



best
lesbian
romance
2014

edited by Radclyffe

BEST
LESBIAN
ROMANCE
2014

Edited by
RADCLYFFE

CLEIS
PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

One thing that makes the romance genre so enduring is the endless variation on the classic “love story.” When we begin reading a work of romance, whether it be a short story, a novella or a novel, we already know the ending. Someone will fall in love and hopefully live happily ever after, or at least happily for now. We don’t know how they will get there, what challenges they will face or what changes they’ll undergo as they cast off old fears, distrust and cynicism to embrace new discoveries and reignited passions. We don’t know when they’ll finally accept the emotional truth that they’ve met someone who makes a difference in their life in a way no one else can. We don’t know when they’ll say the magic words “I love you” and what they’ll do after. Every step of a couple’s romantic journey is different, in life and in fiction, and the same is true for every story in an anthology about love.

When I put out the call for submissions, I didn’t stipulate anything about what constitutes a “romance short story.” Like the reader who opens to the first page hoping to discover a story that resonates with their experiences, hopes, dreams and fantasies, I want to be surprised and challenged and inspired by the stories I receive, and the selections in this anthology do not disappoint. What always surprises me is how similar themes converge despite the different voices, different styles and different vantage points of the authors writing romance.

In this collection, completely spontaneously, several themes became apparent—the one that struck me most of all was that of possibility. Romance is a unique and fluid and constantly changing experience, never the same for any two people or even for the same people at different times. But one thing is always true—falling in love opens us up to possibilities we never imagined, leaving us with a deeper sense of self and a greater appreciation for life. For those at the beginning of the journey, the future is an open road, or as in Sara Rauch’s “Current,” a swift-moving tide:

Clara and I watched the sun descend. It had been a long time since I’d sat like that—with everything and nothing to say. As the thick gashes of magenta and orange striped the horizon, Clara became not a stranger, but a promise.

For those already on the voyage, love is a source of strength and joy, as Kathleen Tudor writes in “Boi’s Love Song”:

You give me the courage to be your strong right arm, the bravery to stand between you and the world, wherever I can, and the heart to be proud of everything that I am. By loving me, you show me how much of me there is to love.

Whatever the path, love is a journey of possibility, passion and promise—enjoy these stories from twenty masters of romance.

Radclyffe

Brittney Loudin

I was in the second semester of my senior year when it happened. If I close my eyes now I can still smell the crisp scent of freshly trimmed grass and the deep musk of hard-earned sweat that never seemed to fade, whether the sport was in season or not. I remember that hot Alabama night so clearly it replays like a movie in my mind. We were the fashionable subject of gossip, the real talk of the town for months after. Little did I know it would change my life, her life and the perspective of this tiny, rural town forever.

My old teammates and the rest of the student body would tell you differently. Every single one of them would recite his or her own version of the story. Some of their variations would be only partially wrong, simply depicting the major events of the game. Others would narrate complete delusions packed with fabricated details. Regardless of the many different ways the story has been and will be told, only Karen and I know the truth. Only we know what really happened the night a miracle four Southern Crosses High School.

* * *

Coach vehemently kicked at the dirt beneath his sneakers and swore into his clenched fist. He knew better than anyone in that stadium that if he didn't find a perfect replacement and soon, they could kiss the game and their shot at nationals good-bye. It was fourth down and fifteen yards to go until our very own Eagles took the all-state championship. With twenty-one seconds left on the clock, the whole of the spectators were on their feet in the bleachers, gawking with unbelieving eyes as our third wide receiver of the year was hauled off the field by EMTs.

The team had been through hell and back this season but managed to pull off back-to-back wins at the cost of several injured key players. Short four men already and without a quick-footed athlete to run the last play, the team would have no choice but to forfeit.

Standing stationary behind the water cooler, I was the only creature for miles thinking the crazy thought that buzzed between my temples. Any other girl at the school wouldn't have once considered the same solution, but my passion—my passion for the game and my passion for her—ran deeper than all the prejudice the folks in Belmont possessed.

I scanned the corners of the field until my gaze at last landed on the sight I so desperately needed to see, the cheerleaders. In the forefront of the gaggle was the head cheerleader, Karen Peters. I watched as she repeatedly circled the group of glittered-up girls, barking instructions and words of encouragement to those who needed it.

Karen and I had been secretly dating for four months, and as far as I was concerned, she was the sun, the moon, the stars and the very rock of earth beneath my feet. At the young age of seventeen I knew what true love was. I knew what love felt like and looked like because it brought me to my knees.

every time I saw my own heart reflected in her eyes.

Everybody and their mother could go on for days talking about young love, summer love and even more so, high school sweethearts, but I was fully convinced that what Karen and I had was a love like no other. We connected so easily I couldn't actually recall the first time we met. As far back as my memory stretched, Karen was always there. Best friends for years until conventionality was no longer enough and we had to privately venture into more intimate regions of our relationship to satiate our needs.

She understood me on levels that my peers and family never did. We often stayed up nights sharing our secret thoughts and dreams, fantasizing about packing up and moving out to New York together, leaving everything and everyone else behind. Karen told me she desperately wanted to become a world-famous dancer, something she wouldn't dare tell her parents, let alone actually do. I divulged the fact that more than anything I wanted to play football in school and then eventually in the NFL. Though my dream was near to impossible, Karen was always a beacon of endless support.

As a matter of fact, it was on one of those days we were babbling on about our hopes and dreams that I asked Karen to marry me. One late afternoon a few weeks prior to the game, we were lying on the grass in her backyard in our swimsuits, chatting away and sipping down pitcher after pitcher of her mama's sweet iced tea. I lifted up my sunglasses and watched her lie there, sprawled out on an old beach towel, trying to steal a tan from overcast clouds.

"Marry you?" She laughed freely into the breeze. "Baby, in this town?" Her Southern twang rocked heavily on the back of her innocent treble voice. "People here wouldn't let you wear your hair backward if you wanted to. You know I would tie the knot with you in a heartbeat, baby, but that's not gonna happen the day you win a football game. I'll tell you that."

The day I win a game. Though I knew Karen had used football as a simple comparison to make her point, my brain was saturated with her words. I wanted to play so badly. I wanted *her* so badly.

So when the night of the championship rolled around and the school was in a panic, it was evident to me what I had to do. Nearly paralyzed by the absurdity of my own idea, I forced my feet to shuffle over to the distressed man pacing back and forth on the sideline.

"Coach..." My shaking voice mimicked my trembling hands. "Coach!" Whether he was ignoring my calls or just plumb deep in thought, I couldn't tell. "*Daddy!*"

The man whipped around. "What is it, darlin'? I'm tryin' to run a show here!"

With a hard gulp, I found my words. "Put me in."

"What?"

"Put me in!" My offer now carried the tone of a demand.

He didn't smile but his grimace lost some of its potency and I knew under any less stressful circumstances he would have laughed.

"Ericson, get over here," he shouted to the burly, stocky boy streaming Gatorade into his mouth before turning back to me. "Sweetie, I don't have time for this! I'm gonna pull Ericson from running back and have him make the catch."

"Daddy, you know he can't make it. He's not fast enough. He doesn't even know the play that well!"

"I don't have a choice, honey."

"Yes, you do. *Me*. I know it. I know that play better than any of those meatheads. You know I can run it, you've seen me run it a million times."

To this day I have never seen such desperation in my father's eyes as I did that night while I stood there staring down at me, silently weighing his longing for the win and his pre-programmed

mentality that told him no girl would ever, could ever, be good enough to really play.

Ericson finally trotted over to my side, beads of sweat flying from his forehead. "Yeah, Coach?"

With a gathered brow, my father's regard hung on me a moment longer and then he turned to the boy. "Get your helmet. Then take your shoulder pads and jersey off and give them to Jane here."

With confusion, the young man acquiesced.

"Two minutes, kid," he ordered before spitting in the grass and walking off.

I donned the pads like they were pieces of armor and I was preparing for battle. After slipping the jersey, stained green and brown, over my head, I snatched the oversized helmet from its seat on the bench and made my descent onto the field.

The murmurs of the crowd swelled into a bellowing roar as they slowly recognized my small frame jogging toward the nest of bewildered players waiting for Coach's orders.

I whistled sharply and when I had the team's undivided attention I signed the code for the play and motioned for them to get into form. Not one boy commented or argued with my self-appointed authority. I'm sure that any other day of the week I would have been blown back by snide remarks and sexist jests, but the energy in the air that night was far too intense for jokes. I had often practiced with the boys during off seasons and my competence wasn't in question. For one evening our mutual desire put us on the same level. We were one team.

Squatting into our designated positions, we waited for the opposing team to follow suit. The fire building in my gut evaporated all my anxieties. This was it. This was the moment I had envisioned since childhood. With a final glance over at Karen's concerned face across the field, I shut my eyes and knelt to touch the grass, securing my hunched stance. The stadium was silent apart from the banging sound of my heart floundering about underneath the pads and the nasal wheezing of my accelerated breath.

The call was made and within seconds my feet were a blur under my body as I bolted toward the goalpost. Dashing into the end zone, I twisted my torso back and checked the air. Sure enough, the ball was hurtling right for my head. Kicking hard off the ground, I leapt into the air, throwing my arms as wide as I possibly could. I grabbed the ball, cradling it into my chest as I fell to the dirt.

The referee's whistle couldn't be heard over the audience's cheers. Still grasping the ball for dear life, I stood and saw my teammates pouncing on one another, beating on their chests and howling with excitement. Then it hit me. We won. I had been so overwhelmed by the fact that I was playing in a real game I had forgotten all about the possible outcome.

When I felt arms swing around my neck, I thought they belonged to another player reveling in the victory, but then I saw Karen. Her ear-to-ear smile melted my racing heart. She was beyond elated.

Unable to contain her bliss, she screamed, "Baby, you did it! We won the championship and you did it." She was literally jumping for joy.

I tossed my helmet on the ground, and in a moment of unadulterated euphoria, grabbed Karen by her waist and picked her up, allowing her to snake her tan, lean legs around my hips. Looking into each other's eyes, we both knew it wasn't really me. It was fate.

"The day I win a game, right?" My lips lightly brushed her cheek and my chest heaved from lack of breath. "I do believe you owe me a wedding, ma'am."

Karen discarded her rattling pom-poms and weaved her fingers through the cropped, damp, clustered hair sticking to my face. "Let's do it, baby. Jane Adams, let's leave and I will marry you tonight, tomorrow night or any night you want. I'm yours. I love you, baby."

"I love you, too." With that, I kissed Karen hard on her lips, right smack-dab in the middle of the end zone. I didn't care that all of Belmont was watching. I didn't care if her daddy would shoot me

hell, if my own daddy would shoot me. If that night proved anything, it was that Karen and I were destined, written in the stars, and we both knew it. It was all we talked about on the flight to New York, graduation night.

Jane Fletcher

“Tell my daughter to get her sweet butt in here. I haven’t paid for all this so she can sulk off on her own.”

“Yes sir.” Annie O’Donnell, the maid, bobbed a curtsy and scuttled away.

She spared a cursory glance for the room. The party was in full swing. Everyone in the district with pretensions to being considered high society had tried to wrangle an invite. The ballroom was crowded with bright young things. Admittedly not all were young, and some were most definitely not bright. “Things” was, though, a sufficiently generous category to include everyone there, with just a few regrettable exceptions.

The music from the jazz quartet overlaid the hubbub of two hundred voices. Scents from numerous bouquets, decorating the edges of the room, battled with that of expensive perfume, cigarette smoke, and, increasingly, alcohol on the revelers’ breaths. The light from three huge crystal chandeliers glittered off jewelry, necklaces, cufflinks and even a couple of tiaras. Above the band hung a banner embroidered with the words, *Happy 21st Birthday, Beth*.

The men present were mostly dressed conventionally with crisp white shirts and tails. Annie had seen the table by the entrance piled high with top hats. The women wore a mixture of elegant evening gowns, small black dresses and even smaller tubes of bright material, in the latest fashion, cut so short the wearer’s knees were on show. These dresses were mainly the preserve of younger women accompanied by headbands (and the occasional feather) and strings of heavy beads. Black-clad waiters wove their way between the crowds, carrying trays heavily laden with pink champagne.

At that moment the band struck up a Charleston and the knees jostled onto the dance floor to commence their gyrations. Annie left the room. She knew the birthday girl would not be among them.

The entrance hall of the Fitzpatrick mansion was larger than the entire apartment Annie shared with her aunt, uncle and five young cousins. A wide sweep of stairs led to the upper floor. She hesitated briefly. The young lady of the household might be up there, taking refuge in her room, but then Annie shook her head. No. She had a better idea of where to find Miss Elizabeth Fitzpatrick.

The double doorway at the rear of the hall stood open, giving access to the garden. The cool night air was a welcome change from the heavy, too sweet atmosphere inside. Lanterns had been set around the terrace. Their flames flickered in the gentle breeze blowing in from the sea. Beyond the stone balustrade, moonlight bleached the garden in harsh blue-white light and soft black shadows. Still farther away, the distant lights of the city reflected in the black waters of the bay.

Annie was not the only one on the terrace. A few others had drifted out to enjoy the night air. They stood talking quietly in pairs and trios. Red lights flickered like fireflies as people drew on their cigarettes. A sudden burst of laughter, quickly hushed, caught Annie’s attention. She looked over, but her quarry was not there—nor had Annie expected it. She knew where to look.

Stairs at either end of the terrace led down to the garden. The sound of Annie’s footsteps changed from the sharp click of stone to the crunch of loose gravel. As she walked down the path, the sounds of

the party faded and gave way to the song of crickets and the whisper of wind through the bushes. A first no more than a faint undercurrent, but growing louder, was the boom of the sea washing against the bottom of the cliffs. Annie took a deep breath, expelling the last of the smoke and alcohol fumes from her lungs.

At the end of the lawn the path passed between a pair of topiary bushes in the shape of peacocks before rounding a now-silent fountain. Beyond lay the less formal area of the garden, degenerating into an overgrown rockery. The path no longer ran straight. After another minute, it ended at a promontory where an old, round wooden summerhouse overlooked the ocean. The building appeared deserted in the brilliant moonlight, but Annie had little doubt of who would be there.

She stopped in the doorway, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness inside. Sitting to one side was the heir to the Fitzpatrick shipping fortune. A stray beam of moonlight glinted off the shimmering silver evening dress clinging to her slender form.

“Your father sent me to find you, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Well, please don’t tell him you found me, and please don’t call me Elizabeth.”

The rich, warm voice made Annie’s insides melt. Before trusting herself to reply, she took a second to ensure she had full control of her lungs. “Lizzie.” The name felt more stilted on her lips than it used to.

“Annie.”

Even without seeing her face, by the lilt in Lizzie’s tone, Annie knew she was smiling. Just the memory of that smile was enough to make Annie’s pulse leap and her knees weaken. She leaned against the door frame for support.

“Can you do me a favor? Go back to the party and get me a glass of bubbly.” Lizzie paused reflectively. “Actually, make that two, and see if you can snag a bottle as well.”

“Supposing I meet with your father, what will I say?”

“What exactly did Daddy ask you to do?”

Annie searched her memory. “To tell you to get your sweet butt into the party.”

“Consider me told.” Lizzie laughed. “If you see him, you don’t have to lie. You can say you couldn’t find me in the house. Which is true. And you can say you’re going to try find me in the garden. You don’t need to add that since you know where I am, your chances of finding me are extremely good.”

Annie shook her head, in amusement rather than denial. If truth be told, she would have lied for Lizzie, willingly.

Back in the house, the party was, if anything, even more exuberant than before. The absence of the birthday girl did not appear to be hampering the proceedings to any noticeable degree. A few young men were wandering around as if in a very halfhearted game of hunt the parcel, but even they seemed more interested in the champagne.

Annie did not run into Mr. Fitzpatrick, so was spared the need to be inventive with the truth. No one else paid her any attention, the black maid’s uniform rendering her invisible, unless she was carrying drinks. Unfortunately, this was the fate she suffered the first four glasses of champagne she acquired, but she was eventually able to get away safely, drinks and bottle in hand.

By the time she returned to the summerhouse, the moon had moved on, and now enough beams reached the interior for her to see Lizzie’s face, highlighting the plains of her fine high cheekbones and small upturned nose. The colors Annie had to provide from memory, the gold in the ringlets of Lizzie’s hair and her cornflower blue eyes.

Annie handed over a glass of champagne and looked around, wondering where to place the other

A bench ran the full circumference of the walls, but it was not level enough to stand the glass of champagne without risk, and there was no table. She bent, about to place the second drink and the open bottle on the floor by Lizzie's feet.

"No. That one's for you."

Annie placed a hand on the ground for balance and looked up, uncertain. "I don't..."

"Oh, for god's sake, Annie, sit down and drink it. I want to ask your advice."

"Why me?"

"Because I trust you and you know me better than anyone else. Like you're the only one who knows I can't stand Beth and prefer to be called Lizzie. Now sit down."

Annie did as she was told, taking a safe position at the other side of the summerhouse, and sipping the champagne. The bubbles tickled her nose. "What are you wanting advice about?"

"Daddy's given me an ultimatum."

"Another?"

"He's serious this time. I have to get married." Lizzie gave a humorless laugh. "He's even given me a schedule. I've got my choice of the young bucks here tonight, with a view to announcing an engagement within six months. I'm to be married by next Christmas, and he went as far as to hint at a grandchild by the end of the following year."

"You're wanting to know how to wriggle out of it."

Lizzie laughed and pointed the now half-empty glass at Annie. "That's why I'm asking you. Do you know, any of my friends would have assumed I wanted advice about which man to pick." She tilted her head to one side, appraising Annie. "You really do know me. We used to be close."

"We used to be children."

"True. Growing up isn't all it's made out to be."

Annie smiled, slightly sadly. In truth, it had all been so much easier when they were children. She had started work at the Fitzpatricks' straight off the boat from Ireland and needed to lie about her age to qualify for employment. It had been such a strange new world she found herself in.

Lizzie had been a scant year younger than herself, equally lost. Her mother, Margaret Fitzpatrick, had succumbed to cancer a few months earlier. Notwithstanding their difference in station, they had become friends, supporting each other as they adjusted to their new situations. At the time, it had felt like being sisters. But as they became older, things had become more complex. Things always do. The way Annie now felt about Lizzie was not an iota less affectionate, but it could not be described as sisterly.

When Lizzie had been sent to finishing school in Switzerland, Annie had tried telling herself it was a blessing. She would be spared the daily torment of seeing Lizzie and the fight to keep her words and actions under control. But being around Lizzie had been the sweetest of torments, and her life had been so very empty without her, so lacking in joy.

With each passing month, Annie had told herself she was coming to terms with her feelings and it was over the worst of it. She had been lying to herself. Deep inside she had known it all along, and when she hadn't then, she would now, sitting alone with Lizzie in the dark summerhouse.

Lizzie had returned from Switzerland a month ago—a month that had passed at a hectic pace catching up with old school friends and the like. Lizzie had spent more time out of the house than in. Again Annie had lied to herself, saying they were adults, with utterly separate lives, and she did not want, and certainly did not expect, anything else. This meeting in the summerhouse was the first time they had exchanged more than a sentence and already the thin shell of self-deception was melting, like ice in a blast furnace. She had missed Lizzie, like a drowning man misses oxygen.

Annie felt her pulse race and her stomach tightened in a knot. Her mouth grew dry. She took a quick gulp of champagne. ~~Unwise. Already she could feel the first faint blurring of alcohol.~~ She put the glass down. Keeping her head clear was vital. "Why do you think your father is so much more serious this time?"

"Because he spent money on this party. Daddy never spends money unless he's serious."

"What will happen if you refuse?"

"He's threatened to cut off my allowance."

"Do you think he will?"

Lizzie shrugged by way of answer.

"So what options do you have?"

Lizzie drained her glass and got to her feet. Annie's heart jumped at the thought Lizzie was coming to sit beside her, but instead she stood in the doorway of the summerhouse, resting her shoulder on the frame, her back to Annie and stared out across the bay.

"Europe was wonderful. Not the school. That was a waste of time. Nothing of value, except I can now say *ooh la la* and *la dolce vita*, which passes for sophistication around here, so Daddy's pleased. But the places..."

Lizzie turned and rested her back against the door frame. Her gaze fixed on the ceiling, but Annie had the sense she wasn't seeing it. Her mind's eye was fixed on other scenes, other times. Annie waited for Lizzie to speak again.

"Europe's nothing like here—the buildings, the people. The world is filled with so many places I want to see. Places I have to see." Her eyes dropped, fixing on Annie. "Do you remember my camera?"

"Of course." How could she forget it?

The camera had been a present for Lizzie's fifteenth birthday. For the following two years, she had done nothing except play with this new toy. Lizzie had talked her father into equipping a small darkroom. Standing cramped together, in the dark, Annie had first begun to realize just how her feelings for Lizzie were changing, and what she wanted. And then everything had all become just too difficult.

The camera had not been a fad. Lizzie carried it everywhere with her. The cupboard in one of the spare rooms was filled with boxes upon boxes of photographs. Nor had Annie's new understanding of herself been a fad. But in her case, it was her heart that was filled, with memory upon memory, and hopeless dreams.

Lizzie continued. "During the summer break they took us on the grand tour. France, Italy, Greece, the lot. It was supposed to make us cultured. But I have to tell you, some of the girls I was with, it was a complete lost cause. We went to Naples. The other girls who had cameras took snaps of Pompeii."

"And you didn't?"

"I gave the chaperones the slip one afternoon and wandered around downtown Naples. There was a fruit market. That's what I photographed. Old women arguing over cabbages. Young men carrying barrels. A boy crouched down, peeking between a donkey's legs. A baby sleeping in a makeshift cradle sculpted from sacks of oranges."

Annie couldn't help but smile. "That sounds like you. Never doing what everyone else does. Do you have the photographs with you? I'd like to see them."

"I've got a few prints, but I sold the negatives."

"You sold them? Who to?"

"A magazine." Lizzie's tone gained a sharp edge of excitement and possibly pride. "It's the first

money I've ever made for myself."

~~Things were becoming clearer, and Annie could guess where they were heading. "How long could you live on it?"~~

"Oh, not long at all. But the magazine said if I had other photographs, they'd like to see them."

"You're thinking you can make a career of it?"

"I don't know. For the last year, I've been putting aside some money from my allowance. Daddy doesn't know. It'll see me through a short while, but beyond that..." She sighed. "I don't know. I really don't know."

"And this is what you're wanting my advice about?"

"Yes, Annie. What would you do if you were me?"

Wisdom be damned. Annie took a large mouthful of champagne, and then another. If Lizzie went if she never saw her again, could she bear it? But how could she be less than fair? And what hope was there, even if Lizzie stayed? Either way, her own case was hopeless, but at least she could know she had been honest, she had been true. And at least one of them could be happy.

"For me, coming to America was a big step. But what with me Da not coming home from the war and me Ma with too many mouths to feed, there was nothing for me in Ireland. My aunt gave me the chance to come over with her, but I didn't know what to do. So I asked my Gran, and you know what she said?"

Lizzie tilted her head to one side. The rhetorical question needed no answer.

"She said, in life it's the things you don't do you end up regretting the most. And my Gran was right. Life has been better for me here. I'd have been a fool to stay behind."

"You think I should give the photography a go?"

"Yes. And I don't think you've much to lose. Even if it doesn't work out, if you came back with your tail between your legs I'm betting your father would welcome you back with open arms, just to show he'd been right all along."

"But could I bear to give him that satisfaction?" Despite her words, Lizzie sounded happier.

"Then don't fail."

Lizzie's answer was no more than the softest of laughs. Her body relaxed and her head dropped. For a long time she stayed in place. Clearly her thoughts moved to something else. At last she drew a deep breath and raised her head. "There's one more thing."

"What?"

Instead of answering, Lizzie left the doorway and picked up the bottle to refill her glass. For a moment it looked as if she would reoccupy her previous spot, but after two hesitant half steps, first one way, and then the other, she crossed the summerhouse and threw herself down on the bench next to Annie, so close their knees were almost touching. Annie felt the tension flare up inside, her skin at the same time too hot yet icy cold. What more could there be? She clasped her hands together around her glass, frightened they would reach out of their own accord.

Lizzie held out the bottle. "You're empty."

Annie let her fill the glass, fighting so the trembling of her hands did not betray her. She risked a sideways glance. Lizzie was concentrating on the task, her lips pursed in concentration—like a kiss. When Lizzie leaned to put the bottle on the ground, Annie quickly looked away, before their eyes could meet.

"The places I'll be traveling, they're not always safe for a woman to go alone. Well, to be honest they're not too safe for anyone, sometimes. And I've got all my photographic equipment to carry, and I was wondering..."

Heart in mouth, Annie waited for Lizzie to continue. Normally, she might guess where Lizzie's words were heading, but in taking the next step, were her own dreams feeding her false hope? When no more came, Annie gathered her courage, to finish the sentence, trying to pitch her voice so she could pass it off as a joke, if need be. "Are you saying you want someone to help carry your bags?"

Lizzie smiled in response, but the set of her lips was less confident than normal. "I wouldn't put it quite like that. I want a companion, an assistant. Someone who can help me. Someone a bit more practical than me, and a bit more worldly wise." She paused, staring down at her own hands, but then she looked up. "Would you be willing to come with me, Annie?"

Annie felt her heart pound again, more fiercely than at any time that evening. It roared in her ears but not loud enough to drown out, softly through the intervening years, her Gran's voice and the advice she gave. *It's the things you don't do you end up regretting the most.*

Dare she say yes? If she did, how would she bear the months ahead, with Lizzie so close yet out of reach? But how could she live with herself if she didn't? Annie's mouth was painfully dry. Yet she drained her drink more in hope of summoning Dutch courage than for the sake of easing it. She put down the glass and faced Lizzie.

"I'll come with you on one condition."

"What's that?"

Annie slid along the bench so their legs were in contact from knee to thigh. She was close enough to see the moonlight reflecting in Lizzie's eyes, hear her breathe, smell the perfume on her skin and the alcohol on her breath. Close enough to see the pulse beating in Lizzie's throat.

"That you ask me again in one minute's time."

"What do you think is going to happen in the next minute to change my mind?"

"This."

It was too late to debate the wisdom. Closing her eyes, Annie leaned forward. Her lips brushed softly against Lizzie's before returning again, hard.

At the first touch, Lizzie flinched, but did not pull away. Her face and lips were frozen, possibly in outrage—Annie dared not open her eyes to see. Then Lizzie's hand rose to Annie's face. At first it seemed as if she was preparing to push Annie away, or slap her, but instead, at the last moment, she slipped behind Annie's neck, pulling them yet closer. Their lips molded together.

It was the kiss Annie had fantasized about for years. The kiss that had haunted her dreams and tormented her days. This was what she wanted from Lizzie—wanted with all her heart and soul. She wrapped her arms around Lizzie, hugging her close. The solidity of Lizzie's body against hers filled the gaping hole in her heart. If nothing else in her life ever went right, this was the moment she would draw on for the rest of her days, the moment that made living her life worthwhile.

At last they broke apart, both breathing deeply. Lizzie raised her hand to her mouth, as if to reassure herself that her lips were still her own. Her expression flitted between confusion, uncertainty, and surprise. She stared at her fingers with the bewilderment of someone expecting to see something new and strange imprinted there, and then her eyes lifted to meet Annie's. Slowly the confusion faded, replaced by the softest of smiles.

"Annie O'Donnell, will you run away with me?"

Anna Meadows

The only secret I ever kept from Sawyer fit inside an orange crate.

She almost found it once, the day we moved in together. I had buried it in the backseat of my car beneath my great-aunt's quilts and the box that held my mixing bowls. When I saw Sawyer come up the stairs with that wooden crate my grandfather had painted the cobalt of a blue glass jar, my head was tight as a knot in cherry wood.

I told her that the things inside had belonged to my grandfather, that I kept them only because they smelled like him, like the cardamom of his favorite *tortas* and the loose tobacco he rolled into papers. They would mean nothing to me if it weren't for that, I told her. It could have been anything, I said, as long as it held that same spice and earth.

She believed me. They always believe you if you want it enough.

And it wasn't all a lie. Everything in that crate my grand-father gave me, and every time I took it down from the top of the closet, the whole apartment smelled like my grandmother's *pan de muerto*. That's why I never took it down unless I knew there was enough time to let that perfume slip out through the open windows before Sawyer got home. The few times I spent so long fingering its contents that the scent was too heavy to dissipate, I made *tortas de aceite* with enough cardamom that Sawyer didn't even notice.

Sometimes I longed to show her everything in that orange crate, to spill its contents onto our bed and give over its secrets. But I didn't want to lose her. "Never let the boy think you are smarter than he is, *m'ija*," my mother told me. "You never keep him if he thinks you're smart." When I met Sawyer, I thought the same went for a woman who dressed like a boy.

My mother hated that my grandfather gave me so many books. He told me I was smart and that if I did not read enough I would get lonely. "You want to know things," he said. He could tell by the rings of blue-black around the brown of my irises. So he brought me a book each time he came to visit. One month a book of Irish poets who sang of a land so green it broke their hearts open. Another, a dictionary, because whenever I asked my mother what a word meant she said, "You ask so many questions, you stop being pretty one day," and told me to stir the Spanish rice. For my birthday, a hardcover about the birds of the cloud forests where he met my grandmother. Its glossy pages shined with the emerald of hummingbirds and the blue tourmaline of the *quetzal's* tail feathers.

He had brought me books for two years when my mother told me I was getting too smart. "No boy likes you if you talk like that," she said. "*Todas aquellas palabras.*" All those words. It was two months before my thirteenth birthday, and she bleached my hair to the yellow of the *masa* we used for tamales. She said making me blonde would make up for all those books because my hair would keep boys from seeing those rings of midnight blue around my eyes.

Even after my grandfather was gone, my mother kept dyeing my hair. When I moved out, I did it myself, a force of habit as strong as biting my nails or reading *la Biblia* before bed. I knew she was right. I needed the maize-gold of my hair to hide what my grandfather had seen. He might have loved

me for it, but no boy would.

When I moved in with Sawyer, I had to get rid of most of my grandfather's books. I could only keep as many as I could hide. Choosing which would stay was harder than picking which doll and which two dresses to take with me when I was a little girl and my family had to evacuate for the canyon fires. It was harder than how I never opened my eyes all the way in front of Sawyer, afraid she'd see those rings of blue. She always thought it was how I flirted with her, half closing my eyes like that.

A book about chaos theory had taught me that a butterfly flitting its wings at just the right time on the coast of my *abuela's* hometown in Guatemala could turn the tide of the Mediterranean Sea. It sounded so much like a fairy tale, that little winged creature pulling on the oceans as much as the moon, that I grew drunk off dreams of *las mariposas* and a million coins of water. It had to come with me.

A small paperback, a French children's book about a boy who loved a rose so much it lit all the stars for him, more than earned the sliver of space it took up in the orange crate. The corners of the picture guide to the wildflowers of North America were still soft from my grandfather's thumbs, so I kept it. I held on to a hardcover of Neruda's poems if only for the line, "I do not love you as if you were salt-rose or topaz."

Books would not have been such a secret for most women. They would have slid them onto the same shelves with their lovers', letting the spines mix until they could not have remembered who they began as whose if not for the names written onto the flyleaves. But I never forgot my mother telling me, "Never let the boy think you are smart." Sawyer loved me for my push-up bras and rosewater perfume, my cayenne-colored lipstick and all that yellow hair I made endless with hot rollers each morning. It didn't matter that by the time we'd been together for three years, she knew I dyed it.

I loved Sawyer for her saffron-colored hair, always just long enough to get in her eyes. I loved her for how the weight of the Leatherman on her belt pulled her jeans just enough to show a band of bare skin at the small of her back. I loved that her tongue always tasted like saltwater.

I loved these things about her the way she loved those things about me, so it was not fair to let her know I was curious and smart like my grandfather had told me. It would have changed too much. It would have made her doubt the way I laughed when she traced a finger along the scalloped lace of my bra, or how, after I ironed her shirts, I liked leaving a blush of lipstick on those clean, starched collars. All of that was true. All of it was as much me as the secrets inside that orange crate. But Sawyer might not have believed it. My mother might have been right about all my words.

Sawyer had loved me that way for seven years when I came home and found her with my grandfather's books. It was the weekend after Thanksgiving. She'd taken down the Christmas decorations from the high shelf of the closet and had found my orange crate behind the boxes.

"I wanted to surprise you," she said. She bit her lip, a little guilty. "Thought I could get all the lights up before you came home."

I blushed to see that the books were in a different order than when I had last put them back in the crate. Sawyer had gone through them.

She caught me staring. "Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to go looking where you didn't want me to."

"I don't care," I said. "They're just books. I never read them."

"Then why's your handwriting in them?"

I knelt on the floor to put them all back in the right order, but Sawyer took my face in her hands. I felt the familiar grain of her calluses on my cheeks, the pads of her fingers worn rougher since the

first time she touched me years earlier.

~~“You’re smart,” she said, her mouth close enough to mine that I could feel its heat on my lips. I see it.”~~

I loved my lipstick and my rosewater as much as *todas aquellas palabras*, and I loved Sawyer more than any of it. I wanted both. I wanted my body to be soft under hers, not so full of words that was as hard to hold in her arms as water.

But she held me a little harder, her calluses like the finest sandpaper. I imagined each of her fingertips on my tongue, rough and sweet as the husks of the lychee nuts we bought from the farmer’s market on Sunday mornings. Thinking of how much the fruit inside smelled like violets on our sheets made me close my eyes. A tear fell from my lash line.

Sawyer kissed it when it was halfway down my cheek. “What else are you hiding?” she asked.

I opened my eyes and let her look at me. I did not squint to keep from her those rings around the brown of my irises. She stared into me like I was fire opal, and I knew she’d seen them, that deep blue that had first told my grandfather I was a girl for questions and words, all those words.

“Did you think I didn’t know?” Sawyer asked.

She put her hands on my waist and kissed me, quickly but gently, like she was pinning me down. She wanted me, still touched me like I was as soft as wet roses, even with all those secret pages. I was a butterfly over the waters of my grandmother’s homeland, and Sawyer was an ocean I could move with the flicker of my eyelashes, as easily as if they were wings.

My hand found that band of bare skin between her shirt and her jeans. My fingers brushed the knobs of her spine. The soft whistle of her breath in through her teeth gave me permission to pull her shirt away from the warmth of her back, and then her body was as open as the Ireland of those poets. Her tongue, her breasts, her thighs were salt-rose and topaz on my lips. She had irises as green as those cloud forest hummingbirds, and the black in the center of each opened and spread when she slipped her hand up my skirt.

She reached between my thighs like I was her rose and she was that boy who loved me like a sky full of stars. She touched me like I was all petals, her fingers looking for the tight bud at the center.

She was all those words. *Todas aquellas palabras*. And I could tell her all of it, everything, as soon as I caught my breath.

Sara Rauch

I emerged from the upstairs bathroom, having gone in twenty minutes before to cry my eyes out. I redrew my liner and lashes from Poppy's makeup bag, but I still felt shitty, was thinking of slipping out the side door through the yard and running for home. Clara caught me off guard. She was there at the top of the stairs, waiting. I jumped and said, "Shit." I was past polite, past profound. I knew my eyes were puffy and bloodshot despite the freshly applied kohl.

"Sorry," she said. "I saw you come up here and—"

I studied her, her outfit and unfamiliar face. I'd glimpsed her downstairs, sitting by the window alone, beer in hand. She had a nose pointy like a woodpecker, and a crest of dark blond hair, pale skin, shadowy smudges beneath her light blue eyes. All I could manage was, "Oh?"

She said, "I wanted to talk to you. Now that I'm standing here, it seems like I'm being strange."

It did seem strange, but I'd been crying in the bathroom at an afternoon potluck, wishing my dad was dead and not my dad, and it was one of those floating September afternoons that always got under my skin. My thirty-second birthday was a week away. My mother had sent a ring—she rarely visited, though I'd asked her to many times—a thick band set with rubies, and a note that read: *This is your year for peace and passion*. My mother was a gemologist, so I figured this arcane blessing had something to do with the stones. I rarely wore jewelry, but I wore the ring that afternoon, constantly aware of its weight on my finger.

"No, not strange. I just wasn't expecting you," I said.

Clara stepped toward me and touched my arm. She said, "I'm Clara. I work with Dale at the university." There was something in Clara's face, some openness, that made her proximity, her assertiveness comforting rather than grating.

"Sienna," I said. "Poppy's best friend."

For many weeks I'd had the feeling that I was approaching a cliff, with no idea of what came next with no parachute or brakes. All the desire I once carried—to be an artist, to do something with my life, to make meaningful contact with another human being—had come to naught. I carried with me instead, an unbearable sense of loneliness.

"Why're you hiding out up here?" Clara asked.

"Avoiding my ex."

Dale and Poppy's parties were legendary. Today the crowded rooms of their immaculate house and the people in bright colors dappled across the back lawn merely added to my sense of removal. How unlike my best friend I was, with her perfect hostess skills. But like always, I'd come early, in my black jersey dress, to help her set up. To listen to Poppy gossip about the hook-ups and breakups of our mutual acquaintances and several couples I'd met at other parties. What Poppy seemed to be saying today was that nothing was wrong with me at all—relationships blossomed and they shed their petals, the cycles of life, blah-blah. At least she was kind enough not to point out that it'd been many years since she'd seen me in bloom.

“Your ex is here?” Clara asked, biting her lip.

“The cocky brunette. Nancy.”

Clara shook her head, which I took to mean she didn’t know who I was talking about. Nancy was visiting from the West Coast, that’s why Poppy invited her. *You don’t mind, do you?* Poppy had asked putting a baking sheet of biscuits into the oven. *It’s been seven years*, I’d said and was happy that Poppy couldn’t see my face. The worst part was I knew I shouldn’t mind. It’d been forever. And it hadn’t been that great anyway. Nancy was self-absorbed and bad in bed.

“One great thing about moving a lot,” Clara said. “No need to confront your past at parties.”

“Are you new to town?” I asked.

“Two years.” She pushed her hands through her hair, letting the little pomp on the front fall back against her forehead.

“I’ve been in the Valley since college,” I said. “Fourteen long years.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I do, I just wish—I don’t know. For something new. New air.”

“It’s overrated.”

“What is?”

“New air.”

I looked down the stairs to the glass sliding door that opened out onto the patio. There was Nancy’s back, and the lit-up face of Poppy’s friend Annabelle. They were drinking martinis and leaning in close to one another. I felt the warmth of Clara’s arm near mine, the little blond hair tickling me.

I stood, not steadily, and said, “I need to get outta here.”

Clara said, “Do you want to go to my place? It isn’t far.”

Under any other circumstance I would have said no. But that afternoon did not feel normal. I felt like a fish that had suddenly grown legs, or a human waking to a set of gills—unsure of what to do with myself, afraid of the strange gift I’d been given.

I said sure. I motioned to Clara to follow me, and we slipped out the side door by the downstairs bathroom. Walking across the lawn, the grass long and lush and tickling my ankles, I felt a moment of urgency pass through me. I stopped abruptly and turned. Clara, not paying attention, almost crashed into me.

I said, my voice quiet though I knew it didn’t matter, “I wonder how long it’ll be till they notice we’re gone?” And I giggled. The sound was foreign as it emerged from my mouth and filled the air. Clara raised her eyebrows and gave a sly smile.

“Maybe never,” she said, and I hoped she was right.

She whistled at the old maroon Volvo. I dug in my purse for my keys and when I unearthed them she closed her hand around mine. “Could I drive? I love these old cars,” she said.

“Where’s your car?” I asked, confused.

“I don’t have one.”

“How’d you get here?”

“I walked,” she said.

I never let anyone drive my car. The old Volvo’s clutch was loose and it frequently ground between gears or stalled out in second if it wasn’t given the proper finesse. It had been my dad’s before he died.

Maybe it was her hand around mine. Maybe it was the dying of another summer. Maybe it was the feeling of a petal or two loosening from the bud. I gave her the keys. She got in and leaned across the

seat to pop open the door. She said, "Get in." Coming from anyone else it would have seemed a command, but from her, it was gentle. Most everything about her was gentle.

All I really knew about her was that she worked with Dale (which department, had she said?) and that she lived on Wood Street and dressed like a dandy. Or at least, she had for the party we were leaving—pressed gray trousers and matching vest, a burgundy tie knotted over a white short-sleeved oxford.

I'd never been to Wood Street, in fact had no idea where it was. It wasn't like Northampton was a small town, but having been around for so many years, I figured I knew all the streets, neighborhood places to see or be seen. Wood Street, Clara told me, was at the edge of town, out by the highway.

It was only a few miles, but Clara took the long way, down the narrow back streets, turning right and left and left again. Her pants pulled taut over her legs as she worked the pedals—she was slender but solid, I could see the muscles in her thighs flex as she pressed the clutch—and her spoon-shaped fingers manipulated the gearshift with ease.

Stopped at a red light, she glanced over at me. Autumn hadn't peeled back summer's warmth though September was almost finished, and we drove with the windows down, my arm extended and my hand gliding the air currents. Poppy would wonder where I was when the party ended, but that was several hours away. She liked to recap the minutiae as she cleared dirty glasses and loaded the dishwasher. It was her favorite part of the party, or at least one of them. Her sweet round face would be flushed with more gossip, recounting the silly moments—*Did you see Max hit Greg with the croquet mallet? Priceless*—who'd been drunk and who'd not shown.

Clara and I drove past pastel Victorians and farmhouses with sagging front porches. She drove slowly, as if relishing each turn the wheel made, each time she downshifted. I stared out the window and saw my reflection in the side mirror—dark hair lifting in the breeze, the sharp curve of my nose. The streets became unfamiliar, the houses and yards shabbier.

I lived near the college, in the opposite direction from which we were headed, in a second-floor apartment with refurbished wood floors and drafty windows. The apartment, beautiful and spacious, cost more than half my monthly income at the food safety nonprofit where I worked, but I'd reasoned it was worth it—given the location. I could walk to cafés and bars, there was a meticulous park only a few blocks away. Years ago, when I'd signed the lease, I'd reasoned that was enough. Now it loomed as a symbol of my inadequacy—sterile and stagnant.

As we got closer to the highway, she said, "I have a cat. You aren't allergic, are you?"

"No," I said. "I have a cat too. Laurent."

"Mine's Bell."

"Like the translator."

She looked at me as if I'd unintentionally caught her naked. Then she looked forward again, smiling. "Yeah, like the translator." Her teeth were remarkably white but very crooked, both incisors jutting over the teeth in front of them.

She pulled up to the curb in front of a small white house with white shutters. She eased the gearshift into neutral, sliding it back and forth a few times before killing the engine. Noise from the highway filled the air: steel rushing, the peculiar long whine of cars passing through, the occasional horn or tractor trailer, the dissonance of movement.

"Here we are," she said.

I sat staring at the house until she reached across me and opened the passenger door. She didn't touch me, but her arm so close to my chest made me hold my breath. I was suddenly afraid, as if the gills I'd imagined growing earlier could suck in air because of Clara's presence.

Clara got out of the car and waited for me to do the same before locking it with the key. Most people didn't know that was how to lock those old Volvos, that just pushing down the button inside the door did nothing. She handed me the keys and we went up the walkway together.

"You have a house, but not a car," I said. Agitation and desire bubbled in me.

"A fair trade, don't you think?" she said.

She opened the front door, letting me enter before her, and I was about to turn, about to say *I have to go*, because I wanted to go, wanted to put space between me and this woman I barely knew, whose hand was on the small of my back sending spark waves through my body, when I noticed the white. It was hard not to. Everything in the small front room was painted white. Not ivory, not cream. Pure white, straight from the can. The only furniture in the room was an overstuffed white chair, atop which sat a small white cat. Bell. She meowed and jumped down and ran into the house.

Fascination short-circuited my nervousness and pulled me farther inside. I followed Clara from room to room. Each yielded more white—floors, baseboards and molding, the entire bathroom, the bedspread and curtains and mirror frames. There were occasional splashes of color—a squat, curved aqua-color vase on a little shelf, a deep purple throw over the end of the bed—but everything else was white. And there wasn't much of anything. Entire rooms were empty. Probably every piece of furniture in the house would have fit into her bedroom, which was not particularly large. I tried to think of something to say, but only inane sentences—*You like white*—came to mind. I kept quiet and tried to not let my mind run over with anxiety. We passed a door with a small square cut from the bottom—*The basement*, Clara said. Was the basement also white? I wondered. It was better not to know.

In the kitchen, the last stop on the tour, everything, as I expected it to be, was white. The refrigerator, the stove, the countertop and linoleum, the dishes sitting on the open shelves. It was a small space, as if it had been carved out of an old pantry as an afterthought, and for both of us to fit inside, we had to stand very close. Clara's body gave off a sweet heat—vanilla and patchouli and cherry cigarillos. She offered me a drink.

"Milk?" I said before I could stop myself.

Her lips curled in a wry smile. It was unbearably sexy. "No milk," she said. "Water, whiskey, or wine." *W* words, I thought. How strange.

"Whiskey."

"Good choice." She reached up and brought down two white handleless mugs and a bottle of bourbon.

By now, the sun was slinking downward in the sky and diffuse light fell through the curtained window, suffusing the kitchen with an ethereal gilt. The whiskey's deep amber glowed. Clara did not offer ice, and though I would have preferred it, I didn't ask for any.

"Let's go out back," she said.

"Clara," I said.

"Sienna?" She turned to me, and the light coming in the window threw her face into shadow. There was, in her features, something so placid, as if she had never expected anything her entire life, and thus had never been disappointed.

"Sorry, nothing," I said. I wanted to ask about the white, wanted to ask why she'd invited me home, wanted to reach my hand out and grab hers, feel her warm palm and supple fingers.

We went through the dining room and out onto the deck. The yard was a small patch of scrubby grass, and beyond that a line of evergreens bordered the incline up to the highway, where I could see the guardrails and cars as they zoomed by.

“You get used to the noise, after a while,” she said, sitting in an Adirondack chair. Painted white as was the deck. I sat next to her in the other Adirondack.

“Are you tenured?” I asked, and then regretted it. What a weird thing to bring up out of nowhere.

“Tenure track, yeah,” she said.

“I didn’t ask what you teach,” I said.

“Philosophy,” she said.

“Oh.”

“Not a philosophy person, eh?”

I shook my head. “A little abstract for me. I took one class in college. Practically failed.”

She laughed and sipped her whiskey. “It isn’t like the real world. That’s true.”

“Why Northampton?” I asked.

“Why not? When you have debts to pay and no one dependent on you, any new town will do.”

“Really?”

“No,” she said and lapsed into silence. After a while, she said, “I grew up in this house. And my parents gave it to me when they up and relocated to Phoenix. The position opened up at the college and I thought, Why not? I’d been gone seventeen years. Why not come home?”

“Why haven’t we met before?” I asked. Poppy and Dale threw parties at least once a month. Certainly Clara would have been invited.

“I don’t go out much. I’m pretty solitary.”

“Why’d you come to the party today?”

She stared off into the line of trees bordering the yard. “Hard to say. Needed a change of scenery, I guess. What about you?”

“I always go to Poppy’s parties. She’s my best friend.”

“Do you like them?”

“What? The parties or Dale and Poppy?”

“The parties.”

“Mostly,” I said. “But they can be—what’s the right word? Under-stimulating.”

She nodded. The way the setting sunlight fell over her face exaggerated her sharp features. I wondered if it did the same for mine—if my neck appeared skinnier, my ears larger.

“Dale and Poppy seem very happy,” Clara said.

“They are. They’ve got the perfect life.”

“You think so?”

As soon as she asked, I knew I wasn’t really sure. Poppy certainly pretended to be happy if she wasn’t, and I went along with it, never questioning or pushing past the surface. Our friendship no longer plumbed the depths the way it once had, in college, and in that disorienting first year out of town. When she married Dale, Poppy entered a world I no longer belonged to, and though I had no real desire to follow her there, I missed the old her—the one that matched me.

But I’d been alone long enough to harness my often disturbing disorientation within the world. Those moments when the solid earth slipped out from under me and left me kicking in the ether. When I woke at night gasping for breath and wondering where I was. With my dad dead, it happened more and more often.

Even the seasons, those trusty indicators of time’s passage, seemed to slip and slide away from me. This afternoon, the sultry warmth of it, the drifting, decaying smell of leaves and whisper of cool evening, something cracked open inside me. Nothing, I knew, was as it appeared. “I honestly don’t know,” I said, answering Clara’s question. I had no idea if Poppy’s life was really perfect, and I would

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