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A Borough Away and a World Apart

When I saw her, I couldn't look away. Her face was schooled with a serious expression, though there was a slight air of boredom or disinterest. She wrote steadily in her notebook, highlighting and underlining phrases and, occasionally, tapping her pencil on her desk. Her left leg shook as she wrote. Even bored, she followed the professor's every word. I admired her ability to remain focused.

She looked up and our stares locked. She cracked a slight smile, but I turned away and continued working. My face felt hot and my palms began to sweat, so I dried them on the legs of my blue jeans. When I dared to look up again, she was still looking at me. Her smile was wider than before.

When class was over, I walked out into the hallway. I had to get back to my dorm before nightfall so I could finish this essay. As I turned out the door, I was stopped by a body. There she was waiting for me. Her expression was fairly neutral, but her eyes twinkled mischievously. My stomach twisted with a pang of anxiety.

"Is there a reason you were looking at me in class today?" My eyes widened. I hadn't expected her to confront me so directly. Did I even have an answer or excuse?

"Uh, well not particularly. But you look like a friend I have back home," this was a slight exaggeration. They both shared a bronze-like skin tone and inky hair, but that was where the similarities ended.

"A friend, huh." I nodded in response. "Hm. And where is home for you?" she leaned closer.

"The northeast Bronx, but I'm staying on campus. Weinstein."

"Jackson Heights, but I also stay in Weinstein. How come I haven't seen you before?"

"I keep to myself a lot. Don't interact with anyone in the building but my roommate."

"Well, you should interact with me sometime. Especially because we're classmates and I could use someone to study with some time." *She* wanted to study with *me*. It was then I wished that I was good at international politics.

On the walk to my dorm, my mind ran along the memory of her conversation. I thought of her red bomber jacket and cuffed acid-wash jeans. She kept her Cortezes a bright white despite the New York streets. Her wavy hair barely grazed her chin. Her gold, shimmery earrings twinkled.

“I met someone today in class. I’d like to invite her.” The other members of the Violet Vagabonds meeting looked at me, eyes blinking slowly like an owl. In my time at NYU, I’d managed to find a group of other women like me; lesbians and a couple of bisexuals. We’d meet twice a month, with the last meeting of each month being a meet-up at a bar or club.

“Oh? Who is she?” Alexis asked. Alexis was the most personable of us.

“I’m not sure yet, I didn’t get her name,” it hadn’t occurred to me to ask her at the moment, but now I realize how dumb it was.

“Oh, so we’re supposed to let in an outsider and you don’t even know her name,” Pauly was a smart-ass. She had a short temper and a tongue as sharp as a cutlass, making her a successful debate team captain but onerous everywhere else.

“Pauly, be nice.” Michelle was the only one of us able to hold their own against Pauly. “There’s no such thing as outsiders, only members and non-members.”

“That’s right, Michelle! And anyone who wants to become a member can become one. The rules are simple,” Alexis looked over at me encouragingly. “If you’ve taken an interest in her, I assume you have a hunch about her preferences?”

“I think so,” it was partly said for them and partly said for me.

“Well,” Michelle started, “the next time you see her, ask her to come to the club. We’ll get a real sense of her then.”

I thought about what I’d say to her all week. On Thursday, I returned to the class in which we first met, Introduction to International Politics. I had a horrible disdain for politics or at least learning it the way this university taught it. I wanted to understand more about international politics, especially concerning America’s role in them. Instead, we learned about game theory. I found the class to be...unsettling. The topics were not particularly gruesome, but the professor made America out to be some great bastion of freedom. The home of democracy, bringing peace

and justice wherever she went. If not that, then it summed international politics up into one perfect little game, with irrational actors. What a joke.

While my family lived in the Northeast Bronx, I saw the failures of this so-called democracy in the South Bronx as I rode the 5-train to and from the Lower East side. In my youth, I had seen and heard stories of buildings bursting into flames while families huddled on the sidewalk and watched their lives erupt in smoke.

My mother had banned me from visiting my best friend's house early into high school after running into her mother at the grocery store.

"Maia," she'd started. "That woman is not well. I don't want you hanging out at her house anymore. It's not safe."

By the end of the year, my best friend told me she wouldn't be back in school next year.

"I'm going to live with my grandmother in Tennessee," Stephanie had told me. "My mom can't handle taking care of me by myself anymore, so my grandmother wants me to stay with her." After semi-regular phone calls and a couple of letters or so, our communication grew thin. Months later, I'd passed Ms. Shelly on the way home from school. She was rail thin and standing on a street corner, a glass pipe in hand. Something inside me shattered. My heart broke for Stephanie.

The Lower East side wasn't much better. There used to be a liveliness in these streets, or so I was told. Bohemians of all kinds congregated all around the neighborhood, creating art and doing beautiful interesting things without explanation. But lately, there's a growing tiredness. A weariness that seems to linger and shake when the wind blew through the trees. AIDS wreaked havoc through the area, dimming much of the vibrancy the neighborhood once held.

Violet Vagabonds often volunteered with some of the local gay organizations. We distributed condoms and pamphlets. We'd also made potlucks to feed some of the homeless people in the area. It was important for us to learn from the real fighters for the cause. Most of us weren't freshmen, meaning we had two years at most before we'd be independent adults in the city. It was important for us to be contributing members of this community, we were all we had most times.

People still clubbed and partied which was exciting. Sometimes, however, people get carried away and let their fears push them to sedate themselves.

A few of the Violet Vagabonds had gone to a particularly interesting club last month.

“This is the hottest club in town!” A girl named Erin told us as we waited in line. The club was on the edge of Union Square with the line going down the block.

“If it’s so hot, how comes I’ve never heard of it?” said Michelle. Michelle had on a slinky black dress that dipped almost to her navel. She fit in perfectly with the crowd. Erin had urged us not to dress in a way that was too “dyke-y.” Erin was a fairly attractive femme bisexual. She wore a perfect, red pout regularly. Her hair was always blown out and coiffed. The more masculine of us were encouraged to stay home. Pauly had rolled her eyes saying she “wouldn’t want to go to some downtown straight club anyway.” Still, her discomfort was perceptible. “Club USA is so exclusive and cool! Kate Moss was seen partying here like last month! I’m wearing almost the exact same outfit that she was. I even have the blue scrunchy!” Erin twirled showing us her slender body clad in a plain black tank top and black jeans. There was truly nothing spectacular about her outfit, but then again, there was nothing truly spectacular about Kate Moss.

“Erin, if this club is such a big deal why do you think a group of dykes masquerading as straight women would get in? Especially me and Veronica?” I tried to be cordial with my questioning, but it was hard to mask the disbelief. Truthfully, I had nothing against clubbing. I liked going out dancing and just being free. I didn’t even mind when men respectfully danced with or near me. But the clubs of New York can be as segregated as the South in the 1950s. Veronica was a beautiful Puerto Rican woman from a neighborhood not too far from my own. Gay clubs in the village don’t allow more than two Black women in on the high end. Part of the reason I joined this group was to have more protection in these places. Gay white women don’t care for us Black lesbians. At best, we received distance and apathy. At worse, we were glared at or not allowed in. Certainly, there were other places I could go, but I didn’t want to stray too far from campus. Especially not on my own and especially not at night. So I stuck it out with these girls and spent a couple of weekends a month barely existing in these spaces.

By some divine miracle (and a healthy serving of eyelash batting and puckered pouts from Michelle and Erin), we were let in. The place was packed with sweaty bodies, vibrating “What Is Love” as it blasted through the speakers. Multi-colored lights flashed, making the liquor bottles behind the bar shimmer and twinkle.

“Is that a fucking slide?” Michelle yelled.

We all turned and there it was— a purple slide that extended from the VIP section to the dancefloor.

“You can’t be serious,” I said.

“I know!” Erin squealed again. “Isn’t it just fabulous?” She went off in the direction of the slide. Michelle only stared after the girl.

Only an hour and a half had passed before we left. But if you had asked me, I would have told you it was a century. I spent the majority of my time jostled between bodies and stepped on. Veronica stayed close to me. We hadn’t been offered drinks or asked to be danced with. I would catch sight of the white women, all seemingly close in age to me, getting twirled and flirted with. Veronica and I were practically invisible. I had not yet decided how that made me feel. We danced together when acceptable songs played and we watched as the house drag queen danced to the big hits, a small source of entertainment and familiarity. About 30 minutes in, a man had pressed himself against Veronica’s back. She quickly turned to look him in the face. He looked ghostly and half-dead.

“Uh-uh, find somebody else. It’s a girls’ night tonight,” she said turning back to me. But as she turned away, I kept my eyes locked on him in fear of retaliation.

But before the man could respond, he collapsed in the middle of the dancefloor — passed out cold and spilling the drink in his hand on Veronica in the process. She shrieked as I pulled her away from the scene. Security guards had come in to pick the man up, his head lolling to the side as they dragged him away.

“Girl, I think we should go,” I said. “The vibes in this place are really off.”

“You’re right, let’s get the hell out of here.”

I’d zoned out for the rest of the lecture. When I looked up to find her, she was just about to walk out of the door. I grabbed my things quickly and ran after her.

“Hey!” I tried to hide how out of breath I was. She looked at me, amusement clear across her features. I couldn’t help but take in how delicately and beautifully they were arranged.

“Oh, it’s you again.” She smiled, “What’s up?”

I fought down the pangs of anxiety and spoke my next words slowly to avoid rushing them. “I wanted to ask if you wanted to attend an event with me next Friday if you’re free.”

Her eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “As a friend, of course! I’m a part of a...” I scrambled for a good word, “social club! Yeah, I’m a part of a social club and we’re having an

event where we were encouraged to bring new people. You seem interesting enough, so I figured I'd extend an invite." I silently prayed that came off the least bit cool, at the very least normal.

"A social club event, huh?"

I nodded once.

"Okay, I'll bite. What time next Friday?"

"Nine," I said. "I can pick you up at your dorm and we can walk there."

She cracked a smile, "What a gentlewoman, offering to pick me up at the door."

"It's not like that. I just don't want you to get lost," I huffed. "Do you want to come or not?"

She laughed and I secretly tried to hide just how lovely I'd found the sound to be. "Okay, okay relax. Swing by Weinstein 4th floor around 8:30."

"I live in Weinstein, too." I'd never once seen her around the dorm. To be fair, I rarely lingered in the shared spaces.

"I know, you told me last time. It's a date." She winked, turning to walk off. The idea that she would remember such a small detail from our only conversation made my stomach fill with butterflies.

"Oh, wait! I never got your name."

She turned over her shoulder and said, "It's Srishti. I'll see you next week."

"Srishti." I tried out the name. "Bye! See you next week, Srishti!" I yelled after her. She simply waved without turning back around.

It was a *date*.

The week passed by in a haze. If you had asked me, I couldn't tell you what my professors said or what my classmates did. I don't remember any assignments that I worked on or what food I ate. All I could focus on was seeing *her* this Friday at 8:30 pm.

I knocked on her door at 8:30 pm. I adjusted my velvet dress so it sat properly over my stockings. I didn't usually dress super nice for these bars, but I wanted to do something special. After class on Thursday, she'd caught up to me asking how she should dress and where we'd be going.

"It'll be a bar, so you don't have to put too much effort into it. Something comfortable is always a good idea" purposely being vague about what *kind* of bar it would be. Despite my

hunch about her sexuality, I didn't want to scare her away before I had the chance to spend some time with her.

Still, her smile seemed to reveal her awareness of the situation. "A bar, okay. I'll see you soon tomorrow night then." With that, she walked away.

I could hear shuffling behind the door before she opened it. My mind went blank as I took her in. She was still fastening her earring as she stood at the door. "You can come inside," she said. "I won't be long. I just need to grab my bag and finish putting in this earring." I think remembered to nod as I followed behind her. "Feel free to sit on the bed while you wait, but like I said, it shouldn't be too long," she smiled at me as she went off to some part of the dorm room that I couldn't see.

"So where is this bar? And what's it called? You didn't give me many details." She'd asked while rifling through her things.

"Uh," I paused. *I might as well tell her the name now, I thought. If she knows of it, then that's probably a sign that she does play for my team. If not, then I guess I'd have to play it by ear and hope for the best.* "Henrietta Hudson's. I'm not sure if you've heard it, but it's about a 15-minute walk from here."

"Henrietta's?"

"Um, yeah." My hands fidgeted in my lap. "I'm not sure if you've heard of it."

"Oh, come on. You don't think I live under a rock, do you?" *Oh.* She made her way back to where I was on her bed, purse in her hands. She sat down next to me, sticking out her hand with a single gold earring in hand. "I'm having a hard time putting this, can you do it for me?" She leaned in close enough for me to help, but I was caught off guard by our closeness.

"Sure," even I could hear the nerves in my voice. My hands trembled as I tried to fasten the earring without taking too long or touching her too much. Keeping my distance was still best. Just because she's heard of Henrietta's didn't mean that we were on the same page. "It's done," I'd said after getting it. She turned and her face inches from mine.

"Thank you," she smiled softly before standing up. "Now, let's get out of here."

The walk there managed to bring some peace to my nerves. The chill of the fall evening allowed me to clear my mind. We'd opted to talk around Washington Square Park, not wanting to be so close to that area after dark. Instead, we went up the block and turned left onto 8th street.

She kept close to me. Sometimes our hands would brush as we walked or her hip would bump into mine.

“So is there a reason you wanted to take me a lezzie bar? And for a social club at that? Is the social club even real or was that just an excuse?” I stumbled upon hearing her questions, nearly falling onto the sidewalk.

I cleared my throat before responding formally. “How’d you know it was a dyke bar?”

“You can’t think that I’m the only gay girl that goes to this school. In fact, I started going to Henrietta’s just to prove that I wasn’t the only gay girl that goes to this school. It’s far enough from home that I can do what I want and not worry about an Auntie or cousin catching me.” We’d turned onto Barrow Street, then, meaning I didn’t have much time.

“I didn’t know if you were gay. I brought you here to find out,” I’d whispered the gay part. We were in the village, sure. But I was still keenly aware of the attacks that had happened in recent times. While the Pink Panthers were known to do their patrols in the area, I still thought it best to keep a low profile and avoid attracting attention.

“I don’t know if I should be offended or flattered.”

“Listen, you’re no 100-footer. I had a hunch, but nothing solid to base it on.”

“Oh, so you were curious about me?” I blanched. “And you thought about me?”

I was once again forced to focus on the use of my motor skills as we navigated the crowded sidewalks. This area could get quite chaotic. With restaurants, clubs, bars, and a few stores lining both sides of the block. The sidewalks were narrow and it was difficult to keep pace with her. When she noticed, she held out her hand. An offering. I took it without question.

Because we were fortunate enough to get to Henrietta’s before 10 pm, we were able to avoid the cover. When we entered, I spotted the Vagabonds by the bar.

“By the way,” I started, “that social club wasn’t a cover. It’s real.”

“Oh?” I grabbed her hand and guided her over to them.

“Srishti, these are the Violet Vagabonds. Everyone, this is Srishti.” A few of the raised their glasses in silent acknowledgment while others verbalized their greetings.

“Maia, there’s no way you couldn’t tell...” I squeezed my eyes shut as I heard Pauly start. But before I could retort, Michelle stepped in.

“Pauly, don’t embarrass the girl.” Michelle stuck her hand in Srishti’s direction. “Hi, I’m Michelle but call me whatever you want. Some people call me Mish or Mitchie, but I’ll respond to any variation of the name.”

Erin was next to give a personal greeting, with emphasis on the personal. “So just to confirm you are into women, right? And if so, are you seeing Maia, or are you still single?” She twirled a lock of her blonde hair around her finger. Alexis swatted at Erin, issuing an apology for her boldness. Srishti just laughed. The vagueness of her response made me uneasy.

After all of the greetings were exchanged, Srishti accompanied me to the bar to get a drink.

“Sunny, can we get two vodka cranberry sodas?” The bartender — whose name was apparently Sunny — turned away from another patron to look at us.

“Srishti, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you around. What you been up to?” *Oh, they knew each other?* The city could hold millions of people, but you could always count on lesbians to know each other. A pang of anxiety shot through my stomach.

“I’ve been busy, but it’s good to see you again! Use some of the good stuff, I’m trying to impress someone tonight.” She looked over at me and winked. I tried to keep my expression normal but my brow had shot up to my hairline anyway.

We made our way to the corner of the dancefloor, drinks in hand and swaying slowly.

“The music is kind of shit here, I’m sorry. Sunny’s boss, Mars, runs a tight ship and music is their domain.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me. I’ve been here before,” I responded. “But also, I’m the one who asked you here. If anyone should be apologizing it’s me.”

She moved closer to me, wrapping her free hand around my waist. “You’ve done nothing that you need to apologize for,” I looked into her eyes as they sparkled in the dim light.

We danced to the next few songs. Not because we truly enjoyed them, but because we seemed to mutually be enjoying each other. We had conversations on-and-off about different things. We pointed out the couples who made out in the dark corners. I’d asked her how many times she had been here before, to which she responded “just enough times to make a few friends.” I thought about what she could mean by *friends*. Had the bartender been just a friend? Did she have other special friends?

“Are you seeing anyone? Romantically, I mean.” I had to ask before I got my hopes up and disappointed myself.

“Not at the moment, but I could be.” She whispered her response, despite the loudness of the bar. I heard her clearly, all the same.

“Are you seeing anyone,” she asked after shortening the distance between us.

“No, but I think I could be, too.”

Within weeks, we had grown close. She stayed the night at my dorm often. What had started as once or twice a week, grew to three or four more.

“My roommate kind of sucks. She’s barely said more than three words to me this whole semester,” she’d told me once when I’d asked. I’d laughed it off and said my roommate doesn’t mind, so she’s more than welcome to stay as much as she wants.

Eventually, I asked her more about her home life.

“What are your parents like? You close?” She stilled when I asked.

“My parents are interesting. I wouldn’t say we’re close, no.” Her face was sullen.

“I understand, my dad and I aren’t very close,” it was true. He and I spoke once or twice a month when I needed extra money for food. I’d tell him how much I need, he’d agree and ask about my grades. We’d exchange “I love yous” and move on.

“My dad is more of a ghost. He travels a lot for work, so I never really saw him much before college. Now? It’s like he doesn’t exist.”

“What about your mom? Are you and her on better terms?” She laughed then, I furrowed my eyebrows wondering why my question was funny.

“I saw the woman every day for the better part of two decades, but she is as much a stranger to me as anyone.” I waited for her to continue.

She took a breath.

“My mom never wanted to come to America. It was never in her plans. At 24, her parents told her it was time she get married and she’d agreed. Didn’t even fight them on it. I could never. She met my dad and within months, they’d gone to England to start their lives. But when jobs began to run dry, he brought her here. She’s like a prisoner, but I can’t even say it’s involuntary. She pretends that she’s happy staying at home, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of us. But I think,” she pauses and sighs. “I think she hates us for making this her life.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, we don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to. This seems quite difficult,” I placed my hand on top of hers to comfort her. She smiled tightly.

“No, it’s okay. I promise. I want to share these things with you.”

She launched into lighter-hearted stories of her childhood. In Jackson Heights, she’d lived amongst other South Asian families. When her dad first came here, they rented one room in someone’s basement. Their furniture was scarce. In the summertime, they would get kulfi from the local store and eat it on the sidewalks. Neighbors would get together and have potlucks for seemingly no reason at all. They would pack into someone’s apartment talking, laughing, and eating. She’d tutored the neighborhood kids for some extra pocket money in high school and was a favorite babysitter. She hated when her mom sent her out to the grocery store for random items because she’d always run into an auntie or a cousin who’d question her on something or another. She enjoyed watching the kids practice Bollywood dances on the sidewalk, especially when they got the steps wrong. Her mom had taught Bharatanatyam lessons to some of the neighborhood girls who would then teach their friends.

As she told her stories, she seemed to float off somewhere else. Making gestures with her hands as she lay on her back and stared up at the ceiling. Her face was serene and gentle. Her laugh rang in the room, I couldn’t pull my eyes away from her.

“Will you take me there?” I asked. “To Jackson Heights, I mean.” I’d seen so little of the city. The main boroughs I’d visited were the Bronx and Manhattan. I went to Brooklyn once to visit a family friend who had moved there. I’d only seen the Lower East side of Manhattan and Harlem to get my hair done up for high school prom. But here this person was — this angel, this transfixing figure — who had been so close yet so far. Queens might as well have been the other side of the country for me. But I wanted to see it. I wanted to see this place that made her.

“Of course, whenever you’d like to.” Her smile took up most of her face then, a faint blush on her cheeks. I placed my hand on one of them. “Will you take me to the Bronx? I want to see your home, too.

“Yes, of course, I can. You have to try the patties from Royal Caribbean, there’s nothing better.” She laughed.

“I’d love nothing more.”

Visiting Jackson Heights is the closest I may ever get to visiting India. Crossing to the other side of *my* world was the equivalent of crossing to the other side of *the* world. Perhaps the

inter-borough travel would become a part of our love story. Perhaps the distance will get smaller and smaller each time we visit the other side.