

An Open Window

When she opened the door to a saffron-colored bedroom, an ocean zephyr billowed white flounce sheers. Her sleigh bed was buried in throw pillows, a faded Beatrix Potter rabbit peering out from one of the gaps. Stuffed animals lined a wooden rocker and high school golf and tennis trophies crowned an oaken dresser. The silver mirror over the make-up table caught her reflection when she passed.

“Sorry about the girl’s room,” Dara said. “But when my mother downsized houses, I ended up rescuing some of the stuff I’d left behind. I put it all in here because the room was empty.”

“So you got your old room back?” Austin asked.

“More or less.” Dara collared her sheepdog when he tried sneaking past her. “There’s a pad and pen next to the phone. Take as long as you need.”

“I’ll be right down after I return this patient’s call,” he said. “And thanks again for the use of your landline; Mrs. Krachiak is difficult enough to understand, let alone through a crackling cell phone. I can’t seem to get a decent cell signal on this island.”

“No problem,” Dara said. “Glad to help.”

The two made eye contact—and perhaps something more—until her dog interrupted by inserting his big body between Austin and Dara, almost pushing Austin’s legs out from under him in the process.

“Shamus!” Dara commanded, pulling her dog away from Austin and then across the floor, claws scratching hardwood. “Just call me if you need anything else.”

“Will do,” he said.

“Bad dog!” she whispered from the hall after shutting the door.

Silence fell like thick fog. The more he looked around the more he had the niggling sensation of being watched. He walked over to the bed and picked up the rabbit. Seeing his own warped reflection its black button eyes, he returned the stuffed animal to face the pillows.

Dara was right; he was exhausted. Having been on call at the hospital last night and after driving down to the beach this morning, he was running on sheer adrenaline. But that didn’t explain why her rabbit’s faint lavender scent—which was now on his hand—triggered something deep within him, something he’d relegated long ago to the furthest recesses of his mind.

It happened at a freshman dance. A dance where he’d spent most of the evening adhered to the bleachers like a refrigerator magnet. The one girl he’d spoken with the entire night was his next-door neighbor, Marcia Biggleman, and that didn’t count because Marcia had beaten him two out of three games in H-O-R-S-E earlier that evening while they waited for her mother to drive them to the dance. Marcia had a killer hook shot.

The girl at the dance he could not take his eyes off, and the one who had his heart lodged in his gullet, was Dara Kleows. Yet the more he thought about approaching her, the stronger the pull of the bleachers. When he did manage to free himself from the metal stands, Dara’s gravitational pull sent him slinging like a satellite around the moon. But instead of returning safe

to earth, he landed in the boys' room. *Houston, we have a problem!* Stomach shaken like a kicked can, he did another bleacher tour. And there he'd remain, had he not been forced to pull Marcia away from some heckling jerks. Fortunate for him, his football friend Reardon arrived just in time to provide much-needed backup. And it wasn't long after they dispensed with the jerks that Austin heard the band announce its final song: "Color my World."

Now or never time.

Muscles knotted like a rubber band under a wound glider, he fought to control his approach. It was by sheer momentum that he managed to ricochet his way through the adolescent meteor shower and found himself standing in front of Dara Kleows. He gasped the single word: "Dance?"

Dara hesitated at first.... The ground was coming up fast.

She turned...he prayed for death before impact.

Then she smiled and said, "Yes." *Poof*—a death-defying landing!

New dress shoes skidding on the polished hardwood floor, jugular thumping like a second heartbeat, he led her through the corybantic crowd until he found an opening the size of a Monopoly board. He stopped and turned to face her. A gaze into her fathomless aquamarine eyes started the rubber band fluttering in his stomach. And when she blushed, her exultant glow sent the air right out of his lungs. He placed a trembling hand on her shoulder, and with the other he grazed her back—careful to maintain a hand's-width distance between them, lest his searing body combust.

Austin had all of two dance moves then, and repeated them with obdurate precision.

Dara's lavender scent, combined with her dogwood-blossom blush, was making a warm puddle

out of him. And he hated it. Or he liked it. Or he hated and liked it! Or, if asked to count backward from ten, he might have made it to seven.

Almost unable to stand, let alone dance, he found Dara's mere proximity the scariest as well as most exhilarating experience of his fifteen-year-old existence. His eyes kept brimming, his head swirling faster and faster in this heretofore unknown coupled rhythm. He couldn't believe that in his entire life, no one had ever told him about this!

Nor would anyone.

What he didn't know then was that a boy loses his virginity sense by sense. Starting with sight and moving through sound, smell, taste, and touch, sex is the culmination but not always the most dramatic of the progression. Dara had begun the process of connecting his budding desires with their visceral senses; knocking down his pubescent card tower with a single taffeta touch.

Still dancing like a Rock'em-Sock'em Robot with a trick chin, the young and punch-drunk Austin worked up the nerve to pull Dara a little closer. His first ever piquant cheek brush was soon followed by an incidental breast touch. His untested body launching into its sexual DEFCON 1, Apollo released from the gate, ready to launch. His first ever intimate touch soon triggered a mortifying erection. With no prospect of making even the most perfunctory of adjustments, he pulled his midsection back to somewhere around Pittsburgh, squeezed his eyes shut, and started thinking about Sister Mary Ignatius's chin warts, the bratty sister on *The Brady Bunch*, Margaret Thatcher on a bearskin rug.

The next thing he knew, the music had stopped. Quartz gym lights ignited—the glaring flashlights of God. Spotty faces fled the dance floor like vermin from floodwater, leaving a certain freshman boy bent at the waist and gimping like a crippled cretin.

Dara took a step back. “Are you okay?” she asked, her concern genuine.

“Fine.” His voice cracked as he tried to conceal the unspeakable horror that was happening in his Hagars. Face burning red, he feared the threat of Dara Kleows seeing the tack hammer threatening to rip though his thin cotton trousers.

“Have to go,” he murmured, hobbling as fast as he could under the circumstances. Hearing loud cackles of laughter, he was certain that Dara and every other boy and girl in that godforsaken gym were busting a gut laughing at the “pup-tented” freshman. He never went to another dance. Hadn’t spoken to Dara since, or not until they met again on the beach this afternoon—though neither brought up the dance.

Head swirling, the grown-up Austin approached Dara’s teenage bed, slid aside her throw pillows and lowered his bone-weary body onto her mattress, its downy comforter still warm from the late afternoon sun. *Just for a moment*, he thought, placing the rabbit against the headboard while bringing his feet up, careful not to muss the cloudlike comforter. *Call Mrs. Krachiak in a minute*. He nestled his face deep into her pillow’s lissome softness, imagining himself brushing Dara’s tender skin. He let the chaste femininity envelop him, breathing her in. And for the first time in what seemed like forever, he felt allayed and calm.

* * *

Dara tapped on the door but got no answer. She tried again. It had been over an hour since she'd heard from him; otherwise she would not be doing this. She slid the door open just enough to make out the symmetrical outline of his body. With his back facing her, she allowed her eyes to run down the length of him, lingering on the pleasing slant of his broad back into lean, angular hips. His shirt had ridden up to reveal the swerve between hipbone and ribs. His skin had a taut, muscular glisten to it, as well as a subtle tan line, russet brown melting into snowy white. She was most struck by the white. His khakis rode low and unrestricted around the waistline, yet fit snug on a small but well-proportioned behind. His sleeping with one leg curled accentuated a muscular thigh. He seemed at peace in his sleep, which made him even more desirable.

It took Dara's breath away to see Austin MacLean holding the very pillow she once pretended was him. Dara had considered herself so unattractive then that she didn't feel comfortable talking to boys. New in school, tall and gangly in frame, she'd withered as the boys in her neighborhood had tossed twigs and leaves at her, calling her "the leaf-eater." But after seeing Dara helping in her mother's Kabbalah book and herbal medicine shop, the kids began calling her the "Yid-Witch." A pack of them had even used those hurtful words, as well as a few other choice anti-Semitic inferences, the night she met Austin MacLean at a Malvern Prep mixer.

Her mother made her to go the dance. The longest three hours of Dara's young life were spent standing alone, suffering the heart-piercing snobbery of the prettier, popular, clear-faced girls as they glided to and from the dance floor to the sanctity of their adoring cliques. "*Bindy, are you going to Devon's after-party? Her parents are away in Europe and, like, everyone's coming.*"

Not everyone. Not Dara.

Having moved the previous year from Vermont to the Philadelphia Main Line, Dara still felt like an untouchable being a half-Jewish freshman in an all-girl Catholic school. She wasn't as fawning or flattering as the other girls, didn't play field hockey or lacrosse, she read books during lunch. Dara stood out—to the point where most of her classmates went well out of their way to ignore her, which only heightened her solitude.

Dara knew well the cruelty of teenagers, but she'd just never seen it spewed so vindictively from flaxen-haired debutants dressed in Laura Ashley and Lilly Potter. Traipsing in and out of their parents' Mercedes and Volvo wagons, little potty-mouthed underclassmen acted as experienced as Vegas showgirls, and gobbled their parents' Valium and Xanax like M&Ms and Pez.

She overheard their prattling earlier in the evening about Malvern Prep upperclassmen forcing freshman boys to ask ugly girls to dance—their rite of passage.

“It's going to be, like, so hysterical!”

Dara kept one eye on the gym's slow-motion wall clock while trying to avoid the boys from Malvern Prep—all except for one. The one with the emerald-green eyes. Even then Austin MacLean had a stunning face as well as unmistakable presence. And not only did she think Austin the handsomest boy in the gym, he seemed, in a word: nice. While the other popular boys were running around in wolf packs, ogling pretty girls and making fun of the rest, Austin dismissed their invitations to join in, and he even stood up for her only friend, Marcia Biggleman, when some boys calling her “Big-ol-tits!” attempted fly-by-feels of Marcia's fully developed breasts. Austin placed himself between Marcia and their licentious strafing and, by

doing so, took the brunt of their shenanigans—until Austin’s very large football star friend intervened and the two sent the pack running.

When the band announced its final song, Dara headed straight for the door, praying her mother had left her Zohar study group soon enough to be waiting in their station wagon. Dara just wanted to go home and sit by the fire with her dog and read a *National Geographic*. She glanced back one last time, but Austin was gone. *Where?* The next thing she knew, he was standing in front of her—asking her to dance.

Dara’s brain shouted *no*. She didn’t want Austin to see her blemished face up close. *What if the lights come on?* Plus, she’d never danced with a boy before. But her mouth had a mind of its own and said, “Yes.”

With legs feeling as though they’d been injected with Novocain, she tried to manage her mother’s high heels as they kept skidding on the varnished floor. Fortunately, even in heels she wasn’t taller than he, but it wasn’t until they reached a clear spot to dance that he whispered to her that he thought she looked “pretty.” Austin was the first boy to ever tell her as much. And all of a sudden, she couldn’t stop trembling. Worried that her V-cut taffeta dress might reveal her butterfly heartbeat, Dara almost leaped out of her mother’s shoes when his hand touched her shoulder. She tried to act cool and collected, but when out of the corner of her eye she saw the popular girls—the chosen ones—circling around them, her legs, her entire body, began to lock up. Deciding it best not to look, she turned her head to Austin and was soothed by his radiating warmth. Protected in his strong arms, calm within his gentle clutch, her nerves began to subside in their protest. Dara felt as though she’d been right about Austin. She knew he was smart, but he was also seemed kind, and had the sweetest smile.

Well into the song, Dara began sensing the flow of the music, her lanky body somehow fitting well with his. The popular girls were still watching them, but their faces had softened, and she no longer cared what they thought. Savoring the sanctity of Austin's arms, his palliative energy source, when he held her a little tighter, she felt an unfamiliar tingling in her pelvis, then throughout the rest of her. Austin instigated a rush she'd never experienced before—and perhaps had not since. They might have spoken ten words between them, but he made her feel so comfortable, so special, so warm. It was a moment of pure heaven, her first taste of bliss.

When the dreaded gym lights flared, Dara experienced a wave of self-consciousness, cresting when Austin lurched back, his eyes turning from adoring to panicked then dropping to the floor. In the glare of the supernova gym lights, Austin suddenly wouldn't look at her—not at all! *What did I do wrong? Was he hazed into asking me to dance?* Heart dropping to her stomach, she inhaled in shallow gasps, grew lightheaded. The next thing she knew Austin ran—literally ran!—out of the gym, leaving her standing alone in the center of the dance floor. He'd left her to walk, alone, past all the popular girls, her own personal hanging judge and jury. Dara felt their rapacious eyes, heard their cackling laughter: *Look at the giraffe! Did you see the way the Yid-Witch danced! And how about the way he took off! Wonder who hazed him?*

And now he was back. Her mysterious and maddening first crush had grown into a man, and he was lying on her old bed! One which was aglow with soft alabaster sunlight, a light she desperately wanted to bathe in. But Dara maintained her distance. Having never quite figured out the boy, she had very conflicting emotions about the man. Yes, she still felt a strong connection with him, and yes, he was now a respected physician, but having once been touched by his fire—and burned—she wasn't quite sure why she was hovering around him again. Why she'd brought him inside her house.

Dara found herself leaning toward the bed, fighting an overwhelming urge to nestle beside him, wrap her afghan around them, and tuck her legs in against his. God knows, her old bed looked so much warmer, more inviting with him in it. Trying to convince herself that she just wanted his touch, Dara couldn't help thinking that deep down what she wanted was to recreate the same sensation she felt during their brief dance together.

Her fingers felt slippery on the door handle. Her arm throbbed. A numbness spread across her chest, then farther down, such was her desire to let go of the door, to let go of herself, to defy common sense. Sensing what her body craved, ached for, she felt her hand again slipping off the door, and she stood terrified of what she might do should she lose hold and release herself.

When Austin rolled over, Dara jumped. Heart racing, she was certain she was caught. Her eyes felt like two open windows to her mind's unrequited passion. But he just sighed, re-gripped her pillow, and nestled his cheek against its feathery middle. Then, with closed eyes, he smiled the most delectable smile...as if dreaming about someone he loved.

Dara approached the bed, couldn't believe she was actually doing this! Heart pounding to the point where it hurt, she felt as though she'd never lain with a man, had never taken a chance. After hovering over him for what felt like an eternity, she placed a quivering, exploratory hand on the bed, unsure of what to expect—but certainly not the electrical jolt she felt.

Positive the vibration came from Austin, this despite never having touched him, Dara was overtaken by panic. She felt like a predator in her own house. Unable to get her heart out of her throat, she couldn't convince herself that she had done nothing wrong—or had intended to do nothing wrong. This until feeling another vibration coming from her pocket. *God, you must have somehow switched your phone to vibrate!*

Tiptoeing away from the bed, it wasn't until Dara had shut the bedroom door and was out in the hall that she thought to look at her phone to see who called. It was a text from her husband.

Be sure to close all windows before coming home. Supposed to storm. BTW, how's Shamus?

Dara put the phone back in her pocket and walked downstairs into the kitchen. After pouring herself a beer, she put a mug in the freezer and walked out onto the porch. The sunlight comingled with saltwater and salt air created an almost auric light. A kite rattled overhead, its long tail ribboning colors in the wind. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.