

Marshmallows

“How did they actually meet?” Jessie asked her mother. It was good to distract her mother with talk whenever she reached over to steal a marshmallow from Nick's plastic car seat tray. They were skidding around on it anyway; the only ones that weren't destined for the innermost cracks of the backseat upholstery were the ones wedged between his sticky fingers.

“Leslie found Horace at the Engelbreit Center. Where we took you to ballet when you were little.”

“Yeah. I remember. I could probably drive us there if I wanted to.”

“If you could drive.”

Jessie still thought Horace was the most beautiful male in the world. She remembered how when she was younger, she thought it was Horus, like the Egyptian god. Had that colored her perception of him all these years? She had a crush on him as a child, and the new fact of his gayness wouldn't have mattered to her childhood self, just like his age hadn't. Did it ever matter to her now?

“Leslie De Beratiste is a weirdo.”

“Mm.”

“How did she not know her own husband was gay?”

She'd managed to get a red balloon this time. She'd been getting four leaf clovers mostly, and she wasn't altogether taken with the idea of eating green candies. She liked foods to be the yummy colors.

“Don't know, sugar. Did you get your deodorant, I forgot to ask when we were at the house.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe *she's* a lesbian too,” Jessie said.

“Maybe,” Ramona said lightly. She wasn't biting. Her patience seemed endless today.

Jessie watched out the window. Maybe Jay would be at her game. Her stomach felt ill. It was a big game, so Coach would bench her unless they were losing in the fourth quarter, then he would put her in for the last minute for Ramona's sake.

A tight turn was made in tandem with the river bend. The cereal skidded across the tray, reminding her.

“Arh-arh...arrrr-eeeeee,” said Nick. His mouth was too small to know words.

“Eeeee. A fine comment, good sir. Did she ever flirt with *you*?” Jessie asked, scooping up three rainbows, a heart and a pot of gold all in one.

“I don't think so.”

Perhaps Leslie wasn't a lesbian. Jessie watched the warping streaks of green watercolors out the window. She always watched outside at this juncture, right before the forest opened up and they entered the town.

“How are Lily and Bear?” Ramona asked.

“Lily's fine with it.”

“What about Bear? You talk to him sometimes in school, I hope.”

“Bear's maybe not doing so hot.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Mm. He's worried that Horace could move away or something. Or goes to San Francisco or something. To meet people. Like, other men. Men like Horace. There's more gay people there.”

“Horace isn't moving to the city. He's obsessed with Lily and Bear.”

“All parents are obsessed with their kids.”

“No they're not. I'm one of the special moms.”

“Whatever. He should tell Bear if he isn't going.”

“Bear is a sweet kid but he worries about everything.”

“Not really. He's nice but I wouldn't call him *sweet*. I've seen him be pretty mean sometimes. And anyway how would you like it if your parents got divorced when you're in middle school?”

“Your parents got divorced when you were six.”

“I know but that was fine--it was so long ago.”

“My parents got divorced when I was ten, as you know, and it was a nightmare.”

“So I guess that means I'll get divorced when my kid is like, four?”

Ramona laughed.

“Better to never get married, sweetie,” she said. “Play it safe.”

Jessie picked off some blue moons and the last red balloon.

+

Jessie was between Harriett and Amber, two of the stickier girls. Amber's thighs were cold, large flanks against her left leg, (she didn't mind this because at least they were a chilling factor). Amber was bigger than any of the other girls. Harriett was small and offered a bit of breathing room but she was sticky. Jessie didn't like to talk to Harriett but didn't realize it was because she was sticky. Jessie didn't talk to Amber but she admired her on the court. Amber was the best player who wasn't one of the coach's daughter's friends. The coach had Amber start the game, along with the ones who were

good, but she never lasted long. She was benched tonight because of her ankle thing. The only ones who lasted through the whole game were the coach's daughter and her two best friends. They were the best players and it wouldn't have made any sense to let anyone else play more than them. But tonight, they were losing in the fourth quarter.

Jessie stared at Jay. He was in the top right, strangely close to Ramona and Nick. Coincidence, or...? She watched him until he saw her then she looked away.

“Ah!”

“Lollie!”

The whole team ran to Lollie. She'd squeaked to a stop before landing on her hip, then popped up again. Would Coach rush over? Lollie was pretty good, much better than Jessie. Lollie wasn't one of his daughter's friends but he still worried about her. In the end he responded quickly but did not run.

“I'm fine,” Lollie said to him defensively. She lept up, and Jessie was watching but also in the zone, imagining herself falling in the middle of the game, the onlookers, the ones in the stands who saw—Jay, suddenly standing, his friends around him also rising instinctively, searching to see what he was looking at as they finished their hotdogs in inelegant ways that contrasted with his quiet eyes. He had a lot of popular friends, but he wasn't the cutest one. She wouldn't have chosen the cutest one.

Jay would make his way down, pushing between the nerdy girls sitting in the row in front of him, his friends calling, “What the hell, man?” after him as he made his way to the court, his eyes constant. As he stepped onto the court, Amelie would watch, astounded.

“You're limping,” Coach said to Lollie, and she burst into tears, despair at being benched.

“Coach, please!” she begged, her face hot and red. She had Jessie's attention now. Jessie had to remember this.

Coach played Amber then, despite her ankle, and Lollie took her seat next to Jessie, her heavy breath a proud, unconscious reminder to the benched girls.

Lollie wasn't sticky. Her tan skin was covered from head to toe in an allover lacquer. She was slick. She sweated a lot for being as popular as she was. She wasn't the most popular, just fairly popular. She was friendly and sometimes talked to Jessie. She talked to everyone.

Jay didn't descend the bleachers two at a time. He was able to do this, she'd seen it at gym class, and remembered it. He only waved and then called Lollie on her cell phone. Cell phones weren't allowed, but desperate as she was at being benched, Lollie picked it up and Jessie didn't blame her. Jessie listened as Lollie began crying again once on the phone with her boyfriend.

“He wouldn't let me finish, I was just about to--”

“Jessie! Jump in!” the coach's sudden invitation shocked her awake.

Jessie jogged onto the court, relieved it wasn't Harriet who was called first. Sometimes coach played her in the fourth quarter to appease Harriet's mother. Harriet's mother was pushy and she knitted a lot. With a gesture, Coach indicated for Jessie to play “post,” the position where you go close to the net and wait to see if anyone can get the ball to you, if they didn't want to shoot it themselves, like if Amelie had two people guarding her instead of one, as sometimes happened.

The girl on the other team who was supposed to guard Jessie eyed her, but didn't approach. Jessie was still wondering why, when the ball shot towards her gut with a sudden punch of air.

There was heavy impaction in the key. Some of the other team's girls were tall, or had their arms up all around her like she was in a woven native hut. She'd seen woven homes in pictures of a small village in Laos. You could only reach it by boat on the Mekong river. The villagers wove scarves there to sell, so it fit that they wove their homes too. Jessie jogged to the other side of the court, after the girl stole the ball, following the rest of the girls at a jog so as not to arrive before them. Arriving last, she hadn't reached her post (post) yet, when Amelie made this sound:

“Ah!”

She was crouching low and swinging the ball, her elbows out, trying to get around the girl that

was covering her. The girl had short, dyed blue hair and a septum piercing. Jessie thought it strange that these two, the beautiful, tan, blue eyed, perfectly formed Amelie and this other girl with her own set of challenges, were perfectly matched in this arena.

“Jessie!” Amelie puffed out, and shot her the ball. No one had covered Jessie again for some reason. She dribbled while running. The buzzer sounded.

+

Their mothers were silhouettes at the very end of the soccer field. The sun had just set behind the trees. It was cold in the grass.

“Finally.”

“Don't trust your eyes. It's just a mirage.”

Jessie didn't know what he meant at first, then realized he was making a joke, except it wasn't really a joke to pretend you were in the desert. She laughed. Her favorites were the jokes that weren't jokes, these were the ones not meant for just every person in the vicinity, and she always seemed to be the only one who heard them.

Ramona and Leslie walked slowly, to preserve their mischief. Jessie wondered if they were secret lesbians together. Nick was asleep on Ramona's back. She didn't care, she was open-minded, but she felt sorry for Nick: growing up, not knowing his mother was a lesbian.

“Where's Lily?”

“Ceramic Arts Lab,” Bear said.

“Here baby,” Ramona said, handing Jessie her bag of goldfish crackers.

“Finally,” Jessie said.

“Gotta have my fish,” Bear said, as if he was Jessie. Not like he said it in a Jessie tone of voice, but like he said it as if he was speaking from her perspective. She tried not to laugh in front of their

moms.

“Good job tonight! You were so close. That dumb buzzer, huh?”

“Don't you just hate that?” the other one said.

“Yeah it was ok.”

“Do you have any food for me?” Bear asked Leslie.

Ramona laughed.

“I have some kale chips in my purse,” Leslie said.

“Fine,” he said, and she dug them out for him.

“Can you hold Nick while I meet with Chris?” Ramona asked Jessie.

Chris was her World Civilizations teacher. He was literally obsessed with the ancient Mesopotamian people of the former city-states in what is now considered Iran or Iraq.

“No!”

“Please, Jess?”

“Bear can take him.”

“Come on sweetheart,” Leslie said. “Fluorescent lights stress babies out.”

It was a good tactic, as Jessie couldn't be belligerent with Leslie. Their moms always did this, since they were little. She took Nick from her mom. He was almost as heavy as her backpack.

“Glog glog glog glog glog glog,” Nick said as soon as he'd locked eyes on her. Jessie didn't answer.

“Don't let him get all cold in the grass. Keep his beanie on. Give me a hug. You did *so* great tonight.”

Hugging her mom, even just half a hug with bulbous Nick between them, made her want to cry a little. She couldn't cry because she had to keep being mean to her mom until her mom stopped telling her she did well at the game.

“Bear will have to decide if Nick gets cold or not.”

“Jess.”

Their moms went away. They both had Chris for first period and Myriam for second. They didn't have any other classes together this year, which was kind of weird.

He hadn't said anything about the game.

“Guh-eee!” Nick said.

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

“Okay when do I get him?” Bear asked.

“You want him?”

“Sure, I guess. I mean haven't held a baby since I was like ten.”

“You never held Nick?”

“Nope.”

“His fingers are sticky.”

“I don't care,” he laughed.

“Glugg-eee!” Nick laughed.

“Umm. You're probably going to drop him like that—here.”

“I am?”

“Why don't you sit down.”

“Okay?”

Bear sat down. He didn't like to be told he was going to do something like drop a baby. He was better at most things than this.

“Boo-loo, boo-loo, eeeeeeeee.”

She put Nick between his legs so he could sit in the little fort they made. They must have been like giant fallen tree trunks to him.

Jessie laid back in the grass, forming the third barrier to Nick's fort with her torso. She watched Nick laugh while slapping Bear's open palms.

"It's so weird," Bear said.

"What."

"He's a real baby."

"Yeah, it's weird sometimes."

It was cold under the tree, with her sweat and Lollie's and Amber's sweat still coating her limbs. Really just their sweat though. She wanted to get her sweatshirt from her locker but she didn't want to, too.

"Okay, where is she?" Jessie said after a while.

"She's the slowest person."

It had been an hour since she left. Lily was supposed to be getting them eclairs from the bake sale in Ceramic Arts.

"If it gets any longer I'm just going to go to Ceramic Arts and get my own eclairs."

She didn't mean it.

"What did you get in Civ?"

"An A. You?"

"An A minus."

"What? Why?" She slapped a fly off his knee before thinking about it.

"Glog glog glog glog glog glog," Nick said.

"I don't know. He wouldn't give me a legitimate explanation. He said he only gives you an A if it's better than perfect. So I asked what exactly about my work this trimester was 'not better than perfect' and he just straight up couldn't justify his answer."

"What a fucking dick," Jessie said.

It was quiet for a time.

“Should we go look for her?” Bear asked.

“Mm. Na.”

“I don't want to either.”

“There she is.”

“It's a mirage.”

Jessie didn't want to laugh the second time but she already had.

“Oh my God, she doesn't even *have* the eclairs.”

+

“I can't believe mom is letting us go here. It had to have been Ramona's idea.”

“It was obviously mom's idea,” Jessie agreed.

“Love me some Ramona.”

“Mom's okay.”

The pizza parlor bathroom smelled like corn. Lily's chapstick that Jessie was borrowing smelled like coconut. There was a third smell produced by the two that Jessie couldn't name, but it was oddly familiar.

She looked in the mirror. Her hair was in a ponytail, and messy still from sitting on the bench at the game. She had been cold out in the grass for so long that her cheeks were red and flushed; she hadn't gone to get her sweater from her locker. I had seemed too far.

“I have to tell you something. And it's something you can't tell anyone. And I don't know how you're going to react to it but I need you to just try to be calm and deal with it rationally.”

Jessie put on a third circle of chapstick before replying.

“Okay yea.”

“Okay. And more than anything I just can't have you getting mad at me that I didn't tell you before. With everything I'm going through right now between my parents getting divorced and like, stress from the divorce, sometimes I just can't take it and I really can't take it if you turn against me. I can't have that. I need you to promise you won't under any circumstances get mad at me.”

“Okay. Tell me.”

“I'm just going to say it because in the grand scheme of things it doesn't matter what happens. I think I have feelings for Jay too.”

“Why do you think that is?” Jessie felt too annoyed to pretend to be surprised.

“I don't know. I can't explain it. I just really, really like him.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“I just know how I feel, Jessie. But it kills me because I know you like Jay, and I think you and Jay would be great for each other, but at the same time, I don't know what to do with these feelings I'm feeling.”

“But, what makes you think you like him?”

“I told you, I--”

“It just doesn't seem like you *know* him.”

“I do.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. I'm dying here. Can you tell me what you're thinking?”

“First of all, I'm not mad at you. I love you. So...You should go for it. He's obviously with someone else right now, but if he likes you, I won't stand in the way.”

“Jessie...”

“No. You're going through a lot right now. You deserve a little more joy in your life.”

“Jessie, I can't be the one who hurts you. I love you too much.”

“I know. I feel the same way. You're my best friend. I've liked Jay for a long time. But you can't help how you feel. I love him. I do. But I'll find someone else.”

“I don't deserve such a good friend,” Lily said. She began to cry. “Can you hug me?”

Jessie hugged her even though she didn't want to. She felt sick. She meant what she said, but it still made her feel sick.

They went to sit down again. Their end of the table was quiet for a few minutes.

“What are you doing?” Jessie asked Bear.

“These tiny pepperoni are just acting as cups for the oil. It's disgusting.”

Bear had picked off all of his tiny pepperoni. Jessie wondered if he had ever been to Pizza Ranch before.

“You are such your mother's son,” Lily said.

Jessie used her spoon to take one of his pepperoni cups and place it on her pizza, between three pepperonis that were already there.

“Here, have all of them,” he said, pushing the plate towards her.

“Thanks.”

“That's weird, don't give her your pepperoni.”

“It's not weird,” Bear said. “Jessie and I have a business understanding. It's a perfectly normal transaction.”

Jessie laughed. It was a real laugh even though she also felt like crying. She couldn't wait to get home and write in her journal. It was all over between her and Jay.