.

“You play right here where I can see you,” my mother said after.

“But I want to ride my bike.”

“No. You stay right here, or you go to your room.”

So I stayed right in front of the door, bored out of my mind.

Every time I went to the bathroom, she followed me, looked inside the bowl.

My pee was orange for a long time.

A few weeks later, I was playing with other friends while our moms chatted. One of the boys said, “Let’s play Hide and Seek.” Enthusiastically, I agreed. He began counting. I ran down the steps to the garage under the building, which was full of great hiding places.

My mother chased me, demanded I never go down to the garage again.

Our game of Hide and Seek never even got started. Brian, the boy who’d suggested it, wanted to know why we couldn’t play in the garage anymore. His mom and my mom exchanged a glance. You know the one. It’s a look that says, “I have no idea how to explain this.”

So they didn’t.

But I did.

I told Brian, “They’re mad at Billy’s dad for tickling me down there.” I pointed between my legs, and both moms nearly passed out. Brian suddenly had to go home, and I was once again stuck in my room.

“You can’t tell people about this. Ever,” my mother said. “Billy’s dad did a bad thing. A very bad thing. We shouldn’t talk about it, because everyone will think it’s your fault if you do.”

That made no sense to me, but I listened. I didn’t talk about the tickle game. I didn’t play as much as I used to. I never went down to the garages.

I don’t remember exactly when I learned that those men who came to see me were detectives. And I don’t remember exactly when I realized that what happened wasn’t just *bad* – it was unspeakable.

Eventually I began to understand. The word “molested” entered my vocabulary. I learned that the two detectives in our living room that night advised my parents not to press charges because I would then be made to testify, to tell a judge what Billy’s father did. And because he lied, because he said it was just my imagination, the judge would probably believe him instead of me. So they opted to spare me the ordeal.

Or were they just sparing themselves?

Despite everything, I grew up fairly normal, except I now have this terrible aversion to the smell of house paint and cigarettes, and a morbid fear of vans. I sometimes wonder how many other secrets Billy’s father had. How many other kids did he molest? It’s a hard question to answer, because his crime is so unspeakable, but now, I find myself troubled by an even harder question that we’ve never dared to ask aloud:

How many kids could we have spared if we hadn’t kept it a secret?

## A Long Overdue Confession by Ellen Hopkins

**As the #MeToo movement kicked into high gear and people began to share their stories of sexual assault and harassment, many of us were forced to confront painful chapters of our personal histories.** And, as questions about the legitimacy of some of the accusations arose, we also had to examine the veracity of our own recollections, especially if the episodes occurred a long time ago.

I've wandered this planet for more than six decades, and so have experienced sexual harassment many times, ranging from so-subtle-as-to-make-me-question-validity to touch-me-again-and-you'll-be-sorry. As an adult, I've been able to craft appropriate responses, or at least I consider them fitting. But thinking back to my teenage years... Well, I could handle overt provocations, but I was ill-equipped to deal with more artfully coercive encounters.

My upbringing, of course, played a role in that. I was adopted at birth by an older couple. My father was seventy-two, and my mother forty-three, when they brought me home to a relatively affluent neighborhood in Palm Springs, California. The family dynamic, as you might guess, was interesting, to say the least. Bear with me here, because everything I'm about to write plays into the ultimate result. It's probably not what you think.

Daddy was born in San Francisco in 1883, the son of German immigrants who arrived with very little. Yet he lifted himself out of poverty, through intellect and hard work. In the early part of the twentieth century, he built a steel company, which became quite lucrative during World War II. He was married to his first wife, the true love of his life, for forty years. Margaret died from lung cancer, the unfortunate victim of the tobacco industry's early propaganda efforts. Her death affected him deeply.

My mom was born in 1912, and the Great Depression defined her life. Her family was also poor, and after the crash, it was all they could do to survive. Though she never provided details, Mama alluded to some of the things she was forced to do as a young woman simply to afford food. Determined to rise above it, she studied nursing and served as a WWII Gray Lady. Afterward, she worked as a private caretaker for a man until his death.

In need of a job, she applied for a receptionist position at a steel company in San Francisco. The owner, my father, was lonely. She was lonely. They married a year later, perhaps more out of desperation for companionship than love. That is not my judgment to make. Daddy and Margaret had never had children, but even late in life, he wanted a family. So he and Mama adopted me and, two years later, my little brother.

It was no secret that Daddy was the undisputed king of his castle. He controlled the finances, paid all the bills. Mama wanted for nothing, but possessed little autonomy. She and I had horses, and often took long rides together. We talked on those trails, and sometimes she shared her disappointment that she'd always had to rely on others for life's necessities. She was bright, and once upon a time had dreams of the theater. One of her greatest memories was performing Shakespeare with a troupe in Ashland, Oregon. It struck me then, even as a child, that I wanted to be in control of my journeys.

There were drawbacks to having older parents. Recreational pursuits were limited, as my father walked with canes. Likewise, extracurricular activities, because Mama's night vision was poor. We didn't ski or hike or ride quads (all things I pursued with a passion later in life), and movies were matinees. But overall my childhood was happy, if sheltered. We lived in a beautiful

home, and summered at Tahoe. I went to an excellent private school through the eighth grade. Our family attended church every Sunday. I took piano, dance, and vocal lessons.

Still, in the back of my mind lived a little voice, and it insisted something must be wrong with me, or why would my biological parents have given me away? Logically, I understood that unmarried mothers in the 1950s often gave their babies up for adoption, but emotionally, it was impossible to accept.

A particular incident stands out even now, close to six decades after it happened. The adoption was private and arranged by a doctor friend of my father's. He came to visit one afternoon when I was four or five. My parents and he had gone out on the patio to talk. I eavesdropped and heard the doctor remark, "Ellen's mother has another daughter, and she is the prettier child." That might not be word for word what he said, but that was my takeaway.

It branded me.

For much of my childhood, I struggled with my weight and body image. My best friend and I were always trying the latest fad diets. From SlimFast to a Cool Whip fast (!), none of them worked. The boys in my class nicknamed me "Elsie the Cow," and honestly, though it hurt, I couldn't blame them. The girls, I'm afraid, weren't much kinder. A fortunate growth spurt soon changed that, but it took some time for my brain to acknowledge it. When I looked in the mirror, I still saw the chubby girl, hungry for positive attention.

The summer after eighth grade, we moved north to the Santa Ynez Valley, which is just east of Santa Barbara. Starting high school where I knew exactly no one was both good and bad. I had no friends, but I had no baggage, either. No one called me Elsie, or looked at me like that *should* be my name. In fact, for quite a while no one looked at me at all. I could have been furniture. That felt normal, but I decided that wasn't what I wanted.

I pulled myself out of my shell, worked hard to develop a positive outlook. Eventually I found friends, a decent crowd to run with. Well, "decent" is a relative term, I suppose. Let's call it a rebel crowd. We were anti-war (Viet Nam), anti-Nixon, and pro-weed, at a time when weed wasn't legal. Sometimes we ditched school in favor of the beach, and once I got my driver's license, I was often behind the wheel.

My father died not long after that, and my mom melted down. I did my best to help her through the legal morass of probate, a poorly executed trust, and IRS woes. But those very adult problems were beyond my ability to mitigate. It hurt to watch Mama suffer, and she truly did. Even more painful was the fact that her resulting depression caused our communication to crumble. She'd been a great mentor before, but no longer. We didn't fight or argue—we just quit talking. She also pretty much freed me to come and go as I pleased.

Boyfriends? I had them. My strong moral sense insisted I wanted love before sex, and I tried to stay true to that. But honestly, I grew bored easily. I'd stay with a guy for a few months, only to find someone else who interested me more. In retrospect, I see I was craving the attention I lacked when I was younger. But I think I also feared hanging onto a relationship too long would mean relinquishing the control I felt compelled to maintain.

Regardless, I liked men. A lot of my friends were male. That didn't always mean hooking up for sex, however. I simply preferred their company to that of most of the girls I knew. Hanging out with the guys was drama-free, and there was no jealousy or competitiveness on display. They didn't worry about manicures or makeup. We could go camping or fishing or dirt-bike riding. We had fun. In contrast, with notable exceptions, my female classmates seemed stuck-up and petty. I only developed a few close friendships, so I never really discovered true woman-woman bonding until later in life.

This feeling was exacerbated when the boyfriend of someone I considered a good friend attempted to rape me.

“Audrey” and I were with him at a downtown event. He was driving, and she had to be home before I did, so he dropped her off first. Then, rather than take me home, he detoured down into the riverbed and parked. He was a brute, much bigger than I, and intent on assaulting me. Fortunately, he was so large that he couldn’t move very quickly. When he tried to pin me, I kicked him in the appropriate place and was able to escape. It was a very long walk home, but I managed it.

The experience shook me. Not only the act itself, which was terrifying and came as a total shock. I mean, I knew the guy, not to mention the fact that he was going out with my bestie. How could I have been so blindsided?

I thought Audrey should know—after all, if he tried it with me, why wouldn’t he do it again to someone else? But when I told her, she cut me off, called me a liar, and refused further communication. I was astonished by her reaction—I was the injured party, and the physical damage could’ve been much worse. Why would she blame me?

As a quick aside, the majority of sexual assaults go unreported, and often it’s because the victims are afraid people won’t believe them, or that they’ll be blamed somehow. I never reported the attempt to the authorities—nothing happened, really. So what was there to prove? And, after the way Audrey reacted, I only divulged the story to a few other friends, people I knew would trust my word.

That was a very long introduction to the story I want to profess. I’ve never shared it before, mostly because I knew I’d have to confront my own complicity. Writing it here, however, has allowed this softly complaining ghost out into the light of day, and for that I’m grateful. It is rarely wise to keep a genie bottled up too long.

I’ve only had one real nine-to-five kind of job, and that was the summer after I graduated high school, when I went to work for a small company that manufactured faux stained-glass panels and lamps. They were made with resin, which was poured into molds. The plastic was liquid, and a catalyst mixed into it made it harden, releasing a lot of heat. For a summer job, it was hot, messy, and dangerous, as the catalyst was an abrasive chemical that could cause burns if it came into contact with the skin. But the factory was a creative space, and I loved getting paid to make beautiful things.

The business was owned by two men, both of whom spent many hours every day on premises. “Greg” was well into middle age, and he was kind and patient as he showed me how to accomplish my assigned tasks. “Jim” was thirty-five, extremely handsome, and funny. Not to mention flirtatious. I was eighteen, completely into the range of “consent,” and the attention of an older man made me feel desirable and sophisticated.

He’d take me to lunch. Ask about my life. Act like he valued my opinions. He made me laugh. Made me think. Made me feel important. The first time he kissed me, I was over the moon. The first time he touched me, I invited more. He showed me things my younger sexual partners didn’t know or wouldn’t do. When I fell in love with him, it was giddy and all-in. I couldn’t wait to get to work every day. The weekends seemed endless.

The signs, of course, were obvious. The fact that I didn’t hear a word from him from Friday afternoon until Monday morning should’ve flashed warning lights. But he always had an excuse. He had to go to Santa Barbara to see his mom, or to LA to visit with his dad. There were other hints as well—at work, he was all business unless he and I were the only ones there. Then

he'd kiss the back of my neck while I was filling molds. Sometimes he'd pull me into the back office for a quickie.

Maybe a month into our affair, he arrived wearing his wedding ring. He'd forgotten to take it off that morning.

"You're married?" I stuttered.

"I thought you knew," was his answer.

When I insisted I was most definitely unaware of that fact, he fed me a story about how he and his wife were talking divorce. Their relationship had cooled over the years, but their financial entanglements complicated things. I was the bright light in his days. She was the pain. I didn't believe it—not really. But I did accept it. And therein lies my complicity.

That strong moral sense I'd always laid claim to? Compromised. The hurt I felt at his dishonesty? Tucked away. The small hint of guilt I experienced over sleeping with another woman's husband vanished when he kissed me. Any notion of being used paled in comparison to being wanted.

*He was married.* But I was pretty—beautiful, he told me more than once. *He was married.* But I was desirable. *He was married.* But I wasn't the chubby girl, though I was still desperately seeking attention.

I don't know how long we might've continued seeing each other if his wife hadn't stopped by one day to bring him lunch. She was lovely. Gorgeous. Sweet.

She was also nine months pregnant.

She'd never been there before. I don't know if she got wind of things, or if it was a random visit. She gave no clue that she knew, but I watched her with Jim. She wasn't proprietary, but she swept across the floor and kissed him as any wife would, and the clear affection in her eyes told me all I needed to know.

When I quit, he didn't try to stop me.

I was stunned, and not just by him. The episode required deep introspection. Why was I willing to overlook his wife, but not the imminent arrival of his first child? Why was I okay with breaking up a marriage, but not a family? Looking back, I understand my limited perspective, and how that man took advantage of my relative innocence. He was at fault. But I could have said no.

Not long ago, my granddaughter left home. She was barely eighteen, and three months away from her high school graduation. Like me, she was abandoned by her parents. (She has lived with her paternal aunt since she was a toddler.) Like me, she has struggled with her weight and body image. And like me, she has been hungry for acceptance by her peers and boys.

She left a short goodbye note, got on a Greyhound, and traveled out of state to move in with a man seven years her elder. She promised she was okay, that there was no coercion. But her perspective is narrow, and some men are more than willing to capitalize on naivete.

I wish I would've confided this story to her. Instead, I'm confessing it to you, hoping it might save you the heartbreak I'm afraid my granddaughter will experience.

Take care of yourself. Believe in yourself. Love the person you are.

## Bathsheba

Mackenzi Lee

### **Leonard Cohen had it wrong: Bathsheba wasn't bathing on the roof.**

In case you aren't familiar with that story from the Bible—or "Hallelujah," the aforementioned song that references it—let's do a quick refresher. Or, rather, let me tell you my memory of it—how it was presented to me in Sunday school classrooms, over and over from the time I was twelve and just starting to be told that my existence as a woman in the world was really difficult for the men around me.

We begin with David, of David and Goliath fame. In a true rags-to-riches narrative, he was crowned king of Jerusalem, the chosen leader of one of God's chosen cities.

From the outside, it would appear that David was a pretty bitching king. But one day, he noticed a woman bathing on a rooftop near the palace. He was overcome by her beauty and asked his advisors or guards—or whoever was paid to hang out with the king—who the woman was. David learned that she was Bathsheba, the wife of one of his military commanders. It was lust at first sight, and when he summoned her to him, they began an affair. When she became pregnant with his child, he arranged for her husband to be killed in battle, so that he could marry her and save her from being stoned for adultery. Since God tends to frown upon both murder and adultery, it was the beginning of the end for David—the first stumble that became a fall from grace as his will and God's grew further and further apart.

As I remember it from church, the tale of David and Bathsheba was the story of a man who was tempted into sin by a woman. Bathsheba was a plot point in the tragic story of David's decline, with no narrative of her own. That's the version of the story that has crept into popular culture, and the one that I remember hearing while perched upon an uncomfortable folding chair in the chilly classrooms of the church of my youth. It was told to me from pulpits, sometimes in general assemblies addressed to the entire membership, sometimes to a small congregation by a leader I was taught to believe implicitly on all subjects, sometimes to a select group of young people. Once it was offered up by a male teacher to a room full of teenage women, alongside the moral that we "ought to be where we ought to be when we ought to be there." That was what he wanted us to take away from the story of David and Bathsheba the Harlot: We, as women, should not put ourselves in situations where we would inspire lust and sin in men. Bathsheba was bathing on the roof, a place where no woman should be naked unless she's asking for it. We should keep our necklines high and our heels low. Never drink too much, never lead men on, only wear one-piece bathing suits, so the reminder that we had bodies didn't inspire impure thoughts in the males around us. No one ever mentioned impure actions, though it wasn't hard to infer that those would be our fault, too.

We were Bathshebas.

We should not bathe on roofs.

But this is not the story at all.

The truth is that Bathsheba wasn't on the roof—David was. Bathsheba was indoors, likely in a communal bath house with other women, while David was *Rear Windowing* her from the palace rooftop.

The truth is that, when David saw her, Bathsheba wasn't bathing at all. She was engaging in a holy purification ritual that orthodox Jews still practice. And not that it matters, but she was likely wearing clothes, because women at the time usually engaged in communal bathing while

partially dressed. She had no idea she was being watched and sexualized while performing a sacred ritual.

The truth is that David didn't send an invitation for Bathsheba to come visit him, if it pleased her. He took her. He *took* her—that's how the Bible phrases it. He didn't write a love letter and then wait nervously by the phone for her to call. He sent soldiers to her house to remove her and bring her to him. She almost certainly did not grant her consent.

The truth is that, according to laws of the time, Bathsheba couldn't say no to her king if he demanded sex from her.

The truth is that, according to the laws, it wasn't rape unless the woman was a virgin, which David would have known Bathsheba likely wasn't, because she was married.

The truth is that David raped Bathsheba, and after the rape, when she became pregnant, David not only murdered her husband, but then also forced Bathsheba into a relationship with him. She was forced to marry and live with her rapist for the rest of his life.

The truth is that it was not an affair. It was not love.

Bathsheba was raped by a man in a position of power over her.

This was not the way the story was told to me.

I had to find out the truth on my own—totally by chance. It had never crossed my mind to seek out other versions of the Bible story I knew so well. Years after I left the church I grew up in, I was scrolling mindlessly through Facebook when an article passed through my timeline with a clickbait headline—*The Most Maligned Woman From the Bible*. And because I'm baitable, I clicked it. Ten minutes later, it was like my whole world had shifted, everything I thought I knew recalibrated by the small details no one had ever mentioned in a story I had heard retold over and over again. The story of the woman who had been used my whole life as the ultimate example of how a good man could be led astray by a woman who did not keep her sexuality—or, really, existence—in check. The woman who had drifted through my thoughts when a man passed me sexually aggressive notes on the subway, then followed me home, as all the while I chastised myself for leading him on—for riding the subway late and alone, for wearing a dress without tights, for taking up space in his world. The woman who made me think, through my thick fear, that like Bathsheba, I deserved this. I had put myself here. I'd been bathing on the roof.

By the time I stumbled on the truth—hidden in my timeline as casually as a BuzzFeed quiz about which Chipotle menu item you are based on your zodiac sign—the damage had been done. I had already spent years feeling guilty for my own sexuality, trying to unravel the internalized misogyny born from hearing these stories of Bathsheba and women like her repeated long before I knew to question them, and carrying the responsibility of the behavior of the men around me on my shoulders. Never hearing the word *rape* or discussions of consent attached to these stories.

All I remembered was that, if I bathed on a roof, whatever happened next would be my own fault.

Unsurprisingly, the world finds ways to continue to villainize Bathsheba and ignore her victimhood, the same as it continues to villainize survivors of sexual assault. Her name has become synonymous with temptress. She smolders from the cover of romance novels. In the most popular film of 1951, Susan Hayward swoons in Gregory Peck's arms beneath the title card, "The awe-inspiring story of the conquering Lion of Judah and the woman for whom he broke God's Own Commandments," followed by "The World's Greatest Love Story!" The paintings of her hanging in art museums around the world portray her breasts exposed, her naked

body being presented to the viewer in a sprawl over the edge of a fountain. In the animated Bible stories children watch, David offers to marry her as a way to save her from death for adultery, her savior in love. As Leonard Cohen wrote in his iconic song, “Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you,” implying that what happened after he saw her bathing on the roof was out of David’s control. He couldn’t help it if he was overthrown.

I wish I could go back and retell Bathsheba’s story to my younger self. This time, I would tell her Bathsheba was assaulted. She was taken. She was raped. I would not use soft words, the gentle words that were used in church sermons to imply but never speak its name.

I would give it a name.

Instead of a story about a man who was tempted by a woman, I would tell myself in no uncertain terms that it was not my responsibility to keep the men around me chaste. That I did not have to dress modestly to protect myself from predators, or to keep good young men from becoming predators. That I was not complicit in acts of sexual violence committed against me, no matter where I was bathing or what I was wearing or how many drinks I had or whether I was riding the subway alone.

I know it doesn’t feel like any of this matters now, I would tell her. I know you think the world is kind. You don’t think you will ever need to know words like rape and assault, or ever experience violence that you’ll have to vocalize. From that Sunday school folding chair at twelve years old, you’re sure you’ll never be ogled, you’ll never be forced somewhere, never be grabbed or touched against your will. Never have men yell at you from their cars. Never have partners who manipulate you into going further than you’re comfortable, then blame you for tempting them into sin and saddle you with guilt you think is yours to carry for years.

But someday, when you retell your own life to yourself, I want you to know what to call these things. I want you to know it is not your responsibility to keep the men around you chaste. You don’t have to dress modestly to protect yourself, you don’t have to say yes when you mean no, you don’t have to be polite to men who say things that make you uncomfortable, you don’t have to smile. You are not a footnote in the story of a man’s life. You are not a temptress, you are not a harlot, you are not responsible for the actions of the men around you—no matter where you are or what you’re doing or what you are or aren’t wearing while doing it.

That’s what I wish I could tell myself: Bathe wherever you damn well want.



**Pretty Enough**  
Beth Revis

**I was sixteen years old the first time a grown man told me I wasn't worth raping.**

My friends and I were in a school play—*A Midsummer Night's Dream*—and my role was Anonymous Fairy #3. During break, we were allowed to walk to a convenience store a few blocks away to buy snacks and sodas, and we didn't bother changing out of our costumes. We wore bodysuits of flesh-colored material and lots of gauzy scarfs—there was the illusion of airiness, but everything was well hidden by the fabric.

One afternoon, three men were leaning on a truck outside of the store. We passed in front of them, and one of the men—a tall, scrawny guy probably my father's age—shouted at us. He had a bulge in his lower lip from a hunk of chewing tobacco, and when he grinned at us, his teeth were stained brown.

I don't remember what he said, exactly. It was something about our costumes, and the implication that we should take them off for him.

I'm from a small town, a very rural area. I had never had a man at least two decades older than me suggest anything sexual like that. I knew of catcalls from the way they were portrayed on television—a beautiful starlet whistled at by a crude construction worker who pushed his hard hat up his brow to better take a look at her legs. It was a joke in sitcoms. It was an opportunity for a hero to stick up for the girl. It was something the starlet easily brushed off.

But when it happened to me for the first time, it wasn't funny. No one stood up for me or my friends. And I didn't want to brush it off.

His words were loud and obscene. But it was his look—the way he seemed so *pleased* with himself—that infuriated me the most.

My best friend was with me, and I could tell the man's words bothered her—a lot. Had I been alone, I think I would have walked away, but instead, my protective instincts reared up. I whirled on the man, telling him to leave us alone.

He pushed himself off the side of the truck and lumbered over to me. He was at least a foot taller than me, and he used his height to his advantage. He peered down his nose, raking his eyes along my costumed body. Throughout the course of the play, I had thought the costume fun. We fluttered our scarves and danced around the stage, as free as the fairies we were pretending to be. But as this man looked at me, I wanted to hide. I felt ridiculous. I felt like a *thing*.

"I wasn't talking to *you*," he said with a sneer. "You're not pretty enough for me. I wouldn't touch you if they paid me."

His buddies all laughed, and I felt shame rise up in my cheeks. It was bad to be catcalled, yes, but somehow it felt worse to be pointedly told that the "compliments" weren't for me. That I was too ugly to be worthy of his unwanted touch.

I glanced back at my friend. She was tall and beautiful. She'd already had several boyfriends, and I hadn't. Boys told her she was pretty all the time. She was always the wanted one. I was not. So while I was all too familiar with the envy that often rose in my chest when I compared myself to her, I was woefully unprepared for that green-eyed snake to bite at me from the lips of someone else.

We left the men as they laughed at us, at *me*, at the way I was so easily silenced. I like to think I had some dignity in the way we walked away, but to be honest, I still think of that moment with shame. Twenty years later, I am certain that man has never once thought about that moment, except, perhaps, to chortle at me again. But I have never forgotten.

And I have never returned to that store. I quit getting candy and soda, and I found excuses to avoid walking that street with my friends. I completely altered my path to avoid the place of that burning shame.

He had taught me a lesson and taught it well: What happened to girls happened because of the way they looked. This was a lesson reinforced by people all around me, at every turn, even people I loved and respected. When there was news of a girl who'd been accosted, with her image in the paper, I saw the way people judged her and said that she shouldn't have been at that party, she shouldn't have been drunk, she was probably dressed like a slut. I wasn't invited to parties, I didn't drink to the point of drunkenness, and I tended to dress conservatively. A little part of my brain whispered in that man's voice: "It won't happen to you," and "Who would want you anyway?"

When I was out with guy friends, and they rated girls based on who they would tap and who they wouldn't, I was included in that conversation because I knew—and they knew, we *all* knew—that I was inherently never a part of the ranking. I wasn't even on their radar. I was "one of the guys," and I wasn't worth their rating. Ratings were for pretty girls. It never occurred to me how messed up such a ranking system was, and that no woman wants to be ranked based on those crude terms; I just knew that I was excluded, and it was because of my appearance. If the other girls were valued enough to rank, the fact that I wasn't merely added to the growing certainty deep inside me that I wasn't worth anything at all.

When I first became aware of the #MeToo movement, I read an article in which Uma Thurman discussed her encounter with an abuser. And while I wish I had been wise enough to truly understand the depth of her experience after reading it, I know in my heart that my first thought was, "Thank God I'm not pretty enough to be raped."

Then I immediately stepped back and thought, "No, that's not how that works. I *am* pretty enough to be raped."

I hope that you, unlike me, can see immediately how truly disturbed a way that is to think.

My knee-jerk reaction had been to put the onus of whether or not someone was harassed into terms of whether or not they were "worth" harassing. But I'm well educated, and I know women who have been raped. I understand on a fundamental level that rapists and harassers target women for a variety of reasons, and that I have as much a chance to be a victim as anyone else. I know that the blame doesn't lie in the way a woman looks, either physiologically or in her clothing. I know that there is no such thing as "pretty enough" to be raped or "ugly enough" to be saved.

And yet, when I was sixteen years old, a man at least two decades older than me told me I wasn't attractive enough to touch, and he laughed at me. He made me feel ashamed for not being objectified. He made me feel as if it were my fault that he was so rude. And so, two decades after that, the first thought I had when hearing a woman's story of being assaulted was, in a very sick and twisted way, gratitude for my ugliness.

I wish I could go back in time and tell sixteen-year-old me that it's not about attraction, prettiness, or even sex. That type of harassment comes down to power. That man had wanted to show his power over the girls he saw. He wanted to preen in front of his buddies. He wanted to pretend that young girls wanted him. And so he manipulated the situation into one where he had power. And when he didn't have power over my attraction, he shifted it to power over my self-worth.

I don't know if I would have believed myself then, but now, I know that's true. He proved he was powerful in the repercussions his comments had on my way of thinking. He influenced my perception of beauty and love and worth in ways that took decades to break. Just a few minutes, a handful of words—that was all it took. He was powerful...in that way.

But when I shift my perception, I see how weak he was. He had to belittle a child in order to make himself feel like a man. How utterly pathetic.

The #MeToo movement is about inclusivity—it's in the very words of the hashtag. *We are not alone*. It has never been a competition between the pretty girls and the ugly girls, even if some tried to pit us into that battle. How can there be a competition when those two sides—pretty and ugly—don't even truly exist? We are each human individuals, unable to be contained in one word, even if that is all some see. And while I spent a lot of my teenage years weighing myself on an invisible ranking system, believing my desirability was caught up in my appearance, believing my very worth was tied to the way others saw me...it is realizing that I am not alone that gives me back my power.

It is human nature to hold onto power once we have it.

I will do all I can to never let mine go again.

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