

Home of the Griffins

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Eliot is making gagging noises. “I’m dying. I’m dying,” he keeps saying, holding his throat. I laugh though I don’t really think it’s funny. He grabs my hand to steer us through the crowded hallway.

“I have class,” I say, like a rudderless ship.

But when the door to the backfield opens, I can’t trade the afternoon’s sun-bleached freedom for the musty Biology lab in the basement, even though Mr. Shivji is my favourite teacher. Last Monday we performed an experiment: the whole class measured my pulse, and after I smoked a cigarette outside we took my pulse again. My heart rate was abnormal but it could’ve been nerves, with Mr. Shivji’s warm fingers against my wrist and everyone silent as he counted my heartbeats aloud. It was meant to be a lesson for everyone. Still, Mr. Shivji doesn’t make you feel bad even when you’re the example. He just gives you the biological facts and lets you choose for yourself.

Two gulls flicker to the grass, peck, and flap. Eliot lobs a twig. Beside the chain-link fence between the field and the freeway, I’m on my back jawing smoke haloes. My mood ring glows violet with blackish edges, the colour of a bruise. Eliot gave me the ring for my last birthday. It was only a half-serious gift, a half apology for the time he laughed when I told him my favourite movie was *My Girl*. The girl in the movie lives in a funeral home and wants to be a writer. She wears a mood ring that’s broken—its colour never changes like it’s supposed to change, and the ring is always black. The broken ring belonged to her dead mother. One day the girl discovers that she’s lost the ring. Her best friend, Macaulay Culkin, goes to find it for her. While he’s looking he gets swarmed by bees. He’s allergic, and so he dies, too. But when they find his body, he’s wearing the mood ring, and its colour has changed from black to sky blue.

I keep the paper legend folded in my pocket although I know the codes by heart. Purple? Positive Colour: Amorous, Heat, Mischievous, Dreamer, Sensual. But on the other hand, Black? Black suggests Fear, Nothing, Angst, Stormy, Depressed, Intense, Secretive. Some of the moods (i.e. Nothing) are less than helpful. I adjust my posture, tilt my chin. The look? Intense Mischievous Dreamer. Secretive. Perhaps a touch but not overly Stormy.

Eliot elbows me and snatches the cigarette. Flipping the hair from his eyes, he reminds me of a bathing bird. As a rule, when he’s not smoking, Eliot keeps his hands in the pockets of his lambskin jacket. He can afford the jacket because his mom is a judge.

“You wouldn’t believe how it stretches,” he gasps. “It’s so bloody. And the hair?” His lips form a prissy frown. He makes that gagging noise again. In his third-period Career and Life Management class, they watched a video of a real woman giving birth. Eliot won’t stop

recounting the details. “It was traumatizing,” he adds. Eliot’s been going to therapy since he met me and started “acting out.” Now, he describes everything as traumatic.

In their blue sweat shorts and grey t-shirts with the griffin on the front, the students in Ms. Tolomeo’s gym class are placing goal-post pylons and kicking soccer balls. Half lion and half eagle, our mascot, Ms. Tolomeo told us, is a magnificent creature known to guard priceless possessions. No one on the field looks particularly priceless.

“How’s Naomi?” I ask, sounding mean. I’m feeling nauseated from all the nicotine.

“How’s Jaspreet?” Eliot replies.

Eliot met Naomi at group therapy. I’ve never met her, but I know they’ve never had sex because Eliot’s “waiting for college.” When I ask if he’s told Naomi about the Halloween dance, Eliot pulls up a fistful of grass.

“You know what Beau did last night?”

I shrug and act like my face isn’t burning. Beau is Eliot’s older brother. One night, Eliot fell asleep while we were drinking microwaved caramel Schnapps and watching *Debbie Does Dallas* as a joke. Beau snuck beside me on the couch. He put a finger to his lips—scarred where Eliot hit him with a marshmallow-roasting stick on a camping trip when they were kids—and led me out of the room by my beltloop. Eliot still doesn’t know.

“He and his dumb friend, Roger—” Eliot inflects more than usual when he’s upset “—were in the street throwing beer bottles at each other. A game they made up, apparently. One hit Beau in the face. Our mom is out of town, so I had to drive him to the hospital.” Anytime Eliot realizes he’s said in my vicinity a version of the word *mother*, his face crumples in surprised shock, like he’s dropped a glass and not yet heard it shatter. He seems to think anyone having a mother inflicts some cruelty on me.

“Who won?” I say.

Eliot’s smile is scornful, tight. In the sun, his eyes glow like coins at the bottom of a fountain. Eliot’s irises are two different colours—blue and green—like a husky’s. He searches his pockets for another cigarette.

“Is Beau okay?”

Eliot used that same scornful smile the time he came to school with a black eye. He refused to explain until I pushed him into the bathroom no one uses because Jocelyn Anderson hung herself from a stall with her backpack strap. I dabbed at the bruise with a wet paper towel as Eliot perched sink-side, wincing and breathing against my collarbone. The pipes shuddered, and my skin bristled with goose bumps. “Jocelyn’s ghost,” I whispered, but Eliot didn’t laugh. So I dampened and brushed the hair from his temples and held his head so that he was forced to look me in the eyes. He finally told me he’d been jumped

the night before, at Stampede station. When I asked if they'd stolen anything, he shook his head. When I asked why he thought they did it, his chin trembled.

"How should I know?" he said. "Why does anything happen?"

I was so mad right then. Not, like you might think, at the assailants, but at Eliot—his tiny chest, his dancer's gait—that I balled the paper towel into a hard wad and spat against the mirror. Eliot scowled. "Real nice, Chelsea. Real ladylike."

I stare into the beady eye of a seagull. Hello in there?

"Of course Beau's fine," Eliot says. "Nothing bad ever happens to him."

Slicked from his forehead, Eliot's Just-For-Men blackened hair looks like it belongs on a used car lot. His mustache hangs lopsidedly and the chest hair he's drawn with my eyeliner has bled onto the collar of his muscle shirt. Hidden below his leather jacket, a spiked armband cuffs his bicep. A roll of quarters bulges the thigh of his white spandex.

Sucked in the auburn pleather jumpsuit I bought at Party Town, I can barely move. To buy the costume, I saved two of my Zeller's pay cheques. I work as a cashier on evenings and weekends.

Rain chases itself across the bus's rear window. At least my hair looks amazing, high-pony-tailed and framing my cat eyes. "Earth to Britney," Eliot says as he hands me the bottle of Fireball. Beau bought it for us, but he refused to drive us to the dance. When I climbed out of his car at the bus stop, his palm sounded sharp against my faux-leather suit. "Could bounce a quarter off that, Chelsea," he said. I giggled though I could tell Eliot was disgusted. Whether it was with me or Beau I'm not sure.

The costume is pulling on my crotch and I've grown a skin of sweat. My breath tastes sour as I slump against Eliot. Sick from the lumbering jolts of the bus, I cradle a paunch that wasn't there when I bought the costume a month ago.

"I look like a slut," I say. Eliot's Freddie Mercury outdoes my Britney Spears.

Resting the bottle between his legs, he takes my chin in his hands. "It's Halloween. That's the point."

I nod. "Is Naomi coming?"

He turns my face back toward the window. "If you were a president," he says, "you'd be Babraham Lincoln."

With his mascara-rimmed eyes and gloss-slicked lips, Eliot's the one who looks hot. But I don't say so. Instead, I drain the whiskey.

"You think Jas will be there?" I ask quietly.

Eliot rolls his eyes. "That guy is such a douche."

"I can't help it if I still like him."

"Whatever," says Eliot, adjusting his mustache.

I twist my mood ring, it glows ochre. Which could mean, Yellow: Cool, Cautious, Distracted, Mellow, So-So. Or it could mean, Orange: Nervous, Mixed, Confused, Upset, Indignant. Britney seems like a Yellow person—a little anxious, perhaps a tad cautious, but obviously cool. If I'm honest, right now I think I'm more of an Orange.

Last year, after we'd shared a mickey of vodka on the playground in Edworthy Park, I jumped from a swing, grabbed Eliot, and pulled him on top of me. The ground beneath us was covered in soft pieces of rubber with a smell that burned your throat. Pushing his body from mine, Eliot said in a voice both sad and free of desire that he didn't want to ruin our friendship. We lay on our backs and watched bats flutter through broken moonlight until I finally asked what he'd meant by *ruin*. Without looking at me, Eliot stood. He said, "What do you want me to say, Chelsea?" Then he stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked toward the train tracks. When I caught up, he was stooped in shadow, placing pennies on the rail.

I free my fingers from Eliot's and kneel in the bushes beside the bus shelter. Gravel bites my palms as cars rush along the freeway. You shouldn't drink whiskey—even cinnamon flavoured—on an empty stomach, but I didn't want my grandmother's spaghetti bloating my costume any further. Holding my hair, Eliot crouches beside me, and I'm shivering. I puke as gracefully as possible. And I'm standing again, shaky, brushing the grit from my knees. As we near the school, Eliot throws the whiskey bottle down a black and reeling alleyway. Watching the glass arc through the night, in the split-second before it shatters, I feel wildly alone.

Stationed by the door like Dobermans, three teachers sniff us and search the size of our pupils. I half-smile at Mr. Shivji's costume and stare at the flecked tile; after I skipped Biology all week, he called my grandmother. Eliot pulls my elbow and I trip over my platform boots as we walk into the darkened gym. Inside, I squint to slow the world's spinning and the coloured lights remind me of Christmas. Although drunk and with Eliot, I am struck by another shudder of longing, this one so deep and so lonely I debate throwing myself down, come what may, right there on the gymnasium floor. Help! I am Mixed! Indignant! Confused! But Eliot, leading me along like a puppy, is grinning. He really does look like Freddie Mercury, and for once, under the turning lights, he also looks oddly himself. It dawns on me, another revelation. We are a seesaw! A balancing act. Mother and pup. Pup and mother. It is true that we both need the other. I am giddy with relief. I am Britney, Mellow Yellow.

Leaning against the back wall, Eliot and I mock the costumes of the people we don't like. Gloria Buchanan flaps her slutty ladybug wings. Danny Pinelle wears an oversized purple suit, a fur-hat-topped Afro, and a layer of gold chains around his neck. He wields a cane crowned with a knob that reads PIMP. I saw the costume at Party Town. I ask Eliot if he thinks it's racist.

"Get a grip," he says.

When the music slows, Eliot's cinnamon breath feels hot on my cheek. My arms wrap his neck—our bellies touching, Eliot holding me up—but his eyes are following Danny. Mocking his way through a strip tease, Danny slinks off his jacket and whirls it overhead like a lasso. A harem of bow-tied cats prances around the spectacle, rubbing his waist with their boas, curling the cane, pawing each other.

To their right, Mr. Shivji bobs his neck, too fast for the music. He performs a jumping twirl and his tail lashes the legs of everyone around him. Griffin wings feather down from his shoulders to the floor. His thin limbs bounce below his blue sweat shorts and grey t-shirt. Catching my eye, he smiles under his beak and gives me two thumbs up. On the phone, my grandmother told me, he'd sounded concerned.

Eliot scoffs, and I bury my thumb in my fist.

Through the machine smoke and streaming lights, I spot Jas. Shirtless in a tattered vest and silk pants, a copper pot hanging from his waist, he laughs as Marc Ghoris—painted face, gold earring, sagging goatee—moonwalks into adjacent slow dancers.

"Now that," Eliot says, "is racist."

"Aladdin?"

"Blue face." Eliot points at Marc, and I laugh so hard I stumble.

When I lift my eyes, Jas is circling Gloria Buchanan. Her pigtails brush the top of her corset; he grips her fishnet thighs. On Gloria's face, beneath the ladybug freckles and pink cheeks, a slack-mouthed look of pleasure widens. Eliot holds the small of my back. Jas cups Gloria's ass and lifts her from the ground like an ice dancer. He sucks her neck, working up to her too-red mouth, which is still open. Then they aren't moving their bodies at all.

I hear Eliot call my name over the music.

The rain now falls as heavy snow and the streetlights are bright with halos. Over the backfield, Eliot walks toward me, blurred by thick snowflakes. I turn toward the freeway, wiping my face with the back of one hand. Under the warmth and wet-leather smell of Eliot's jacket, I feel wrapped inside another body. Shivering, he lights a cigarette and hands

it to me. A pulse of music drifts from the gym. All around us, trees bow under a blanket of white.

"Fuck Gloria," Eliot finally says.

I nod.

"You know Jas is a piece of shit," he adds.

I nod again.

"WWBD? What Would Britney Do?"

A smile cracks my lips.

"Pre-baby Britney. Before she went all psychotic and shaved her head," he says.

Snow melts on Eliot's face, on his bare arms.

I don't laugh, but he won't stop.

"I heard she was caught filling her baby bottles with Pepsi."

I stare at the headlights on the freeway until I go blind.

"It's true! It was in *Us Weekly*."

Snow has covered the tops of my velvet boots. Cracking his knuckles and stamping his feet, Eliot says we should go to his house, eat grilled cheese, and watch *Wayne's World*. He lights a second cigarette. "Aladdin," he adds, grinning.

When I don't smile back, he turns away. "Whatever," he says. Hands in his pockets and cigarette hanging from his mouth, he walks toward the road.

"I'm pregnant," I say. The word sounds so frail I'm not sure it can reach him through the snow. But Eliot stops. When he turns around, my heart feels pinched against my ribcage.

"Holy fuck, Chels."

We stand inside the maze of our footprints, not speaking, until I'm so cold I can't feel my toes.

"Jaspreet?" Eliot finally asks.

I kick at the snow, unable to meet his eyes.

"We could get married," he says softly.

I don't know why I do it, but I start to giggle, and then I'm unable to quit, even when I see his shoulders fall in the same betrayed slump Eliot gets when he talks about Beau.

"What about Naomi?" I say, through laughter.

Eliot's face darkens. "Forget it," he says. His long stride carries him away over the field.

At the bus stop, Eliot's smoking another cigarette. He looks sullen and tired. When he sees me he does not smile.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Eliot stares at the traffic.

“Can we do something?”

He shrugs, so I take his cigarette in one hand and clasp his wrist in the other. Still warm, his wrist pulses like a frog’s throat as I lower the cherry toward his skin. Eliot bites his lip while I hold the ember to his palm for a full five seconds. A small circle welts his right hand.

Eliot grabs the cigarette, takes a stuttering and deep drag, then clutches my left wrist. I shake my head, pointing at my stomach.

“A memento,” I say, not certain what I mean by it.

Eliot frowns. “Are you sure? How’re you going to get out of that thing?”

I hadn’t thought of the body suit. “Burn through it,” I say.

The melting plastic singes my throat, and the sting pulls my jaws closed.

Flicking the cigarette to the sidewalk, Eliot begins to sing. At the part of “Bohemian Rhapsody” where Freddie Mercury says it doesn’t really matter which way the wind blows, I join in, and we half shout the chorus, our drunken voices rising up through the sleet.

We are still singing when the bus arrives. I pay our fare and wink at the driver. He shakes his head. In the fish-eye mirror I feel him watching as I strut down the aisle.

At the back of the bus, we are the only passengers. I nestle under Eliot’s shoulder. As we pass the school, I can just make out the griffin on the marquee. The windows float our ghostly reflection; soaked and pale, we look as though we’ve almost drowned. The skin left of my navel aches, and I cup it, tenderly. Atop my belly, my mood ring glows: Macaulay Culkin blue. I wish we could live in this moment—sheltered, eyes half-closed, cinnamon-mouthed and circling the wintry city, guarding our new scars, our own priceless possessions.

Eliot rings the bell and I follow him back into the night.