SPIN ME RIGHT ROUND

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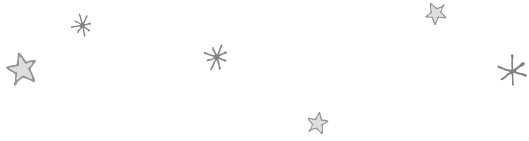


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To Mikey, the sister I lucked into



Under the Rainbow



THERE IS NO POINT to senior year if it's not all about you.

Let's review: Freshman year is for *children* who have no idea what they're getting into as they spend months afraid of upperclassmen and cowed by teachers bearing homework; sophomore year is when the cis boys spend every waking minute impressing each other by doing the stupidest things while everyone else wishes they'd be escorted off to an island somewhere far away; junior year is for actual academic effort in order to look worth admitting to some school that will bankrupt your parents. But senior year? That's when you rule.

I like to think I rule Antic Springs Academy. Before you get all *oh my god, a prep school narrator* and throw up in your

mouth, let me be clear: ASA isn't that kind of academy. It's a boarding school with only about 200 kids, but it's hanging on to life by a thread. You can work off part of your tuition with on-campus jobs and almost everyone does, so forget your notions of rich kids and scions of industry. There are a few silver spoons and a few kids from the opposite end of the spectrum here on scholarship, but mostly we're in-betweens.

I like to *look* like money without *being* money. As in, I had the velvet Vans before everyone else because I started noticing YouTubers in LA wearing them; but mine were factory seconds from an outlet mall. When all the '80s stuff started popping up on TV, I was at TJMaxx snapping up high-waisted acid wash (from the women's section, because, who cares?) while everyone was still rocking their dark denim. I'm always leading the pack even on my budget, which is like hosting a dinner party on SNAP.

Today, I am wearing a silk bowling shirt emblazoned with ironic '50s pin-ups, tucked into massive cargo pants that are cinched perfectly at my waist by a faux-ammo belt. My best friend Nix says I look like an influencer sponsored by a brand of questionable taste, which is, like, perfect. My boyfriend Cheng on the other hand—well, he tries to be chill when he sees me in the parking lot. And by chill, I mean he says something like, "Um . . . that's a look," instead of "Bae, I cannot be seen with you in that." (He dresses better since we started going out, but he still never met a hoodie he didn't like.) We have our morning kiss before we enter the admin building, where all senior classes take place.

We can't kiss *inside* the school, even a nominal peck, because it is apparently 1950 beyond those glass doors. Did I mention that for a century ASA used to be First Church of God Secondary School? (Go ahead: try to make that an acronym.) In its heyday—when my mom went here—it had 500 kids who came from all over the US for a good old-fashioned Christian education. But, what do you know? Demand dropped and the school rebranded itself with a new, mostly secular mission to be an "Accessible Academy for All."

It's not as conservative as when my mom attended, but Antic Springs is the land that time forgot when it comes to gender stuff. Not only is there no Gay Straight Alliance, there are still dress codes about boys not wearing makeup and girls not showing cleavage. (God help you if you're Nix and blow past the binary altogether.) But I think dress codes are meant to be broken and I do a lot of the breaking. Right this minute, I have on glitter foundation and my eyebrows took a solid half hour to perfect. No teacher is hauling me off to the bathroom to wash it off, like they did in my mom's day, because even they know that'd be stupid. But more than one teacher has encouraged me to do so myself because boys wearing makeup is not in keeping with "the spirit of things." Please: I *am* the school spirit.

"Luis! LUIIIIIIIS!"

Some unwritten law decrees that there should be only two kinds of high school principals: the ones who like kids and Try Hard to be cool but will never be, and the Demonic Spawn who think of each incoming class as target practice

for humiliation and shame. Mrs. Malee Somboon-Fox is a Try Hard, which is sweet but can be incredibly taxing for anyone on the receiving end. It is also useful, if you know what you're doing. If you want her to soften a policy or fund your organization (I, for one, created Student Fashion Club, Mall of America trip, and Green Cafeteria Tuesday), you just tap into her eternal quest for youth. If you're really smart—and I am—you snap up the campus job as Principal's Secretary, which I did my sophomore year. I'm like her personal assistant, hype man, and confidant all in one. I excel at all three, but, seriously, there are only so many ways to answer "Why don't the kids like me more?"

She is making a beeline for me from across the lobby, nearly knocking over the kids taking down last week's banner announcing Senior Day at Darien Lakes Park. "Luis! You look so *FUNKY!*" Mrs. Somboon-Fox literally has the wrong word for every situation. "Don't forget we have Prom Council today! I've already told Ms. Silverthorn you'll miss the end of English."

I flash her my biggest smile. "I'm on it. You know me!"

Mrs. Somboon-Fox smiles back, a wattage to rival my own. "What am I going to do when you're gone?" And then she's off, probably to bring food to the new science teacher, since Mrs. Somboon-Fox is sure the woman hates her, which means the poor teacher is a campaign to be won.

Cheng watches her stride away and then slides his hand next to mine briefly. Seriously, we're not even allowed to hold hands. Everyone (and I mean everyone, teachers to janitors)

knows who's gay at this school, but once we walk through the doors, it's all straighten-up-and-fly-right. Unlike in my mom's day, when kids could be kicked out for stuff they did off campus, our private lives are now our own, but our *school* lives are held hostage by a code of conduct written with a quill pen by Puritans. You have to sign the code to go here, but it's kind of a formality (like your parents signing that they won't hold the school responsible if you snap your neck playing soccer, a promise they would never keep). Even my Christian classmates play pretty fast and loose with the pledge to "respect authority as ordained by God." I mean, we're teenagers.

Sliding his hand back into his own pocket, Cheng fixes his brown eyes on mine. "Are you sure about this?" I know he means Prom Council and my Big Ask, so I give him a look that says, "For real?" This shouldn't be in question. Surety is my calling card.

In four years, I have sweet-talked Mrs. Somboon-Fox and the school board into adding an expressive movement elective for PE, un-banning leggings, having dances for the underclassmen, hiring an outside DJ for those dances, and making sure the required reading list is not just full of white people who were already dead when my mom went here.

Not all my quests have been totally successful. Last fall, I tried to get Mrs. Somboon-Fox to require student pronouns on all the class rosters, so people would have no excuse for their misgenderings. To my surprise, Nix thought *requiring* pronouns was problematic, because not every pronoun stays fixed forever. I pointed out that if it was optional, 90 percent of the

teachers wouldn't do it, and we'd be right back to the old way of making assumptions on sight, but if it was a rule, teachers would have to comply, and kids could change their pronouns whenever they wanted. It didn't matter in the end: Mrs. Somboon-Fox barely let me finish my pitch before reminding me ASA isn't "that kind of school."

Naturally, as I am not one to accept defeat, I didn't so much change my tune as modulate the key. Under the gun, I can adjust really, really quickly to my circumstances, so I asked if it could be *allowed*. Mrs. Somboon-Fox said she hardly had time to go room-to-room policing class lists, so, in a way, it already was. She wasn't going to promote it, but I took it upon myself to nudge every teacher I thought might go along. I only got two takers, the school's oldest and youngest: Ms. Silverthorn (an early adopter by nature, despite being, like, sixty) and Mr. Kuranchabi (who is such a millennial he brings his avocado toast from home). That's two more teachers than, probably, ever, so it goes on my list of minor victories (though Nix likes to remind me that optional pronouns was their idea all along).

Today is going to be my biggest move yet. I'm going to remove the line on the prom ticket that says your date has to be the opposite sex.

I *know*. We're two decades into the twenty-first century and some schools are still buggin' over a pair of boys wanting to dance together. I mean, we have gay World Cup winners and pop stars and governors now. Gay dads doing corny dances with their kids is a staple of TikTok. And there was even a trans

hero on *Supergirl.* Can you really get more mainstream than that? So you're asking yourself where the hell I live—is it the Deep South, maybe that town that staged a decoy prom to keep the lesbians away from the real one? Or some former Soviet Republic that sends police to crack down on Pride? No. Antic Springs is in upstate New York. The supposedly liberal northeast. Which only proves what every queer person already knows: prejudice, like fire, can live anywhere there's oxygen.

This is farm country, so maybe prolonged exposure to, I don't know, *silos*, makes people fearful of the gays. The towns here (including mine) are pretty small but always have room for at least three churches, and everyone's in everyone's business. There's no public high school in Antic Springs—if you want that, you have to go to Schuylerhook Regional, which is like a half hour away, with kids from six other towns. We only have the Academy and that cringeworthy code of conduct. So, farm country + old-school rules = no gays at prom. I'm about to change that.

This isn't just for me and Cheng. There are two more not-exactly-secret queer couples and a few more students who would bring same-sex dates if they could. And even in a small school, we have four kids beyond Nix who use them/they pronouns, so this policy doesn't just ban them—it ignores they exist. This is about justice! This is about equity! This is about—

Okay, fine: I want to be prom king.

Before you judge me, *everybody* wants to be prom king. Even, maybe especially, those who say they don't. Why wouldn't you want to know that your classmates picked *you*? Who

wouldn't want that glorious yearbook spread and the car ride in the Memorial Day parade and, obvi, eternal bragging rights?

I want the real American dream, age-seventeen version: to dance with my boyfriend at prom, take silly pictures in a photo booth, make out during a slow dance, so intently that our classmates say *"Get a room!"* as we laugh and know they secretly wish they had what Cheng and I have. So yes, maybe it is all about me.

"Just be prepared, in case . . ." Cheng trails off, but I know what he's saying. He's so chill, he could be a greyhound. He's not even criticizing me, really, so much as preparing me in case my plan doesn't work. I get it: he's trying to watch out for me, but it's a little irritating, too. Like I'm not always prepared?

I face him, not saying anything, just quietly playing with the strings on his Quidditch Cup hoodie and giving him my best "Seriously?" face until he laughs. Shaking his head, he wheels off to join some of the other lacrosse guys crowded around a phone. Whatever they're looking at, it's got to be less interesting than me, but it also gets me out of defending my strategy.

We don't have the same first period, so I'm off to Earth in the Balance, the hilariously named enviro class. To get there, I have to walk down Picture Hall, which is lined with a solid eighty years of class photos. The walls are so crowded that it feels like being trapped in a museum. My mom's class of '85 is two-thirds of the way down the hall and it's huge (120 kids) compared to mine (a mere 50). It's still easy to pick her out: for one thing, there weren't a ton of Latinx kids then (still aren't,

tbh), but her shortness combined with the tallness of her bangs makes quite an impression. The photographer has her down in front, so everyone can see the full splendor of the shoulder pads on the oversized shirt she wears belted over pegged white jeans. Two years ago, I was like, *omg Mom*, *what were you wearing*?, but now I kind of want the outfit.

My dad is less easy to recognize. For one thing, he had hair then. When Gordo—yes, I call him by his first name—left us eleven years ago, he had a perfectly gleaming bald head that he kept ultrasmooth as a point of pride. In his senior photo, he sports dark hair in a tight fade with three lines carved out on the left temple. He smiles a sarcastic smile beneath eyes that look troubled, at least to someone who knows how they can darken into anger. He wears a plain black suit with a wide tie that his spread collar barely contains. I have looked at this photo a thousand times trying to imagine why Mom picked *this* guy.

"You're obsessed with that picture." Nix dispels my reverie with a familiar complaint. (They're right, though—I can't pass this hall without at least a quick check-in with Mom and Gordo. There's probably a future therapy session in this.)

"And *you're* going to be late to AP Latin." I know Nix hates Latin—that's a language only a parent would choose—and I get why they ditch so often. Language Hall is just about as far from here as you can get without leaving the building. They'll never make it.

"Maybe I will, but your class is this way and I'm looking for you." Nix is chewing their lip, which means I'm about to get a

little speech. Oh god, that's why they took the hall pass. I know what's coming before they say it.

"You have to get rid of prom king and queen." Nix knows I was expecting this and that I will try to duck out of it and they don't care; we've been friends since before I had pubes and they pretty much never hold their tongue around me. "It's so old school—not just an erasure of kids like me but like *aggressive*—Boys! Girls! Pair Off and Be Crowned!"

They step back, hands on hips that hide beneath the enormous T-shirt of the day, covered with anime figures I will *never* know, worn with boxy track shorts and tube socks. (Nix's undying worship of Billie Eilish dates back to, like, that spider in the mouth video, and shows no sign of ending.) We've been through this.

"As if allowing same-sex couples isn't *already* enough to get by Silverthorn? Let me leap that hurdle first."

"The hurdle that matters to *you*." Mostly, I love that Nix can read me for filth like nobody else, but right this second, I could do without it. (Cheng has already used up this morning's "Doubt Luis" pass, thanks.)

I do my best aggrieved voice. "It matters to *all* of us. I'm getting you in the door!"

Can an eyeroll make noise? I swear Nix's does. "The ticket policy isn't keeping *me* out. You know what? I think—"

"Okay, I hear you!" The look they give me clearly says *if you heard me you wouldn't be talking over me*, but I plunge ahead anyway, because I have like twenty seconds before the bell. "Let me get through today's meeting and we'll talk."

"I think you'll be hot for changing the royalty thing *after* you've been prom king."

Best friends are the worst. Because they *know.*

Once Nix sees in my eyes that they have me dead to rights, their job is done. They grin, a champion without a prize belt. "Go on, you selfish bastard. Whatever happens, I'll pretend to be all excited about it when everyone else is."

I know that's a real promise: Nix always has my back. I want to hug them but they hate hugs and, you know, bodily autonomy is a THING, so I blow a kiss instead, and they're off.