

“Mom, this is my lesbian lover.”

Mel rolls her eyes at me and makes a failed attempt to snag alcohol from a passing waiter.

“That’s nice dear.”

“Another one already?” my father peers at me over the top of both his menu and bifocals.

“I like that last one. Melanie?”

“This is Melanie, Dad. You haven’t met before. The last one was Ana.” I dutifully pull out Mel’s chair for her before taking my own seat.

“Oh. Wasn’t she Russian? A dancer?” a crease appears between his eyebrows as he mulls the mystery of which past girlfriend is which.

“Mel or Ana? Ana was Russian, Kara was the dancer. Mel is a journalist.” I flag down the waiter. He doesn’t bother to card me, but a stern look from my mother prevents me from ordering anything stronger than water. Mel hides a smirk at my crestfallen expression and asks for a glass of wine.

“So you’re a lesbian?” my mother pats Mel’s hand. Mel looks very taken aback. “I always thought it was funny how my daughter here preferred to date lesbians, not being one herself.”

“Of course she’s a lesbian. She wouldn’t have an impressive number of female ex-girlfriends if she wasn’t,” my father says in his most matter-of-fact voice.

Mel looks at me questioningly. “Your parents don’t know whether or not you’re gay? How does that work?” she asks.

“Well I didn’t say she wasn’t gay, just that she wasn’t a lesbian,” my mother runs bony fingers over her pearls as though making sure they haven’t been stolen, “In such delicate situations, I prefer to refer to people as they refer to themselves, and she’s never called herself a lesbian.” She says the word ‘delicate’ with a sniff, as though it is a synonym for distasteful; something that should not be discussed in public.

“Really?” Mel is incredulous. “Why not?”

I shrug. “Why do I need to label it? We over-label things in our society. It’s a problem.”

“If she’s uncomfortable with the word, I don’t see why it’s worth bothering her about,” my father says. He obviously hopes this statement will signify to everyone that the discussion is at an end.

“Well you use it freely enough. You don’t seem to mind calling me one.” Mel now has the same forehead crease as my father, a fact I regard with genuine horror. Even dating women, I apparently go for the same kind of person as my male role model. What a stereotype.

“Well isn’t that what you call yourself?” Mother asks Mel.

“Yes, but—“

“Then why is it a problem?”

“I just don’t see why she can’t call herself what she is. She’s been out to you for years, hasn’t she? What did she tell you then?”

“That she was attracted to women. I didn’t feel the need to press her any further; it wasn’t something I wanted her to feel bad about. The gays and I have always gotten along fine.” Mother takes a dainty sip of water and dabs at her lipstick with a napkin.

“Mother, having a gay hairstylist doesn’t qualify you to march in the parade.”

“That’s not the point, babe. The point is that I don’t understand why you have such a problem with subscribing to labels when everyone you’ve dated has labeled their sexuality,” Mel says, then pauses to order a caprese salad appetizer and glare at the waiter for staring too long at our hands clasped on the table.

“It’s fine for you, but that doesn’t mean that I have to be exactly the same. We all approach ourselves differently.”

“Yeah, and we tend to come to the same conclusion: that we’re lesbians.” She says sharply.

“Mel,” my father clears his throat. He has a very impressive and commanding way of clearing his throat. It can get the attention of every person in the room, “what kind of journalism do you work in?”

This less-than-subtle change of topic catches everyone off guard but has the effect it intended: Mel and I stop scowling at one another, and my mother visibly relaxes.

Our salads come, followed by the entrée. We are well on our way to dessert by the time my father asks where Mel went to school.

“Smith College in Northampton,” she replies, “It really is a fantastic institution. I loved it there.”

“So how did you meet our daughter?” he gives me his best approximation of a fond

smile. He is not an overly affectionate man, and it comes across more like a grimace.

“It’s a funny story…” She begins, but I answer at the same time and cut her off.

“At a lesbian bar.”

She shoves back her chair suddenly. “Is that right? If you aren’t a freaking lesbian, why were you even there?” She stands up, teeters slightly on her high heels, and then stalks towards the bathroom.

My mother pats at her mouth with her napkin again. “Now you’ve done it. I really don’t see why you can’t just find a nice stable man, darling. If you aren’t a lesbian—“

“God, mother!” I spring to my feet as well, “Just leave it alone, would you?” I follow Mel to the restroom, weaving around the other patrons. They seem quite intrigued by our little drama. My father is perusing the dessert menu, oblivious. My mother is looking shell-shocked.

Mel is leaning against the counter when I arrive. I close the door gently behind me.

“Look, I’m sorry.” I begin, but she holds up a hand.

“You know what? This is really hard for me.” She turns to face the mirror and nervously begins to finger-comb her bangs. “I love you, ok? We’ve only been together for a couple of months, but it scares me that you can’t even call yourself what you are. You don’t date men. You aren’t straight. But you obviously aren’t comfortable with yourself. And you can’t be in a long-term relationship until you figure it out.” She blows out a long sigh.

This outburst has shrunken her. The pressure of the words now released, she is deflating. Her eyes meet mine in the mirror. I’m frozen.

“I didn’t know.” I say quietly.

“You’re not terrible perceptive.” She smiles wanly. “It’s fine. I just wanted you to know how I feel.” She begins to pack things into her purse. I hadn’t even realized that she was in the middle of touching up her makeup.

“This is a disaster, isn’t it?” I come closer, wrapping my arms around her waist, resting my chin on her shoulder. She puts her face against mine. Her cheek is soft and warm. She smells like roses, and silky dark hair tickles the back of my neck.

“Sort of.” She turns her head, liquid brown eyes warm, but weary.

“Listen,” I whisper, “I’ll work this out. It isn’t your problem, it’s mine. I don’t want to hurt you. And I want to stay with you.” I kiss her shoulder.

“No. If you want to be with me, it’s my issue, too.” She steps out of my embrace and reaches down. For a moment my mind goes to the back room at the bar on the night we met, and I see her coy smile as she bends down to pick up my dropped purse.

Instead she pulls off her shoes, sinking from my height to her own diminutive size. “Let’s get out of here.” She holds out her hand.

I smile and grasp it. She looks surprised. She didn’t expect me to want to work at this, but I’m feeling grown-up tonight, much older than my 18 years. We exit the bathroom, she holding her shoes in her free hand, and find the back door.

For a moment I look up to the sky. The stars are invisible with all the city lights, but I am feeling strangely buoyant. I am feeling, for the first time, free enough to float from my body and join them in the heavens.

It is the hand of my lover that tethers me to the ground.