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Notes from the Teenage Underground

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GOING UNDERGROUND

Blank Canvas

Things I love about the National Gallery:

- How on the outside it looks like a big public toilet block but inside it's full of treasure
- How running my hand along the water wall at the entrance makes me feel five years old and daring
- How gallery goers are either looking to get lost or pretending that they're not
- How in the Great Hall, when the sun shoots through the stained-glass ceiling, lost or not, people's faces take on rainbows

. . .

On the day of the gallery excursion, me, Lo, and Mira had met early at HQ, the disused junior school toilet block. Escape from school and our backwater suburb, no matter

how brief, required prep work. We passed around our artillery: cigarettes, mascara, and hot mocha lip tint, all the while teeming with the prospect of the city. We were late for the bus, but that was to be expected. As we walked up, with our arms linked and attitudes on full beam, I thought, "Moments like these are the best." Me, Lo, and Mira were like the good things that came in threes: wishes, kings, backup singers. But we could be bad too. We climbed aboard the bus. Bliss Dartford—miss priss popularity—sang out, "Here come the frrrreaks!" and the sucker peers stirred and snickered but this just confirmed what we already knew: we were cool, unique, original. Everybody else was bar code.

• • •

At the gallery, we checked our bags and dragged along with the group, past Greek urns, Dutch masters, and Royal turds, into the moderns. Our gender-trauma art teacher Barry "Boobs" Polson had us all camp before a painting with our notebooks open.

"Think about what you see," he instructed. "Write it down."

The painting was completely and utterly black. It made me think of nighttime. I wondered if there was anything underneath its shiny surface. Things impressionable young girls shouldn't be looking at. I wrote in my notebook: *Surface and Underneath.*

I felt my face. Beneath the frizz and lippy I looked like a normal seventeen-year-old. Brown eyes, brown hair,

combination skin. I was meant for bigger things. My mother, Bev, named me after her favourite feminist, Germaine Greer. My namesake was brave and audacious, a sexual libertine, *and* an authority on Shakespeare. Um . . . much to live up to? If she was an icon, I was a clod. I could be boastful and call myself an authority on film, but there was no getting around my virginity. Bev insists that all smart girls have an inner Greer. I pictured mine asleep under a rock or a kidney stone. She wasn't likely to crawl out anytime soon.

I wrote in my notebook: *Everything and Nothing.*

I looked up. A couple of nerdburgers had their heads down, scribbling away but the rest of the class were passing notes or looking around the room, distracted. Boobs saw none of this. He was staring into the black, transfixed. He didn't even notice when Lo stuck me in the ribs and whispered, "Let's go."

. . .

Minutes later, the three of us were sitting on the grass in the sculpture garden, half hidden by a Henry Moore, sharing cigarettes and cashews and dreaming aloud.

Mira took her shoes and socks off. She stretched her legs out and inspected them. There was a line on her upper thigh where she'd stopped shaving. "God," she said. "Check me out."

"You're European," I stated. "If we lived there, we could spend our summer sleeping on the Riviera beaches. You wouldn't even have to shave."

Lo said, "Get thee to a depilatory."

"We could burn up Florence with scooter boys," I continued. "After dark we could dance barefoot in nightclubs, wearing only sheer green shifts with gold jewellery."

"Ha!" Mira smiled.

But Lo had had enough of my reverie. She nabbed my cigarette and took a drag. "I'm bored."

"You're always bored," I said.

Lo played the sullen blonde, from her purple toenails to her cig-smoky halo. Lo has talents. She is quick and merciless and she has perfected the art of looking put-upon. This makes people take her seriously.

She settled back on her elbows. "Summer lies before us like a . . ." She snapped her fingers, searching.

"Blank canvas?" I supplied.

"Exactly. We need a project."

"Well, it's that time of year," I said. "Are we still going to have a theme?"

"Of course!" Lo snapped. "And goals and guides. But whatever the theme is, it has to be *significant*."

"Significant how?" Mira asked.

Mira's secretary specs make her look bookish but her mouth always gives her away. Her lips have a life of their own. They remind me of that famous painting—Man Ray's kiss floating in the clouds. They can be floppy, foolish, soft, or sultry; it depends on what she's saying. Now she was pouting: "I thought this summer was going to be about boys."

"Boys, sure." Lo didn't blink. "Boho boys. Dangerous boys. Boys without bar codes."

"Do they exist?" I asked.

Ninety percent of the male population are bar code boys, mass-market items, straight off the production line. Bar code boys are irrefutably blah. Definitely *not* wish-list candidates. The only thing they're good for is practice.

"Forget about the boys!" Lo snapped again. "Think about the theme. God. How did you two ever manage without me?"

Mira and I shared a quick grin. We shrugged, and said in unison, "We didn't."

History

Flashback to year seven.

Most of the class had bonded at the local primary school. Not me. Not Mira. When it came to "cliquing" up, we were like the bad chocolates left in the box. Marzipan and Turkish delight. Only for the weak-willed and desperate. I can blame Bev for my handmade clothes and hippie taint, but where do you cut the cord? I was arty and shy. I felt like I'd been given a different textbook to everyone else, one that didn't even have diagrams. Meanwhile, Mira was gauche-girl. Too enthusiastic by half. Always walking in on the end of jokes and laughing like she got them. The jokes were usually about her. She was fatter back then and had adenoidal issues. She sounded like a dirty phone call.

Mira and I drifted together, united in our quest for acceptance. We knew that cracking Bliss Dartford was the

key. Every school has a Bliss—rich bitch, even tan, perfect orthodontics. Mira and I tried hard to impress her, but it wasn't happening. Then, in year eight, Mira's dad got promoted to corporate bigwig, and a whole new social strata opened up for her. I was left surfing the scummy edges.

How shallow is high school? Mira dropped a few pounds, started wearing labels, and her stock skyrocketed. When her mother started playing tennis with Bliss's mother, I knew it wouldn't be long before Bliss came around. I also knew that their "besties" status was temporary. Boys took care of that. Bliss may have been prettier, but Mira gave up the goods without even blinking. All year nine I watched them tango. Things were about to change. I could feel it.

Lo transferred three weeks into first term of year ten. She was so slight and quiet we hardly noticed her at first. Or maybe our receptors were blocked. By May she was coming in loud and clear. Was it the essay she read comparing Kurt Cobain's suicide note with Hamlet's third soliloquy? Or was it her negative care factor? Lo wore ankle socks to everyone else's knee socks, she didn't bother to comb her hair, she had cigarettes in her blazer pocket, and seemed to pick and choose her hours. Once, on the bus, I saw her skirt ride up. She had little nicks on her upper thigh. I remember pointing them out to Mira. She shrugged. "Freaks and geeks," but to me they hinted at a great dark past and made Lo fascinating. It took six months for Lo to rumble Bliss Dartford, rescue me, and

recruit Mira. But this saving business works both ways. Lo said the cuts were just her way of marking time, keeping herself company. She doesn't do it anymore, not now that she has us.

. . .

Lo reminds me of this sweet-silly film *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas!* Peter Sellers plays a lawyer who drops out during the Summer of Love. Everything is groovy until all the pot and posturing start to go to his head. "I'm so hip it *hurts*," he whines to Leigh Taylor-Young, his chesty squeeze. She tells him, "It's very unhip to say that you are hip." Anyway, Lo's like that. She doesn't have to talk about being cool—she just is.

Themes, Goals, Guides

Our summer project started as a joke. Every year for English Studies, our class is assigned a theme to go with our set texts. (This year it's "The Politics of Power" alongside *The Prince* by Machiavelli.) This time last year Lo decided the three of us should have a covert theme all our own. Only it would be more like an anti-theme, something edgy to enhance our outsider status, something that no school board would ever allow. She nominated "All Things Occult" and we spent the summer—dubbed Satan Summer—exploring the dark side.

It was only natural that Lo should rebel against her parents—they're born-again, seriously gothic. Mira and I, sick of same-old–same-old summers, were more than willing to be swept up in Lo's game. We each had a goal: Lo's was to get out of Christian camp; Mira's was to corrupt some brother school boys, and mine was to short-circuit

my mother's foray into the world of Internet dating. Our "guides" were the famous or infamous historical figures whose lives we gleaned for inspiration. Our main man was Aleister Crowley—legendary magician and deviant. His credo, "Do what thou wilt is the whole of the law" (olde worlde speak for "Do whatever and don't apologise") became our license to fun. Our activities included but were not limited to

- hanging out at Inez Wisdom's Esoteric Emporium, plundering her Wicca library;
- watching endless horror movies;
- chanting incantations;
- propagating herbs, and
- etching pentagrams into public property.

Those were heady times. But I didn't doubt Lo could come up with something to match them.

One word, three syllables

Lo snapped off a blade of grass and wound it around her fingertip, tighter and tighter until her skin went white.

"We should stage a protest or start a riot." Her voice was slow and thick, like she'd just come back from the dentist.

"But don't we need a cause?" I wondered aloud.

"I already gave you one." Lo sighed and shifted. "Boredom?" She looked around us, pointing at statues and picking off random gallery goers with her fingers. "Boring. Boring. Boring. Boring."

"Okay, we get it," I said.

We were quiet awhile. And then I thought of something interesting.

"Back in the eighties art terrorists stole a Picasso. They said they were going to burn it unless the arts minister coughed up more funding for young artists. They

sent a burnt match with the ransom note and then nothing for ten days."

Lo sat up, just slightly. "So what happened?"

"There was a tip-off. They found the painting in a locker at Spencer Street station—deframed, rolled up, but otherwise unharmed. We went past it earlier. It's the one called *Weeping Woman.*"

"Did they ever find out who did it?" Lo asked.

I shook my head.

Lo's eyes were lake-still and serious. "God, wouldn't you just want to tell someone?" She meditated on that thought for a while and then asked, "Do art terrorists still exist? Or is it just the other, everyday suicide kind?"

"I don't know," I said. "I could always ask Bev."

My mother is an art teacher. She's how I knew the story in the first place. She's how I know most things, when it comes right down to it.

Lo lit up a cigarette, suddenly animated. "I love it! That's what we should do this summer."

"Steal a Picasso?"

"No!" She was up and pacing, waving her hands about. "We should do cool, arty shit."

I nudged Mira. "Look out . . ."

Mira smiled, eyebrows on high.

Lo had gone into her fevered priestess pose—body still, eyes closed, face vibrating. She opened her eyes a few seconds later.

"I have the theme," she announced. She took a deep breath. "One word, three syllables: *Underground!*"

I bunched my brow while Lo scattered words like lawn seed.

She said, "We should be extreme, avant-garde, debauched, antiestablishment, revolutionary!"

"Doesn't sound very tan-fastic," Mira muttered.

"So go hang with Bliss," Lo returned. "I'm sure she'd welcome you back with open arms. You can have pool parties all summer long. Ad hoc day spas. Adventures in retail."

Anyone else would have taken this as an insult, but Mira just made a gagging noise. "Please! Don't make me go back there."

I watched my friends deflecting off each other, the sun tracking the silver in the stonework. I felt inspired, surrounded by art and possibility. When Lo got into something, she really got into it. Her enthusiasm was contagious, but also a little unsettling. She would whisk me and Mira into her whirling dervish, and once we were in there anything could happen. Lo was dancing with our theme now, teasing the word with her tongue, drawing it in, drawing it out. "Underground . . . Underground . . ."

She sat back down between us and drummed her knees and smiled, happy and childlike. "We'll call it Ug for short."

Mira leaned forward. "Ug-ug," she mugged. Then she checked herself, cleared her throat, and started spit-polishing her specs. This could only mean one thing. Boys were approaching. Ug would have to wait.

Incoming!

Boy number 1 had a rocker quiff and a granddad suit-jacket festooned with punk badges. Lo said under her breath, "Bar code cool," which meant cool in quotemarks, but I was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. Boy number 2 was short and spotty, clearly the brains of the operation. He reached into his battered briefcase, brought out a postcard, and offered it to us. Lo deliberately looked at the sky; Mira blinked, blind without her glasses; so even though I was the farthest away *and* the least brave it was up to me to move our interaction along. I put out my hand and took the card. The graphic was from a children's annual—ruddy-cheeked boys and girls at play, only when I looked closely I saw that their eyes and mouths had been blacked out. The effect was jarring and creepy. I moved on to the typewritten text.

"What does it say?" Mira asked, in between making moues at Quiff.

"A Clockwork Orange," I read.

Spots stepped up. "It's a new club. Friday nights at the back of the Bug Bar. It's on Elizabeth Street. Near the old post office."

He scanned our faces for recognition and came up short.

"We're from out of town," Lo said.

"But not out of the state." My contribution was innocuous, delivered in an uneven tone. I cringed inside, *here we go . . .*

Conversing with boys was such a trauma. Whenever the three of us happened upon male potential, I always wound up hovering at the sidelines, smiling stupidly, waiting for an in. When I did speak, it was never worth the effort. Maybe it was because I'd grown up without a male presence. Or maybe it was like Bev said—I was a late bloomer. No matter how you looked at it, when it came to the opposite sex I was officially at sea. Not so Lo and Mira—they were old salty dogs! They had different approaches: Mira was a maniac for boys—she billed and cooed and had a 100 percent success rate. Lo was Miss Ambivalence. In Satan Summer, Mira and I tried to give her grief because Jerome Packington was in hot pursuit. J-Roam, as he tags himself, is a great-looking moron. Bar Code Bad Boy. Mira and I were like, what a dream to have this hotness at your disposal. Lo said he only liked her because she black-magicked him, but that was nearly a year

ago, and he still gives her longing looks across the food court.

I passed Lo the postcard. Her eyebrows lifted a little at the defaced kiddies, then she sighed and used the card to fan her face. Quiff was standing with his hands in his jacket pocket, his hip jutting out.

"It's a cool gig," he drawled.

Lo said, "How would *you* know?"

He started to answer, then stopped, disarmed. Lo thought flirting was for the birds. I had to hand it to her—she really knew how to knock them off their perches.

Spots asked Mira for a cigarette. She complied with an incandescent smile. Then, like a ritual, we all took one. Lo held her lighter out and let the boys hover in front of her. This was bad. They were blocking my sun. I was literally cast into shadows.

My face was starting to hurt. I forced myself to speak. "So what is it—everyone in boiler suits listening to Beethoven?"

At first, no one responded.

"*A Clockwork Orange,*" I explained. "The movie? The main character listens to Beethoven and . . ." My voice faded into the yawning pit of incomprehension. One of the side effects of my film-buffery was that I overestimated everyone else's interest. But I was making steps to improve this. Once upon a time I would have gone on an extended jag about how the director Stanley Kubrick pulled the ultraviolent film out of circulation because of

death threats and copycat crimes. Lo would have liked this story, but Quiff was studying his filter tip and Spots just looked confused.

Mira exhaled a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. Lo put her arm around my shoulder and said, "Gem's our film girl." She'd done this to make me feel better, but it had the opposite effect. I felt like a mascot. I shrank back. For the next few minutes there was small talk, banter, but it had nothing to do with me. There was a tightness growing in my stomach. I was thinking that Mira being all obvious and Lo being all anti made me about as memorable as grey matter. Finally, the boys showed signs of moving on.

Spots said, "So, maybe we'll see you there?"

Mira uncrossed and recrossed her legs. "Maybe . . ."

Quiff nodded. Spots made a fist: "Rock!" And off they loped, destroying all cool with a backward glance.

Lo had been waiting for that. She had her lighter ready, and as they looked back she flicked it, setting the postcard alight.

Mira snatched the burning card and clapped it between her hands. Lo stared at her. "You're unbelievable!"

"We might need it," Mira said. She looked down, smiled, and flicked the ash with her fingernails. "They were cute."

Lo snorted. "They were *schoolboys*!" She nudged me, trying to coax a smile. "Look what they did to Gem! She's gone all null."

That was me, null and void. I ground my cigarette into the grass. My head was aching. The sun seemed too bright. I stood up, mumbled something about needing water, and walked back into the gallery through the sliding glass doors.