

Not Your Mother's Fundraiser

My cousin, Ginger, pulls the fake ID out her faux leopard-skin purse and waves it proudly toward me. She sits next to me on my bed, crosses one hairy leg in black fishnets over the other and pumps the top leg while I memorize information.

“Pretend I’m the bouncer,” she says after a minute, squaring her broad shoulders toward me. “What’s your zipcode?”

Ginger is 6’1” without her heels, but the caked-on foundation, blue eye shadow and fishnets don’t exactly scream *bouncer*. I stifle a laugh.

I flip the fake ID over, so I don’t cheat. “02271.”

“What year were you born?” Where I sit on my bed, Ginger stands up and towers over me, attempting the intimidation tactics of a doorman at a club. Still, even when Gabe is not dressed in drag, as Ginger, he is not the most intimidating presence on the planet.

“1995.” The date trips clumsily out of my mouth. To get into Ginger’s show, I have to look like I am 21 when I have a hard enough time with 17 ½.

“What’s your sign?” she says.

“Taurus.”

“Yes! Your *birthday* doesn’t change—just the year. Good work, Anelle. They’ll let you in, no problem.” She slides a box of tissues off my bureau and tosses them to me. “Here, stuff some of these in your bra.”

“But I like my breasts just the way they are,” I say, because I do. Who wants them bouncing around all obscenely when I’m jogging? Who wants to dig a hole in the sand for them when I lay on my stomach at the beach?

“Stuffing your bra will make you look older,” my cousin insists. She turns back toward my bureau mirror and gasps. “Why didn’t you tell me I missed a whole patch right here?” She points toward a spot of bristly black beard. “I am meticulous about these things!”

I stand up and hand her a razor I shaved my legs with the day before. It’s not ideal but it will have to do.

She grimaces but snatches the razor.

I watch her consider the stray facial hair in the mirror. I say, “Ging, you’re going to steal the show.”

She sighs, then turns to me. “This is my debut, Anelle. I must dazzle!”

I pluck some tissues out of the box. “You’ll be awesome.”

Gabe has dressed as Ginger many times before. Before he moved out of our house three years ago, I used to help my cousin get ready before big nights out on the town—zippering up the dress, clasping gaudy jewelry, things like that. He wears a suit and tie to work at the real estate agency, but when Gabe dresses in drag, his friends address him as Ginger. For respect. I still can’t help seeing Gabe under the foundation and blue eye shadow. He’d probably be so offended if I told him it was like seeing his alter ego, a split personality or something. Because Gabe as Ginger is not a condition that needs to be treated. And I know that. Sometimes I wish I could be as girly as Ginger is, with her feminine strut and New York posh giggle.

I look up at my cousin as she leans into the mirror. Ginger has planned the Alliance for Housing and Healing fundraiser for years, commissioning donors for a silent auction, organizing the lip sync line-up, keeping costumes in order. But she's never performed. She lifts the quivering razor to the small patch of wiry facial hair, and I know she is nervous.

"They don't teach you culture like this in school," Ginger says, as we wait in line to get in the Care Bear Lounge for the drag show. A celebrity air eclipses the nerves she exposed at home. She fields kisses from throngs of people while we stand outside the club. "This is the most important homework assignment of the year, Cousin," she says to me.

As her friends fawn over her purse and shoes, I consider how my cousin has never asked me questions about my sexual orientation, even when I told her I joined our high school's Gay-Straight Alliance. Maybe Ginger knows I don't have many concrete things to say on the subject. I've had a few boyfriends, sure, but I did kiss Olivia during Truth or Dare at a slumber party. But kissing a girl doesn't automatically make me a lesbian. In the Gay-Straight Alliance there are plenty of members who haven't really made up their minds yet. I'm still learning about my options, I guess, and avoiding labels. Maybe my cousin thinks the drag performance fundraiser will help me clear things up.

In line, I adjust the stuffed bra one more time and rehearse the facts on the fake ID. But the bouncer hardly looks at me or my ID because Ginger, in her commanding presence, pulls people toward her like a magnet. The bouncer pulls my arm through the crowd and stamps my hand as Ginger leads me through the entrance.

We find a seat for me along the wall and close to the stage, at a low rectangular table that looks like the Care Bear Lounge inherited from a chain restaurant.

“I have to go backstage now,” Ginger says. “You’re hot. You’re young. Don’t let anyone talk you into anything. And under no circumstance are you to leave this building without me. You’re parents think we’re at a late movie. You’re lucky they said you could sleep at my house on a school night. And don’t think I forgot about trigonometry final tomorrow.”

“Yes, *Mother*,” I tease.

“Seriously, daa-ling.” She flips the ends of her blonde wig off her collarbone. “I would feel guilty if you were abducted.”

I feel for a second like a dork, alone at a table meant for four. It makes me feel better that no one knows me, though, so I don’t care as much as I normally would’ve at, say, the lunch table at school or something. I can’t wallow in being a loner dork for too long anyway, though, because a short-ish man with ultra-muscles and a shiny bald head gallops down the path between the tables. He’s sporting a pink bow tie and a pink sequins thong.

Only.

He drops and does push-ups while on-lookers holler his repetition count. People crowd around him, but I have a perfect spot because he’s right next to my table. He slows down around push-up seventeen.

That’s when Kim Kardashian busts (pun intended) through the sea of people and wedges a ten-dollar bill under the elastic of Pink Bow Tie’s thong.

Okay, it is a girl who looks *very much* like Kim Kardashian—tan, full-lipped, booty-fied and everything.

Open-mouthed, I look at Ginger.

“Enjoy the show!” Ginger blows me an exaggerated kiss and strides away.

Pink Bow-Tie pushes himself especially high, claps in mid-air, and comes down on one arm only. One handed pushups are impressive even without wearing a pink thong. More people gather, and Pink Bow-Tie collects an impressive wad of cash in the string of his thong. But my eyes are fixed on the Kim Kardashian look-alike who tucked those first bills in there.

Kim K.'s back is to Pink Bow-Tie now, which gives me a good view of her tight mini-skirt. It accentuates her voluptuous hips and her round butt. My friends and I recently debated about the birth butt or implant butt of Kim Kardashian for a whole lunch period. I ogle at this Kim's assets until I catch myself staring. Wondering why I'm staring at her ass gets in the way of letting me enjoy the vision. Yes, I had noticed how Lena's legs lunged toward the ball during our high school basketball practices. Yes, I had touched tongues with Ivy on a field trip. But this gawking is out of admiration I think. Or envy (I will never be that curvy). But it's more, a tempestuous desire that she look back at me. She slides her hand down a man's chest and I wish it is my chest, even if she'd feel the tissues. The man runs his hand down her back and rests it on her hip.

When my eyes rise, she's looking over her shoulder straight at me. What can I do but smile? A flirty smile, I'll admit. It is Kim Kardashian, for crying out loud. I mean, I don't necessarily even approve of what Kim Kardashian stands for, on that stupid reality TV show and everything. But here, in front of me, it's impossible to admit that this girl is not *hot*. Her sienna

hair falls in loose curls, her full lips fit perfectly on her face, the black of her eyeliner boasts big, dark eyes.

And then our moment is over.

She spins her head around to her friends. I return my attention to Pink Bow-Tie, who is now on his knees hugging the legs of an older man with a blue martini. Blue Martini Man attempts to sip his cocktail and blue liquid drips onto Pink Bow-Tie's small, glistening head.

And Kim's walking toward me. We catch eyes. She swings her hips slowly and my cheeks singe hot. As she inches closer, she blinks. Fake eyelashes.

She stops at my table. Leans against it with her thighs. She's probably looking at me, but I can't take my eyes off the place where the table meets her legs and the—bulge?

She has a penis.

I don't have time to ponder whether this makes my attraction to her more or less understandable because she says, "Mind if I sit down?"

She doesn't wait for my answer. She lowers her generous backside slowly, deliberately into the plastic chair next to mine.

While the emcee says his introduction, Kim learns that I am here to see Ginger, a personal friend of hers she assures me. Kim soon knows this is my first time in the Care Bear Lounge, I am a Taurus and I go to UConn (they have a great women's basketball team). Kim has actually adopted the real Kim's identity so everything she tells me is really stuff I'd already read or heard about Kim Kardashian. Her sex tapes leaked for public viewing on the internet; her husband, Kanye, and she are fighting; she needs a new outfit for her dog, a boxer named Rocky.

“I’m going to buy you a ring,” she says. “It will look so nice—there.”

My hands are folded on the table and she pats my naked ring finger.

My heart and stomach flip-flop. I’m freefalling.

“I think we could have a lot of fun.” She rests her hand on mine.

This, I suppose, would have been a perfect time to take Ginger’s advice and duck away from anyone who hit on me. But I’ll admit, I am captivated. She’s toying with me, I know. Drag queens aren’t supposed to be hot for girls like me, though, are they? But what does “girls like me” mean anyway? And these fantasies about Kim Kardashian whirling through my mind right now? Even with the male paraphernalia? I’m not sure any label matches the way I’m feeling about this. They haven’t talked about this kind of attraction yet in the school GSA. Confusion and excitement battle in my belly.

The music pumps through speakers and I recognize this Barbara Streisand song. Ginger and I wail it together often. Ginger pokes one long, fishnet leg out from the curtain and into the audience’s sight. Applause erupts.

“She’s famous, you know?” Kim clutches my thigh with her red painted fingernails.

“Barbara Streisand?” My focus on Ginger is slipping as I think how there is only one layer between Kim’s fingers and my bare thigh.

Kim turns her attention to the stage. “No, Peaches. Ginger. She’s famous. She started this whole thing. The organization. The fundraisers. The community service. But she’s a backstage gal usually. This is her on-stage debut.”

The dim lights of the Care Bare Lounge encourage me to take one hand off the table and rest it on top of Kim's hand, which is still on my thigh. Electric. I smile at her coolly, then focus on Ginger. I have waited years to see Ginger in action, after all. Ginger throws her head back at the high notes; she holds a fist to her chest at poignantly heart-breaking moments. She stretches her arms toward the crowd and, after the final lip-synched note, blows me a kiss just like the one she gave when I first sat down.

A friend of Kim's comes over with a pink cocktail. Kim curls her tongue around the straw with her eyes on me and sips. She offers the drink to me, but I decline. She raises an eyebrow and caresses my cheek.

Ginger comes to my table after her first number. She glances down at Kim's hand on my thigh and I hope she won't crack Kim in two later. Ginger's friends whisk her this way and that, fawning over her performance and whistling for the other performers.

I try my best to stay focused on the other stage performers, mostly big drag queens in boas and beautiful dresses lip-synching to various show numbers or classic ballads. Pink Bow-Tie comes around again during intermission and raises at least one hundred dollars between his butt cheeks.

Soon, Ginger is back stage, changing for her next number, so I circle the bar with Kim and she leads me by the hand the whole way. Many, but not all, of her friends greet me kindly. Judging by the raised eyebrows and head nods, clearly some of them have a hard time seeing how Kim and I connect. But as long as Kim leans her head on my shoulder, and as long as she squeezes my hand, I don't care. I remind myself to look around, journalist style; I remind myself to absorb all of this "culture," like Ginger advises, but my energy runs toward Kim, who stands

maybe four inches taller than me in her stilettos. Sweet musk wafts off her when she pulls me into her and whispers in my ear.

A tall woman in a black leather jacket speeds toward us and says, “Kim, Baby, let’s share a smoke.”

“Naaa. I’ll stay inside with this doll.” Paris pulls me tighter around the waist.

“How do you know I don’t smoke?” I ask.

“Even if you want to, I wouldn’t let you. You’re too beautiful.”

She is toying with me again, and I let her. “You’re beautiful too,” I say. The rouge on one of her cheeks is thicker than the other. It makes me want her even more.

A duet comes on stage, Ginger and another performer who, under the make up and permed red wig, I recognize as Ginger’s oldest friend from grade school. Ginger hasn’t told me that they’d be doing a number together. And I never knew Kevin was Kassandra, as the emcee announced.

“What are you doing later?” Kim asks, partway through the song.

“Not sure. Ginger probably has a plan.” Like driving me home so I can get to a Trigonometry final in the morning.

The song ends in a duet of jazz hands and the crowd erupts.

“How’d you like to come home with me?” Kim runs her hand down my hip. “I’m not usually like this, you know. Men flock to me. But, well, here you are, painting yourself to look twenty-one and I just can’t help myself!”

"I am twenty-one."

"Honey, please. You also go to UConn, right? Just kiss me."

It is as simple as that. I kiss Kim Kardashian.

She wraps both arms around my neck. "My doggie, Rocky, always sleeps in my bed. I'd love for you to meet him." It is a pick-up line, of course, and I pick it up.

After Ginger's encore, she finds me next to Kim amid a circle of friends. I plead with Ginger to take me to the after-hours party at Kim's house.

"Absolutely not," Ginger says. She pulls her faux leopard-skin purse on her shoulder. "I will not be responsible for an F in Trigonometry. Or a broken heart."

I roll my eyes at my cousin. "I'm not in love with her," I say, when Kim's head is turned. I can tell Ginger doesn't believe me. I don't believe myself. I lick some of Kim's cherry lip gloss off my top lip.

"Say goodnight to your sweetheart," Ginger says so Kim can hear.

"Oh, Baby, leaving so soon?" Kim fingers the strap of my tank top. Ginger tenses beside me.

"She *is* a baby," says Ginger, and she pulls me toward the exit.

On our way out the door, the bartender yells, "You were brilliant, Ginger Lee!" and the bar claps for her again.

Kim blows me a kiss when I turn back.

My cousin should have let me go to the after party. I don't sleep anyway. I lay on Gabe's couch, staring at his white stucco ceiling and playing the kiss over in my mind. Is it Kim Kardashian I kissed or the man underneath? My complicated desire keeps me awake until sunrise. I never open that trig book.

Well, Ginger promised me culture and I tasted a bit. Just around five-thirty a.m., the taste drifts off my tongue and I take a nap until my cell phone alarm wakes me up for the trigonometry test. With the lack of sleep and Kim on the brain, I hardly pass the trigonometry final. I should be thinking about the functions of the sine and cosine. Instead, I'm thinking about the function of Kim Kardashian in my life.