The Label on My T-Shirt

She's beautiful, and I'm wearing a t-shirt. Perhaps I should have known this was a fancy restaurant. But I'm nervous, too nervous, and my sister told me not to overdress. If she could only see me now.

Cynthia smiles, as if this were normal for her. "I don't mean to be intrusive, but is this your first date with a woman?" she asked.

I nod, and when she doesn’t say anything, I immediately add, "I had a few possibly-dates, but I'm not very good at knowing if women are into women."

"Do you know that you're into women?" Cynthia asks.

"I mean my profile is set to women," I say, and give a dry laugh. Strained. Nervous.

"I meant you're sure, right? You're not just bi-curious, not about to ask for a threesome with a hidden boyfriend? Not just want one fun night?"

I shift uncomfortably. "Do I have to prove I'm gay enough?"

"That's not what I meant," she says, and when she rests her hand on my hand I relax.

"I'm sure, anyway," I say. "Very sure. It's clear enough to me."

"Have you ever kissed a girl?" she asks.

I shake my head, and this time she doesn't wait for any words. She leans in, and my blood melts out of my body, and is replaced by electricity, tingling, everywhere. *Everywhere.*

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The electricity fills me again. I'm nervous, my whole body tingling. *Nothing is after me.* I remind myself of this, because last time I went on a four hour jog, away from something, away from demons, Cynthia got worried. Today, I will try to see if a shower can put out the electricity. Hopefully it won't shock me. Or maybe I hope it does.

When I climb into the water, the door opens. "Get out of here!" I scream, and I reach for a towel, pull it into the stream of water. If I'm going to be followed by a demon, I at least don't want it to see me naked.

"What's gotten into you?" Cynthia says, yanking the shower curtain back, and I stand, wet towel in hand, not anywhere close to covering me.

"I don't know," I say, but I do know. It was just like this for my father. And yet so, so real.

"You have to talk to me," she says, and she grabs the towel, pulls it out of my hand. "Do you want to come out here, or do you want me to come in there?"

"Let me get dressed," I say, and she stands in front of me still, arms crossed.

"I've seen you naked before."

"But anyone—" I sigh, and lean against the back wall, closing my eyes and breathing heavily. She walks in, fully dressed, and takes my hands.

"Listen," she says. "Maybe you should see someone."

"I don't want to see anyone."

"But— remember your—" I know what she's going to say next, and I don't want her to. I want her to leave me alone.

"I'm not going to be him," I say, and I mean it. In a home somewhere, given shots of medication because he can't be trusted to take it even with a doctor on staff. Being told, plainly, that he may simply never get better.

"I'm going to call your mom," she says.

"I already told you not to." My dad really put her through the ringer. I can't do the same.

"If you won't let me help you, I can't stay," she says, and this time her hands land on my chest, hard, but I'm already all the way against the wall, so the shove doesn't work. I want to put my hands up, though I'm unsure if that's supposed to protect me or simply let her know I surrender. Instead, my hands become fists at my sides.

"Then don't," I say, but when she turns, turns off the water, gets out of the shower, I become aware I made a horrible mistake. "I didn't mean that," I say. "Stay. I'll— I'll see someone. If that's what you want." Now my hands go up, not as protection or surrender, but to reach her face, to get her to look at me. She keeps stepping back till she's out of my reach.

"I don't want any of this."

"Of this?"

"Of you."

"I'm sorry," I say, voice quiet, and I know it sounds like a beg.

"My brother will pick up my things tomorrow."

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There's a lot of things I expected from the psychiatric hospital, especially after visiting my father there sometimes, but meeting a girl with thick curly hair and a tinkling laugh wasn't one of them. She is beautiful in her t-shirt and too-loose stretch pants, and I'm relieved that, unlike my dad at times, I'm not in hospital scrubs.

"I wish we were allowed to touch each other," she says. I glance around, right, left, no longer the awkward first time girlfriend.

"No one's here," I say softly. She wraps an arm around me, links a few fingers in one of the belt loops of my pants.

"Hopefully no one comes. Wouldn't want them to see what I'm about to do next," she says.

I turn and smile at her as her fingers unhook. "Hmm, what would that be?" I ask. She presses her lips to mine.

Electricity, just in my lips, not taking over her my whole body, not making my blood into electricity, just… Just this moment.

She pulls back, "I love you."

"Oh."

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. It's just… true."

I want to tell her that we had only known each other for two weeks, and yet I can't bring myself to experience something so awkward. "Yeah, I love you too."

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By now, I do love her. I know it in the way my hands tangle in her hair while I kiss her. No knots until I make them. I know it in the way I feel comfortable in just her t-shirt, wandering around our apartment with a practiced ease, knowing where everything is with my eyes closed. I just know it.

She stumbles in one morning, drunk, again. "I missed you last night," I say, uncertainly.

"Leave me alone," she mutters. "I'm hungover."

"You're not supposed to drink on your meds," I say, and it's true. It puts her at a greater risk for alcohol poisoning.

"I know what I am and am not supposed to do." The glare she sends me is hard to stomach. Everything in me churns.

"I just worry about you," I say, and she grunts. Clearly, she doesn't do the same about me. I reach out a hand.

"You think just because you're doing better means I don't get to be sick."

"That's not what I think at all," I say, my hands feeling cold. I try to reach over, grab hers. She yanks them back. "Let me talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to you," she snaps.

"Why not?"

"Because I want to move out."

"You don't mean that. You're—"

"If you tell me I'm manic, or depressed, or anything else, you don't want to know what I'll say," she says. It hits me hard. I remember all the times we told my father he was confused, how often my mother said if I just tried one new medication, I'd feel better.

"I was going to say you're scared," I say, and I reach for her hands again. She reaches away again. "Nothing wrong with that. It has nothing to do with your illness. Plenty of people are scared.”

"And why would I be scared?" she asks.

"Because we're getting serious."

"No," she says. "We're not. I don't want to be serious with you."

I swallow hard, remembering the words from before, from the beginning, from the love. "Please reconsider."

"I don't want to."

"I want you here."

"I don't want to be here."

I want to scream, tell her to get out then, that I don't want her here if she doesn't want to be here, that I don't want her at all. And yet there I stand, in love with her. "Please don't go," I say, and she gives one quiet laugh, not the laugh I fell in love with.

"I'll get my stuff when you're at work tomorrow."

"Fine," I say. It's not fine.

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The bar is crowded and I want to dance with her. Maybe that's why I'm confident, getting away from the crowded bar, when I step onto the dance floor. "Can I dance with you?"

"What?" she screams, music too loud, her too soft, and I want my hands on her hips.

"Can I dance with you?"

It must be a yes, because her hands are on my hips now, and it feels so normal, so natural. I'm not drunk, I don't need liquid courage any longer, I'm well and whole and the medication is working. She would be lucky to have me. I tell myself that over and over again, despite really feeling like it's not true. I'm broken and sick. I'm the girl left over and over again, because I'm too sick, or not sick enough. She is beautiful, white t-shirt tucked into jeans, confident where I would worry about sweat stains after so much dancing.

We dance till the bar closes at three. I can't imagine ever being so close to anyone else, and when we walk outside my hand finds hers. It feels natural. "I want your number," I say, then realize with the music off that I don't need to be quite so loud.

"You can have it," she says back, softer, and I smile, hand her my phone, and consider running away, leaving the phone behind. But my confidence is growing every day.

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"Have you told her about it?" my mom asks, kneading bread, I think just so she won’t have to look at me.

"Does it matter?" my sister Luna asks. "That's over. Done with."

I don't know what to say. It does matter. I could get sick again at any time. They warned me of this. It could be only a temporary fix.

"Have you told her?" my mom asks again.

"No."

"Well, lesbians are cooler about those sorts of things, right? You always were, even before before." ‘Before before’ is a family phrase. If they mean when I was ill, it was before. Before before means before I was ever ill, at least in their eyes. I felt ill a lot longer.

"Mom, I don't speak for all lesbians," I say. If my sister was speaking, she would have to add something like *I tell you this all the time* or *don't make me repeat myself.*

"Right, well you speak for the most important lesbian there is. You should tell her. You talk about how nice she is all the time, what could happen?"

"Yeah," I say softly.

"I bet that's why you're taking her on this big picnic," Luna says. "You wouldn't convince Mom to make fresh bread for a regular picnic. I don't think she'd even make it for my birthday. And they say I'm the spoiled one."

My sister doesn't say it, but once again it feels as if she is reminding me that my parents showered attention on me when I was ill, and she had sort of fallen to the wayside. I will never forgive myself for that.

"Time for the bread to go in the oven," my mom says merrily, perhaps sensing my unease. "Aida, why don't you go get ready?"

She couldn't have said it fast enough. I dash up to my room. People liked to tell me I looked good when I was ill—being too sick to eat is a great way to look emaciated, which apparently some people were interested in. Now I'm bordering on pudgy, as if I needed to make up for all the missed meals.

I choose a shirt that's loose and flowy, hiding the pudge. Mom jeans that go high on the waist, holding it in. Ballet flats stretched out from my wide feet. Not perfect, but pretty.

I could go downstairs. Even though the picnic basket is already packed I'm sure my mom could use some help cleaning the kitchen, but instead I find myself scrolling through her Instagram. Rachelle. She is beautiful.

I hear the oven go off, and that seems like a good time to go downstairs. My feet hit the hardwood of the bottom floor just in time to see my mother packaging the freshly baked banana bread. I run over, ignoring the sliding of my flats on the slick floor.

"Aida, be careful," my mom calls out, but I already am swooping the bread into the basket and heading for the door.

"Got to go," I say, but I really don't, I just don't want any more questions about my illness, or Rachelle, or anything else.

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After we had sat on the blanket for a while, I take my head off of where it lies on Rachelle's shoulder. That stance had felt so, so lucky, luckier than I ever deserved to have, and I don't know what to do if this took it all away.

"I need to tell you something."

"Okay," she said, linking her fingers through mine, her thumb tracing a circle on the back of my hand. Her hands are smooth, like she had never done manual labor. As if I have.

"It's, uh—"

She leans in, kisses me. "Whatever it is, it doesn't matter."

But that doesn't feel right to me, because it does. It matters to me. "I think it might."

"Okay," she said, sitting up all the way so it's easier to turn and look at me. "What is it?"

"I'm schizophrenic," I say, and there's a long pause.

"Tell me more." I'm feeling a bit relieved that she is willing to hear me out, to not jump straight to judgment.

"Well, I've been doing well for years, so it doesn't come up much any more, but it's always possible things could get bad again."

"Will you like me either way?" she asks.

"Yes, of course," I say, even while knowing it's not that simple.

"Then it doesn't matter."

It feels even less right to me the second time, years of my history erased. "I want to talk about it."

"Let's not," she says, and she leans in, kisses me. "If it's not something you deal with much any more, why dredge up the past?"

"Because it matters to me."

"Fine. Let's talk about it then. What do you want to say?"

"Well, if you're worried about me, I can give you my therapist's and psychiatrist's number. I can send you a list of what I'm taking, in case I ever have to get some sort of medical procedure. I want you to know what I'm like when—"

She holds up a hand, cuts me off. "I don't want to talk about all this, Aida. If something goes wrong, I'll just call your mom."

"I want you there for me," I say, "not just my mom."

"The medication works, right? I haven't noticed you acting crazy, and we've been together for quite a while."

"Look, if you don't want to talk about this, you don't want to talk to me."

"What's got your panties in a twist?"

"You know what does! Like it or not, Rachelle, this is an important part of my life."

"Fine," she says, raising her hands. "Fine, fine, fine. Let's talk."

"I don't think I want to talk right now," I say, and I stand and grab the basket.

"Aida."

"Later," I say, but I don't know if later will really happen.