

ATTENTION, READER:  
PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS IS NOT  
A FINISHED BOOK

This is an advance reading copy that has not been corrected by the  
author and publisher.

The artwork is not final, and sketches and art placement are subject to  
change, as are the text, design, page length, and format. Typographical  
errors will be corrected during the course of production.

If you quote from this galley, please indicate that your review is based  
on an uncorrected text. Thank you.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

# **JULIET TAKES A BREATH**

Gabby Rivera

September 17, 2019

\$17.99

Fiction

Ages 14 up · Grades 9 up

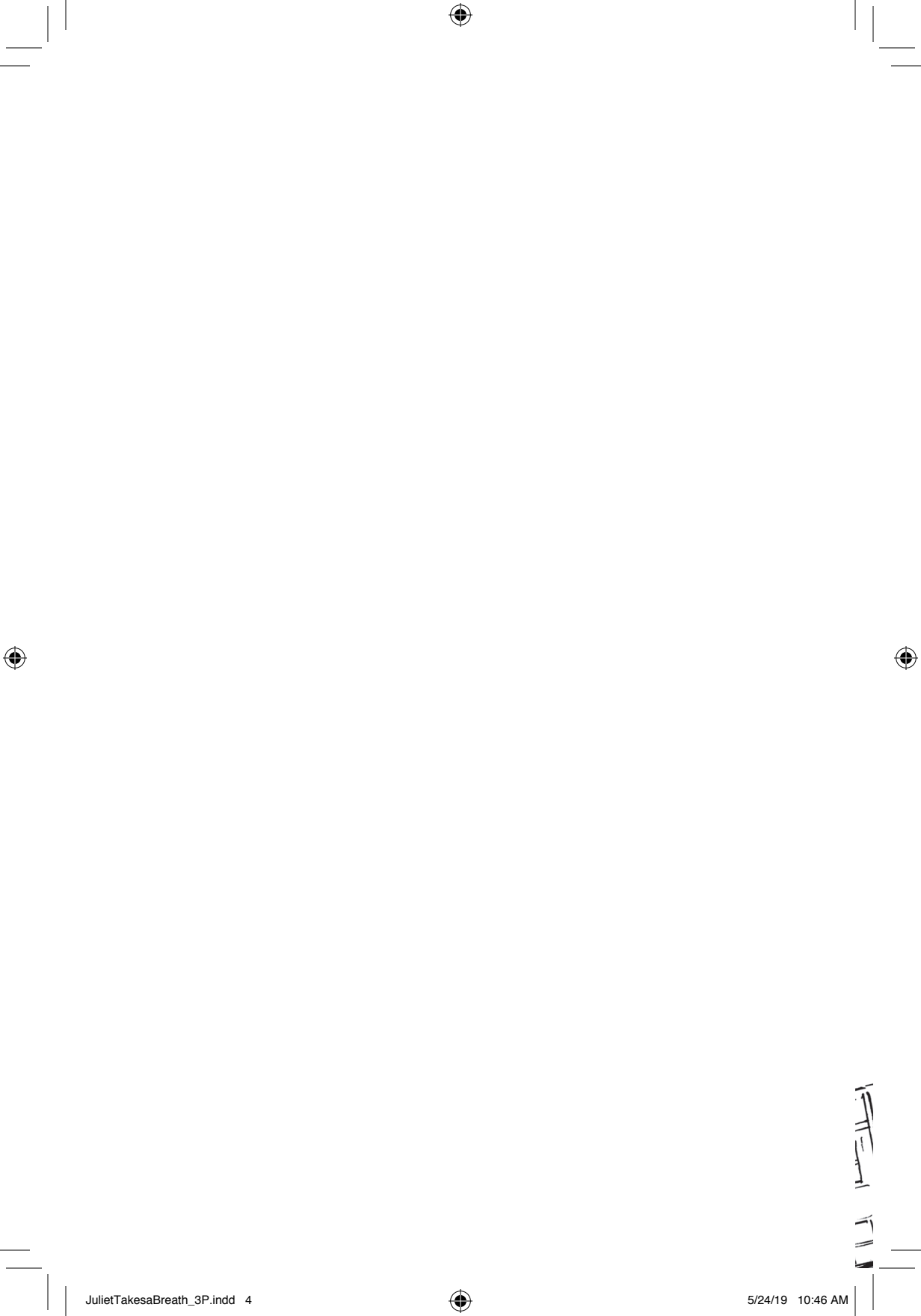
320 pages

9780593108178

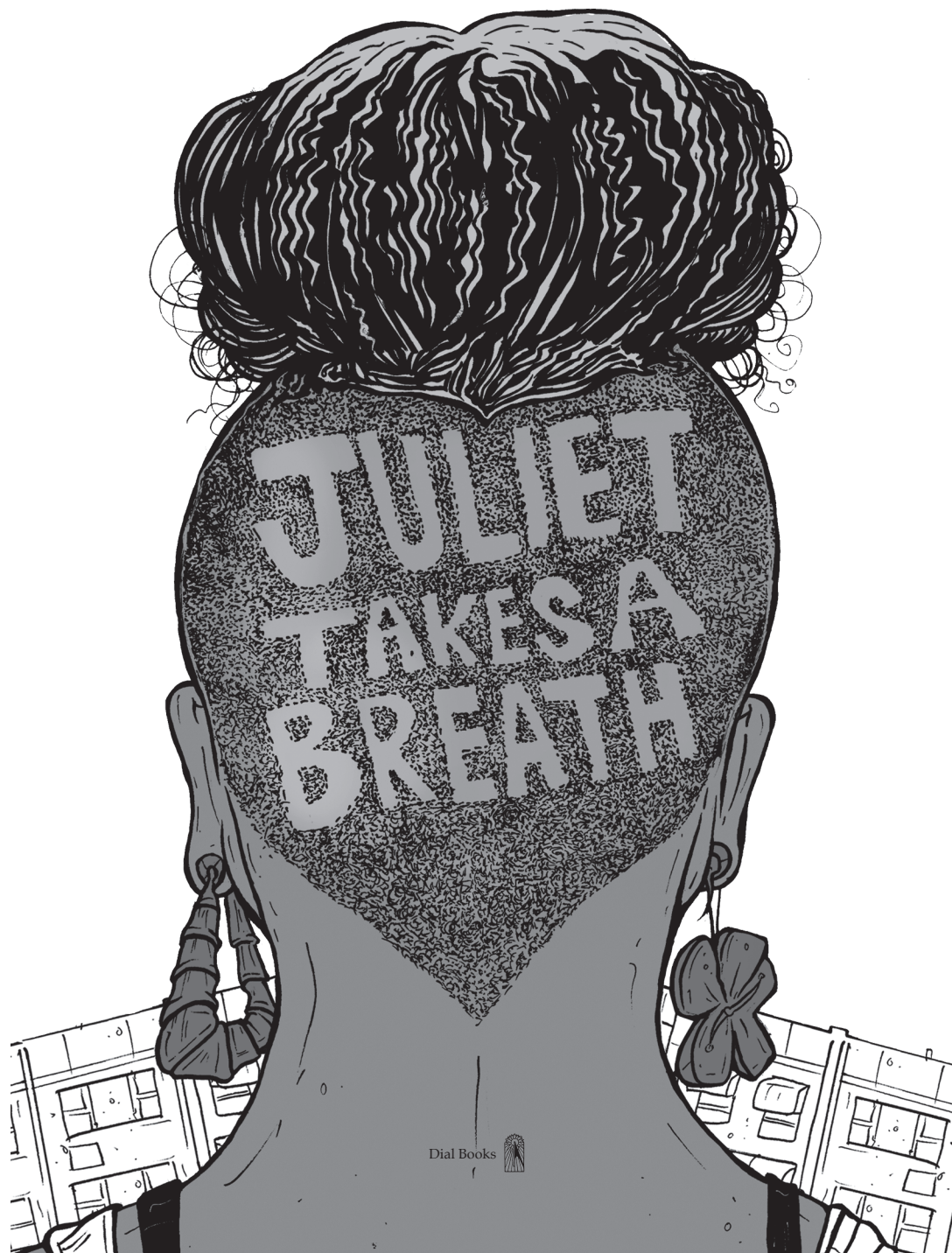
Dial Books



**JULIET  
TAKES A  
BREATH**



# GABBY RIVERA



Dial Books



Dial Books  
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



Copyright © 2019 by Gabby Rivera.

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Visit us online at [penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)

[CIP tk]

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780593108178

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Design by Cerise Steel

Text set in Palatino

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

To Christina Elena Santiago, aka Nena

We will always be homegirls coming up in the Bronx on the hunt  
for 32 flavors and then some.

To the round brown girls who are told they aren't enough, who  
move in the world uncertain if there's room for their bodies,  
selves, and hearts.

Take all the room you need, camarada.

Make no apologies. Fight hard. Love on each other. You are a  
miracle.





PALANTE \* PA'LANTE (adverb)

Puerto Rican slang, also used in Latin America and other parts of the Caribbean. Contraction of *para adelante*, meaning to move forward.

A call out into the world for our people to always keep it moving.



# PREFACE

March 3, 2003

*Dear Harlowe,*

*Hi, my name is Juliet Palante. I've been reading your book Raging Flower: Empowering Your Pussy by Empowering Your Mind. No lie, I started reading it so that I could make people uncomfortable on the subway. I especially enjoyed whipping it out during impromptu sermons given by old sour-faced men on the 2 train. It amused me to watch men confront the word "pussy" in a context outside their control; you know, like in bright pink letters on the cover of some girl's paperback book.*

*My grandma calls me la sin vergüenza, the one without shame. She's right. I'm always in it for the laughs. But I'm writing to you now because this book of yours, this magical*

*labia manifesto, has become my bible. It's definitely a reading from the book of white lady feminism and yet, there are moments where I see my round brown ass in your words. I wanted more of that, Harlowe, more representation, more acknowledgment, more room to breathe the same air as you. "We are all women. We are all of the womb. It is in that essence of the moon that we share sisterhood"—that's you. You wrote that and I highlighted it, wondering if that was true. If you don't know my life and my struggle, can we be sisters?*

*Can a badass white lady like you make room for me? Should I stand next to you and take that space? Or do I need to just push you out of the way? Claim it myself now so that one day we'll be able to share this earth, this block, these deep breaths?*

*I hope it's okay that I say this to you. I don't mean any disrespect, but if you can question the patriarchy, then I can question you. I think. I don't really know how this feminism stuff works anyway. I've only taken one women's studies class and that was legit because a cute girl on my floor signed up for it. This girl made me lose my train of thought. I wanted to watch her eat strawberries and make her a mixtape. So I signed up for the class and then she became my girlfriend. But please don't ask me about anything that happened in that class afterward because love is an acid trip.*

*Feminism. I'm new to it. The word still sounds weird and*

wrong. Too white, too structured, too foreign; something I can't claim. I wish there was another word for it. Maybe I need to make one up. My mom's totally a feminist, but she never uses that word. She molds my little brother's breakfast eggs into Ninja Turtles and pays all the bills in the house. She's this lady that never sleeps because she's working on a master's degree while raising my little brother and me and pretty much balancing the rhythm of an entire family on her shoulders. That's a feminist, right? But my mom still irons my dad's socks. So what do you call that woman? You know, besides Mom.

Your book is a refuge from my neighborhood, from my contradictions, from my lack of desire to ever love a man, let alone wash his fucking socks. I don't even wash my own socks. I want to learn more about the wonder of me, the lunar power of my pussy, my vadge, my taquito, that place where all the magic happens. You know, once people are quiet enough to show it reverence. I want to be free. Free like this line: "A fully realized woman is at all times her true self. No soul-crushing secrets or self-imposed burdens of shame, these create toxic imbalance, a spiritual yeast infection if you will. So step out into the fresh air and let that pussy breathe."

I've got a secret. I think it's going to kill me. Sometimes I hope it does. How do I tell my parents that I'm gay? Gay sounds just as weird as feminist. How do you tell the people who breathed you into existence that you're the opposite of

what they want you to be? And I'm supposed to be ashamed of being gay, but now that I've had sex with girls, I don't feel any shame at all. In fact, it's pretty fucking amazing. So how am I supposed to come out and deal with everyone else's sadness? "Sin Vergüenza Comes Out, Is Banished from Family." That's the headline. You did this to me. I wasn't gonna come out. I was just gonna be that family member who's gay and no one ever talks about it even though EVERYONE knows they share a bed with their "roommate." Now everything is different.

How am I supposed to be this honest? I know you're not a Magic 8 Ball. You're just some lady that wrote a book. But I fall asleep with that book in my arms because words protect hearts and I've got this ache in my chest that won't go away. I read *Raging Flower* and now I dream of raised fists and solidarity marches led by matriarchs fueled by café con leche where I can march alongside cigar-smoking doñas and Black Power dykes and all the world's weirdos and no one is left out. And no one is living a lie.

Is that the world you live in? I read that you live in Portland, Oregon. No one I know has ever been there; most people I know have never left the Bronx. I refuse to be that person. The Bronx cannot own me. There isn't enough air to breathe here. I carry an inhaler for those days when I need more than my allotted share. I need a break. I know that the problems in the hood are systemic. I know that my neighborhood is stuck in a sanctioned and fully funded

*cycle of poverty, but damn if this place and the people here don't wear me down. Some days it feels like we argue to be louder than the trains that rumble us home. Otherwise our voices will be drowned out and then who will hear us? I'm tired of graffiti being the only way to see someone's mark on the world—the world that consists of this block and maybe the next, nothing farther. There aren't even enough trees to absorb the chaos and breathe out some peace.*

*I'll trade you pancakes for peace. I heard that you're writing another book. I can help with that. Let me be your assistant or protégé or official geek sidekick. I can do all the research.*

*Seriously, some of my best friends are libraries. If there's room in your world for a closeted Puerto Rican baby-dyke from the Bronx, you should write me back. Everybody needs a hand, especially when it comes to fighting the good fight.*

*Punani Power Forever,  
Juliet Milagros Palante*

*PS: How do you take your coffee? This will help me decide if we're compatible social justice superheroes or not.*





PART ONE

# **WELCOME TO THE BRONX**



## CHAPTER ONE

# WOLVES, FALCONS, AND THE BRONX

*"We are born with the power of the moon and the flow of the waves within us. It's only after being commodified for our femaleness that we lose that power. The first step in gaining it back is walking face-first into the crashing seas and daring the patriarchy to stop us."*

*Raging Flower: Empowering Your Pussy by  
Empowering Your Mind, Harlowe Brisbane*

THERE WAS ALWAYS train traffic ahead of us and that Saturday was no different. The delay between the cell-block-gray train car and my redbrick house on Matilda Avenue, *mi casa*, was long enough to merit the *Assaulting an MTA Officer Is a Felony* sticker on the wall. Without a heads up, I was sure we'd all be

busting heads and windows open on the 2 train to the end of the earth, aka the North Bronx. Any wait period that lasted longer than two songs provoked collective teeth-sucking, eye-rolling, and a shared disgust for the state of New York, public transportation. I always wondered what would happen if the white people didn't all get off at 96th Street. Would it make my commute home to the hood easier? Would the MTA give any more of a damn? Good thing I had a pen, my purple composition notebook, and headphones blasting *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* like it was my j-o-b.

The train was elevated after 149th Street and Third Avenue, so for almost one hundred blocks the view of the sky existed only above the train station—but no one ever seemed to look up that far. I'd looked through metal bars my whole entire life just to get a view of both the sidewalk and the sunshine. Past the train, there were clusters of electrical wires and telephone poles that looked ready to burst into flames or fall over from a gust of wind. This was my Bronx: the North Bronx, the split between the Bronx and Westchester County, the difference between the South Bronx and the part of the Bronx that no one ever traveled to.

"We apologize for the inconvenience and thank you for your patience," said the automated white male robot voice used by the MTA. *Thank us for our patience.* Like, save the gratitude and get me home. I was leaving that night for Portland, Oregon, and I still had to finish the mixtape I was making for my girlfriend, Lainie, who was already away at her internship with the College Democrats of America. On top of all that, I had to pack, shower,

get ready for my good-bye dinner, come out to my family, and then hopefully still be able to hug my mom so hard that I would feel her on my skin for the whole summer. I didn't have time for the train to be stalled.

"Seven times three is twenty-one, seven times four is twenty-eight." Across from me, a young girl and her mom, both wearing bandanna dresses and head wraps, reviewed times table flash cards. Three dudes stood in the doorway. They bragged about their conquests over "some bitches from last night." When boys talked, it sounded like feral dogs barking. They fiended for attention, were always aggressive, and made me wish I could put them down.

*Raging Flower* was both book and shield. I pulled it out, sighing mad loud. The main boy gave me a look. Whatever, papi culo. I couldn't even with dudes lately. All they did was talk smack about how good they laid down the pipe. Anytime I ignored them I was both a *bitch* and all of a sudden *too ugly* or *too fat* to get it anyway. Neighborhood dudes sure knew how to slime and shame a girl in one swift move. Reason number five hundred and fifty-one *Raging Flower* was so necessary. Reading helped me gather myself, reminded me that I had a right to be mad. It felt like my body was both overexposed and an unsolved mystery.

"You must walk in this world with the spirit of a ferocious cunt. Express your emotions. Believe that the universe came from your flesh. Own your power, own your connection to Mother Earth. Howl at the moon, bare your teeth, and be a god-damn wolf."

*Ferocious cunt.* I circled that phrase in neon-purple ink. Was I a ferocious cunt? By tomorrow night, I'd be in Harlowe's home, not on the train in the Bronx. I had planned my escape—chose to come out and run off into the night. What kind of wolf did that make me?

I needed air. I wasn't ashamed of myself. I wasn't ashamed of being in love with the cutest girl on the planet, but my family was my world and my mom was the gravitational pull that kept me stuck to this Earth. What would happen if she let me go? Would my family remain planted to terra firma while I spiraled out and away into the void?

The train lurched a little. The mother-and-daughter duo beside me packed up their flash cards and got off. The train doors closed with a high-pitched two-note signal.

At the corner of 238th Street and White Plains Road in the Bronx, the 5 and 2 trains split ways. I got off the train and stood on the corner, staring at the fork between the elevated train tracks. A bent, corroded metal rainbow, it curved above and beckoned the 5 train in another direction, away from Mount Vernon and into the unknown. But nothing likes to be split in half so when the 5 train hit that bend, sparks flew out and landed like mini-meteors on the sidewalk. The wheels ground hard, metal on metal, and sent out a screech: a torturous yell that could be heard for miles. The sound shredded the fibers of my bones. I felt it in my cavities, heard it in my daydreams.

The sun was setting over the neighborhood. Jamaican men

stood in zigzag patterns on the block, shouting, "Taxi, miss?" No insurance, some without a license, but damn if they didn't get a person where they needed to go. I dipped around them and made a left toward Paisano's Pizza Shop. Black and brown bodies were in full motion. A solid line of people shuffled in and out of the liquor store. It was owned by Mrs. Li. She sent flowers to my uncle Ramon's wake when he died two years ago from cirrhosis. Sirens sounded as ambulances rushed to the nearest emergency to transport the bloody and wounded off to Our Lady of Sacrifice Hospital.

The block was never silent.

We lived loud and hard against a neighborhood built to contain us. We moved like the earth pushing its way through cement sidewalks.

I pulled a dollar out of my pocket. "Robert," I said to the man crouched in between the liquor store and Paisano's. He didn't move. Jacket over his head, he stood still as death. Robert existed in a plume of crystal-white smoke. "Robert," I said again, louder. The jacket shifted, his wide brown eyes peered out from the sleeve.

"Hey, ma," Robert said, not blinking. I put the dollar in his coat pocket. He nodded thanks and pulled the jacket back over his head. I didn't know how else to reach out to this man who'd been smoking crack in between the same two buildings for almost twenty years. Even on Christmas morning, he stood like a sentry dedicated to crack rock. I've asked him if he needs

anything. All he's ever asked for was a dollar. That was our relationship. I nodded and kept it moving, past his smoke spot, past the row of cab drivers, past the seventeen-year-old prostitutes and their eighteen-year-old pimps. I was almost home. Good thing too 'cuz those dudes from the train were *still* talking mad loud behind me. Why were they on my ass? My cell phone buzzed in my pocket. Mom.

"Nena!"

I yanked the phone from my ear. "Yes, Momma?"

"Pick up some recao, cilantro, and tomato sauce for the sofrito. Oh, and something sweet. I love you."

"Love you too," I replied, still keeping the phone a safe distance from my ears. I learned a long time ago that you never told Momma she was shouting.

Everything in the Imperial Supermarket was mad suspect. The fruits and vegetables were often moldy. A pack of sesame candy I bought had a roach in it once. And man, I hated buying chicken there too. Every package of meat had a grayish tint to it, and the aisle itself often smelled like blood. But it was the only market we had within walking distance from the house. Momma was going to get her sofrito ingredients. I just had to be diligent and examine everything, as per usual. Figured I'd start with the easy stuff and pick up the tomato sauce first.

The group of bro-dudes from the train found me in the canned vegetable aisle, and one of them said, "Hey, mami, you lookin' good. What's up with your number?"



I didn't answer him. I focused on the sixty-five-cent tomato sauce in my hands. He moved in close behind me.

"I *said* you lookin' mad good," he repeated, his breath harsh on my neck.

My back tensed up. I cracked my middle knuckle with my thumb. Every way this group of man-boys could possibly assault me flashed through my head. A bolt of fear snaked up my spine. I squeezed the can, wishing I was bold enough to clock him with it. I shrugged hard and turned around. His friends had moved in closer, forming a little semicircle around me. Fucking dudes, man.

"Whassup? You too good to say hello?" he asked, smiling.

"I'm gay and not interested," I blurted out.

My whole face went hot. Why did I say that? Jeezus. With fluorescent lights above me, stained white tiles under my feet, and a circle of machismo incarnate around me, there was nowhere to run.

"That's a damn shame. Maybe you just need this good D right here," he said as he grabbed his crotch. He stared at me and gave himself a good up and down stroke. His eyes had a hard glint to them. His tattoo-party tattoos showed from beneath his beater: a lion on his right arm, a crucifix on the left, and the name *Joselys* across his neck.

His boys gave him a pound. They laughed, salivated, and tightened their circle around me. I stepped to the right, and he moved in my way. They laughed again.

A woman pushing a stroller bumped right into him and cleared the way for me. Her three kids clamored through too, breaking their formation. Thank God.

Tomato sauce in hand, I got the rest of the items Mom needed and headed for the checkout line. I kept my arms crossed over my chest best I could. This halter top was half a size too small but made my tetas look amazing. Maybe too amazing. I should have worn my other jeans. Or cargo shorts and a baggy T-shirt. I got way less static when I dressed that way. These tight-ass jeans felt like a reason. Funny, I felt really good when I left the house this morning. I thought I looked cute.

My shame seeped into a frothing rage. The type of rage that can't be let out because then you'd be that crazy chick that killed three dudes in the bodega and no one would even light a damn candle for you. I wondered what dudes like them really expected of girls like me in those situations. Like, did they want me to drop to my knees in the middle of the supermarket and orally worship their Ds? And damn, was it really so wrong to wear something that made me feel confident and sexy-ish? I prayed that la Virgen would get me out of the hood forever.

I'd never said I was gay out loud to anyone I didn't know. What was happening? Was I practicing? God, now those dudes were always going to know me as Dyke on the Block. I imagined that they'd be offering me their "good Ds" forever. I hated that damn Imperial Supermarket. Home, home, I had to get home. Just had to lock the doors behind me and breathe.

My head seemed like the safest place to be most of the time. Maybe that's a bit hyperbolic. I felt safe in my house. Our three-family home on Matilda Avenue was my redbrick fortress, cemented together during the 1930s when someone decided that this would be a good neighborhood for families, specifically Jewish ones. My grandma, Amalia Petalda Palante, moved into this house pregnant with my father and married to her third husband, my grandpa Cano, in 1941. They were legit the only Puerto Ricans on the block. Everyone else was either Jewish or Italian Catholic. But according to her, "A los Judios y los Italianos no les importaba que éramos puertorriqueño. They cared that we kept quiet and made sure the front of our home was clean." I'm sure it didn't hurt that my grandma was hella light-skinned and brought food to her Jewish neighbors on the left and the Italians on the right. Bricks were used to build the house, but it remained standing because of her: because she scrubbed its floors 'til her knuckles bled, because she planted hydrangeas in the front yard as an act of solidarity with her neighbors and because she didn't let anyone tell her that Puerto Ricans couldn't live there.

I climbed the steps to our home and ran into the kitchen. Mom and Grandma Petalda held court over food simmering in calderos and pilones filled with mashed garlic and spices. I dropped the requested items for sofrito onto the counter and kissed them both on the cheeks. They snuggled me. Grandma wore her favorite purple bata and wooden chanclas. My mother

was dressed in loose-fitting blue jeans and a souvenir shirt from our last trip to Miami. They were deep in dinner preparation mode, so it was easy to head up to my room. All I wanted to do was finish Lainie's mixtape and be weird with Lil' Melvin, my kid brother. I didn't even care that he was already in my room, slobbering over a book and some TWIX bars.

"Don't ever be an asshole on the streets. Don't ever tell girls that you wanna grab their bodies or corner them in supermarkets while you touch your junk," I said, kissing his chubby cheeks. I stole one of his candy bars and ate it to keep the tears away.

"I'm re-reading my old Animorphs cuz Mami threatened to throw them away. So definitely not on team macho-douchebag. Acting like that is uncouth and also gross, sister," Lil' Melvin said, looking up from his book. "Rabid animals get put down. Those types of heathens should, as well. Glad you're home. Time for you to play me those depressing white lady songs that you're adding to Lainie's tape." I hugged him tighter than usual and went to work.

I obsessed over which Ani DiFranco song to add to Lainie's tape. When we first started dating, I had no idea who Ani DiFranco was. Lainie, shocked to baby-dyke hell, made it her mission to convert me. And yo, it took a lot of work. Ani was crazy white girl shit. Her music evoked images of Irish bagpipes and stray cats howling in heat. Her garbled singing voice made my eyes water, and I couldn't ever be sure of what she was singing about. But with enough practice and encouragement from Lainie, I broke

down Ani's gay girl code and understood that I too was just a little girl in a training bra trying to figure shit out. Lainie's mixtape needed some Ani. Lots of Ani. Enough Ani to make Lainie think of me all summer long. Five Ani songs in, I added some Queen Latifah, Selena, and TLC for balance. I wrote the names of songs and artists in black Sharpie. The mixtape was for her and only her, but I still played Lil' Melvin every song twice. If he approved, he would hold up the Live-Long-and-Prospers salute. If not, he would give me a theatrical thumbs-down. The idea of leaving him for a summer made my heart ache.

Lil' Melvin believed in the possibility of humans shifting shape but only into other mammals. He also knew months ago that something dark and sad was brewing inside me. I cracked one night after a fight with Lainie and told him that she was my *girlfriend* girlfriend and not just a friend. He put his chubby hand on mine and offered me an unopened package of TWIX. It was the best offering of acceptance a fourteen-year-old boy could provide. He knew tonight was the night I'd planned to let the family know that I was a big old homo. The Animorphs book series entered his life at the right time. A little shape-shifting and fantasy all helped in him being down for me and open to the possibilities of this evening. "You sure about this, sister?"

"It has to be tonight, brother. I'll die if I don't speak up, but they'll kill me if I tell them." I decorated the *i*'s in Lainie's name with black bomb stickers. I'd never made a girl a mixtape before. Lainie was my first girl anything. I'd written a free verse poem about her in the margin of my purple composition notebook.

It worked better in pieces, so I used it as love filler for the liner notes of the mixtape.

“I doubt they’ll kill you. It’s not like Mom and Dad are cyborgs that’ll disintegrate you with death rays.” Lil’ Melvin slid one TWIX bar into his mouth and measured the other. If they weren’t the same size, he’d e-mail Mars and complain about their apparent lack of quality control.

“Duh, brother, but I mean, like, die in my soul.” Eighteen songs and one Floetry skit all accounted for on the inside of the CD case. Making a mixtape was way easier than announcing to the world that you’re a lesbian. I added more bomb stickers and glued a picture of Lainie and me at Lilith Fair to the back cover.

“Spiritual death is unlikely, Juliet. Your soul would just find another creature to attach itself to and then you’d be a falcon or something. And no one cares if falcons are gay,” he said. Lil’ Melvin: philosopher, letter writer, concerned citizen, and TWIX coupon hoarder. He rolled over on the bed and pressed his forehead against mine, his soft belly resting on my arm. “Let out your lesbionic truths, sister.”

“*Lesbionic*. I’m keeping that word forever.” With my hands folded behind my back, I looked up at my Virgin Mary wall clock, and for a second I thought she smiled at me. Lil’ Melvin slipped back into his Animorphs coma.

The smiling faces of Selena, Ani DiFranco, TLC, Salma Hayek, and Angelina Jolie gazed down on me from the walls like patron saints on stained-glass windows. Surely they understood why I wanted to come out. They waited confidently,

knowing that eventually I'd just have to do it. It'd be nice if one of them could have said something.

Could I really go downstairs and get this demon off my chest? Was it possible to exorcise yourself? I paced back and forth, following the worn path in the dark red carpeting. Prayer always freed people from possession in the movies. What kind of prayer made parents the people you needed them to be? If I went through with it, I wouldn't be able to take any of it back. I wouldn't be able to rewind my life to before Lainie or the movie *Gia*.

I watched Lil' Melvin eat TWIX bars on my bed and read his book. Maybe he was right, maybe Mom and Dad really wouldn't care that there was a gay falcon in the family.

What was left for me to fear anyway? I'd been a nervous wreck since coming home from college. I'd avoided my parents and their questions the same way my parents avoided Jehovah's Witnesses knocking at our door: turn off the lights, turn down the TV. No confrontation; just wait for them to go away.

Dinnertime with the family sent me into panic mode complete with angsty silence and a carnivorous burden; I felt like if I didn't act soon enough, we'd all be consumed by it. And really, all I could do was play awkward, nerdy, fat-girl, closeted-lesbian dodgeball with the questions directed at me.

"No boyfriend, nena?"

"No, too busy with student government. Oohh, are you making arroz con maíz? That's my favorite."

Dodge. My portrayal of the aloof-but-diligent daughter should have been nominated for an Oscar, or at least a Golden Globe. But

no, instead I received pats on the head and plotted ways to get my gay secret out into the world. And by plotted ways, I mean, acted out muy dramatic scenarios in my head a la Grandma Petalda's telenovelas. I had to tell them and it had to be now.

My mother, Mariana, and my father, Ernesto, sat at the head of the table. Grandpa Cano had built it out of red maple wood before I was born. Grandma Petalda sat wedged in between Lil' Melvin and me. Across from us were my titi Wepa and my titi Mellie. Everyone came together for me; this was my good-bye-for-the-summer dinner. Grandma Petalda and my mom spent three hours making arroz con maíz, alcapurrias, and bistec encebollado. Leaving the Bronx was cause for celebration. Doing it by way of an internship with a published author and for college credits merited an all-your-favorite-foods dinner. No one in my family knew exactly where Portland, Oregon, was—anywhere north of the Bronx was “upstate” and outside of New York was considered “over there somewhere”—but none of that mattered. Better to make food and have a send-off for the first-born granddaughter, me, Juliet Milagros Palante. This was how we said good-bye. We ate Puerto Rican food and used outdoor voices to tell perfectly exaggerated stories while loving so hard it hurt. The act of eating was a good excuse for me to daydream and wallow in what-ifs while Titi Wepa's latest cop story filled the air.

She looked each of us in the eyes while gesturing with her fork, and said, “So I see this asshole rob an old lady by Yankee Stadium and I go, ‘Hey, I'm Officer Palante, get down on the ground now,’ and he says, ‘Whatever, bitch,’ and takes off running. ‘Cuz I'm



a chick, he thought he'd get away. I might have tits, but I've got brains too. And I knew he was gonna go down River Avenue. So I took One Hundred and Sixty-Second and bing boom, I caught him. Got him down on the ground and cuffed his ass. These punks, they don't think ahead. They've only got one move. Not me, baby, my brain has all the moves. Every woman needs a plan A, B, and C," Titi Wepa said. She slapped the table to bring her point home and clinked beer bottles with Titi Mellie.

Her story made me think of my plans. I definitely had an A and a B, but definitely not a C. Plan A: I could sit there and keep eating and when dinner was over I could get in the car with the whole family, go to JFK, say a tearful good-bye at my gate, and just leave. No big gay announcement. Nothing to put this perfect night of mine off balance. Plan B: tell them I like girls and get it all off my chest so that my lungs wouldn't feel so damn tight and just maybe I wouldn't need my inhaler so much. Red pill or blue pill. Down the rabbit hole or remain asleep under the tree, dreamless and stuck. This dinner could be a straight line, if I wanted: no bumps, no bruises, turbulence-free.

Lil' Melvin was reading his Animorphs book under the table. Less than interested in Titi Wepa's latest cop tale and more connected to the idea that he too could one day morph into an animal.

"I bet you wouldn't be so good at chasing falcons, Titi," Lil' Melvin said without looking up from his book.

"You don't chase falcons. You shoot them," Titi Wepa said. "And I've got a nine millimeter for that."

“Boring. Animals don’t have guns. Now, Titi, if you could fly and you flew after a falcon and caught it, then that would be the coolest thing ever.” Lil’ Melvin shoved a forkful of yellow rice and corn into his mouth.

Titi Wepa stared at him, coughing, shaking her head. Dad got her a glass of water. Mom snuck around behind my chair, dropped a second alcapurria onto my plate. “So quiet tonight. Don’t be nervous. Idaho isn’t so far away.” She kissed my cheeks and sat down at the end of the table.

“Oregon, Mom. Portland, Oregon,” I said, swallowing pieces of fried plantain and spiced beef. I picked up Lil’ Melvin’s falcon cue, took a deep breath, and dove into my confession. “So, a group of boys cornered me in the supermarket and told me they had the best you-know-whats in the world. So annoying.”

Titi Wepa and Titi Mellie laughed like I’d said something funny. My father looked up from his second plate of food and shook his head. Grandma Petalda sucked her teeth. “Boys today have no class.”

“Ay, please, they just don’t know how else to say they like you,” Titi Mellie said, her neon-pink halter top trying its very best to keep all of her bits under wraps. Titi Mellie’s lipstick was the same shade of pink as her halter top, her acrylic-wrapped fingernails, and her hair scrunchie.

“Like me? Oh stop. No boy on the block is talking about his junk to me because he likes me, Juliet, as a person,” I said, as my heart beat so damn fast I felt like I was going to faint or die, “Besides, I told him I was a lesbian and he backed off.”

I kept my eyes fixed on the image of the Virgin Mary hanging in the kitchen.

Titi Wepa clapped her hands. "Ah, the dyke-n-dodge trick. I've used that so many times. It's a classic. Gotta be careful though, sometimes that revs up their little pingas even more." Titi Mellie nodded her head in agreement as if the wisdom of the ages was being passed on to me.

"Ay, you know we don't use that kind of language at the table," Mom said, standing up again, refilling my father's plate for the third time. Her hips swayed under a Puerto Rican flag apron. "Why didn't you just tell them that you have a boyfriend?"

She had her questions and I had mine. "Why lie? I don't have a boyfriend. And I think I'm a lesbian," I said. My words felt like they were being sucked out of me. They lingered in the air above our red maplewood dining room table, compact and ready to be tucked away. I thought for sure there'd be an earthquake of some kind after my revelation. Nope.

Titi Wepa added some salt to her bistec encebollado. "If not having a boyfriend made people lesbians, Mellie would be running her own parade," Titi Wepa said, her mouth full of food. Lil' Melvin snorted, his laughter bubbling up around the table until even Grandma Petalda joined in.

"Okay, enough of this crazy talk," she said, smiling. Mom raised her glass of sweet pink moscato on ice. "Tonight Juliet is leaving the Bronx and going away for an amazing internship. Let's toast to her college career, her brave spirit, and to making all of us so proud." Everyone around the table raised their

glasses and looked at me. In each of their faces, I saw different versions of who I was. This was all happening way too fast. How had I lost my moment?

“Stop. Everyone, just stop,” I said as I pushed my plate away. “Thank you for all of this but listen to me. I am gay. Gay, gay, gay. I’ve been dating Lainie for the past year. This isn’t a joke. I’ve been wondering for weeks how to tell you all, and this is the best I’ve got. I’m definitely a lesbian.”

No one moved or laughed, no glasses clinked. From the window, the sounds of the 2 and 5 trains screeching away from their shared track filtered into the dining room. Grandma Petalda was the only one still eating. I set free the elephant, the falcon, or whatever kind of animal spilled its truth onto dining room tables. Was this what ferocious cunts did? I didn’t feel ferocious. The smoldering discomfort that rose in my chest was humidity—thick, oppressive humidity.

There was nowhere to look. Titi Wepa polished off another beer. Titi Mellie checked the length of her acrylic nails. Mom stared at me from across the table.

“It’s this book, isn’t it? This book about vaginas has you messed up in the head and confused,” she said, looking past me, anywhere but at me. Her voice heavy but not angry. My father reached out for her hand and held it.

“No, it’s not *Raging Flower*. I love Lainie. It’s never felt like this with a boy,” I said. Tears betrayed the tiny bit of strength in my voice. Lil’ Melvin bowed his head low, his cheeks flushed. He nudged his knee into mine and kept it there. I pushed my

plate of food aside. Mom and I stared at each other, and I felt like I was falling.

“But, Juliet,” she said, “you’ve never had a boyfriend, so how would you know? All you know are these neighborhood boys. You haven’t given any of the boys at your college a chance. You might like Lainie but it’s not the same thing. I promise you that.”

“Love. I love her. You don’t know anything about my feelings.”

“I know you better than you think I do, and this isn’t you, Juliet.”

Mom got up from her seat, pushed her chair in, and walked upstairs to her bedroom. No door slam, no stomping feet on the stairs. She ghosted and left us at the dining room table without a word.

It was 8:00 p.m., and my plane was scheduled to take off from JFK at 11:30. I wondered if it would become a one-way trip.

Grandma Petalda cleared the dishes and put food in glass containers, ending my good-bye dinner. Titi Mellie gave me a quick hug and told me that a good boyfriend is hard to find but that I’d grow out of this lesbian thing. Lil’ Melvin exited the dining room to play *Final Fantasy*. My father kissed my cheek and left the table to go talk to my mother. All I heard from upstairs was unintelligible whispers that almost became shouts.

Titi Wepa and I sat across from each other. I’d never seen her so still. Wepa’s wild brown curls were gelled back into a severe cop-style ponytail. She studied me, her dark brown eyes

meeting mine. "Okay, lesbian, it's time to take you to the airport. Get your stuff, let's load up the car."

The house felt too small for me. My father emerged from the bedroom and helped bring down my bag. Still no sign or sound from Mom. Dad's face was gray like worn asphalt. Tension lines in the corner of his eyes conveyed grief, stress, sadness, something other than his usual men-don't-show-their-feelings type of face. After loading my gear into Titi Wepa's Thunderbird, he held me. It was the longest hug I'd ever received from him. I wondered what they had said about me behind their closed door. Grandma Petalda stood in the doorway; she beckoned me over.

"You are what you are, Juliet. You are my blood, my first-born granddaughter. I love you like the seas love the moon," Grandma Petalda said, pulling me into her soft belly. "You will be back. This is your home. Now, go say good-bye to your mother."

I was about to argue with her, say something like, "I can't come back here, Grandma" or "She doesn't want me anymore"—something final and dramatic. But I checked myself. I saw our family in her eyes; she wasn't throwing me away. I kissed Grandma's cheeks, smelled the adobo still on her skin, and felt waves of Grandpa Cano flow through her. She released me, and I ran up the stairs to my parents' bedroom.

I made it to the door, raised my hand to knock, and then stopped. My mom was in there, and she wasn't making any

effort to come to me. Maybe she didn't want me barging in on her, maybe she didn't want to see my face. I slumped to the floor, feeling like I'd destroyed everything.

"Mom," I called out through the closed door. "I'm sorry I ruined dinner. I didn't know how else to tell you about Lainie. I didn't know how else to say any of it," I said, my chest wheezing. "Titi Wepa's taking me to the airport now. I love you so much, Mom." I took a puff from my yellow inhaler. The small screech of release it made filled the air around me. I waited, listening for movement, for any sound of life reaching out from the other side of that door. The hallway walls were lined with pictures of our family. Pictures from the day my mom and dad got married in City Island hung in wooden frames. My dad rocked a short trimmed Afro and full beard with his baby-blue ruffled tuxedo. My mom looked like a statue of the Virgin Mary; she was covered in lace and purity, smiling like she knew in that moment what the rest of her life would be like and it was already everything she'd imagined.

From under the door, Mom slid a worn photo of us into the hallway. In the photo she held me in her arms, the Hudson River behind us. My arms were outstretched toward the sun. I turned the picture over and in black ink she'd written *Mariana and Juliet, 1987, Battery Park*.

"Whenever I look at you, I see that baby. You'll always be that baby to me, so forgive me if I can't accept what you've said tonight," Mom spoke, still on the other side of the door.

“Aren’t you going to hug me good-bye?” I waited for her answer. I just knew if she’d open the door and wrap her arms around me, it would all be okay.

“Call us when you get to Iowa so we know you’re safe.”

“Portland, Mom.”

“You know what I mean.” I heard her get up from the floor and walk over to the bed she shared with my father. I heard the bed frame creak and knew she was lying down. She wasn’t going to come to me and I couldn’t go to her. I held the picture of us against my chest and rested my forehead against the door for a moment. *Dear God, please help us.* I walked downstairs and away from my mother.

Titi Wepa’s Thunderbird hummed in the driveway; Bon Jovi’s “You Give Love a Bad Name” blasted from its speakers. I climbed in and took a deep breath. A TWIX bar slapped against my shoulder. “Don’t worry, sister,” said Lil’ Melvin, getting into the backseat. “The Force is strong with you.” I kissed his chubby fingers and said, “You’re my falcon-brother soulmate weirdo.”

Titi peeled out of the driveway, windows down, her ponytail swinging in the wind. Our redbrick house grew smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror as we sped off to the airport. Titi Wepa ran a red light, blessed herself, and kept her foot on the gas pedal. After a few blocks, I couldn’t even hear the trains rumbling anymore.



## CHAPTER TWO

# LA VIRGEN TAKES THE WHEEL

TITI WEPA DROVE super fast, like a surge of adrenaline released into the bloodstream. Each lane of traffic was an algorithm for her to solve using agility and the need to be faster than everyone else. As a proud, shield-carrying member of the NYPD, this was how she'd been taught to drive in order to save lives; no alternative existed, so we flew. The only thing out of the ordinary was her silence; Titi's lack of one-liners and profanity-laden nicknames for the drivers around us created a deep void. I wondered if she was repulsed by my confession or if she thought I was a coward for spilling and running. Lil' Melvin sat quietly in the back, nighttime erasing his ability to read. He was also out of TWIX bars. I kept my eyes on the sky and looked for the moon.

When we were little kids, Mom and Dad took us on massive summer road trips to visit Titi Penny, Mom's only sister, in Vero Beach, Florida. We'd drive down, our minivan divided into two

sections: one for sleeping and the other for everything else. Lil' Melvin and I fought over the last cookie in the snack bag while trying to outsmart each other in games of I Spy. Dad drove the entire way, focused on the highway numbers and how many miles he could squeeze out of each gallon of gas. But the best part—the part we'd beg for—was when Mom told us stories about her and Titi Penny spending summers in Puerto Rico. Their mom, my grandma Herencia, sent them to stay with La Perla, her sister. Mom and Titi Penny chased lizards and hunted for coquis. They practiced arching their eyebrows to the heavens with La Perla's makeup and learned the drinking songs that the male suitors sang to their great-aunt in the moonlight. Puerto Rico seemed so far away, almost made up, but somehow the stories got us to Florida faster. The car rides and all Mom's stories gave us a loving transition into our summer adventures.

But this one, this joyless, motherless ride to the airport was nothing like those trips to Florida. As we sped along the Bronx River Parkway, the moon had still not shown itself. I wished it would emerge and offer a blessing. My heart ached, so I texted Lainie even though I knew she probably wouldn't reply until tomorrow. She'd started her internship in D.C. with the College Democrats a week ago, and we hadn't found a moment to talk. My phone buzzed against my thigh, I flipped it open hoping it was Lainie. Instead it was my cousin Ava:

Yo prima, heard you're a big old out loud lesbiana. Viva la Revolución. Call me.

Ava made me laugh. Everything with her was “Viva la Revolución,” even small shit like Pop-Tarts coming out of the toaster on time and catching the bus. But damn, word traveled quick, like the bochinche plague. Mom must have called Titi Penny and oh my God, now the whole family was going to know about me, and what if Portland became the only safe place for me in the world?

Titi Wepa swerved across three lanes to catch the exit for JFK. Her tires screeched hard as she pulled into the Southwest departing flights drop-off zone. Around us taxicabs and shuttle vans loaded and unloaded hordes of baggage-laden souls. Everyone traveling to or coming from the ends of the earth in search of family, friends, self-discovery, and a shared desire to be anywhere but where the hell they had been.

Titi Wepa didn't move. She stared hard at me and said, “You were born in the middle of the night on a Monday, September sixth, nineteen eighty-three. I'll never forget that day as long as I'm living and breathing. My brother came out of the delivery room—first time in my life I'd ever seen him cry—and told us you were a baby girl.” Titi wiped her eyes. “I've loved you from that moment and I always will. I don't care if you're gay or if you shave your head or . . .”

“Or if you become a falcon,” offered Lil' Melvin from the backseat.

Titi Wepa laughed. “Or if you become a motherfucking falcon. I'm your titi and nothing will ever change my love for you. Now get the fuck out of my car.” Her black mascara ran down her cheeks.

I reached over and pulled her into a tight hug. "I love you too, Titi. I love you times infinity." She kissed my cheek and left a dark red lipstick stain. I took a deep breath, inhaling her Cool Water perfume and the new car smell that emanated from the blue, tree-shaped air freshener. I wanted to bottle all of her up and take her with me. I got out of the Thunderbird and grabbed my purple-and-black Adidas duffel bag from the trunk.

Lil' Melvin popped out behind me, chocolate still crusted to the corners of his mouth. My brother, my baby, a gray-eyed boy version of me, I took him all in at the curb. We faced each other, and he pressed a brown paper bag into my chest.

"Don't open this until you need to, sister," he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

*Confidential* was written on the bag in black marker. "Okay, weirdo," I said, grabbing him by his side chub. "Take care of everyone and mostly yourself. Love you." I ushered him into Titi's Thunderbird and shut the door behind him. Waving, I watched them drive off into the throng of vehicles. Once I lost them amid all the other red taillights, I stuffed Lil' Melvin's brown paper bag into my backpack. I stepped through the doors, trying not to cry, feeling both wrecked and excited.

Every night that week, I had dreamed about Portland. Extended, epic, Technicolor dreams where white lesbians appeared like faeries to welcome me as I landed in the middle of a lush forest clearing. They draped wreaths of Oregon grapes and flowers around my head, my hips, and all over my body. The faeries gathered in a circle around me and swayed

in rhythm to the trees and the winds. The white angels sang in harmony about couscous cures for all ailments and aligning our periods with the ancient cycles of the moon.

I'd stood there, staring, and tried to use my phone to call Ava so she could swoop down and bring her brown revolution to save me. Wide-eyed, I'd lit a cigarette, looking around to see if I could catch a taxi or something. My phone never worked, and I couldn't call Ava or hail a cab in the woods of my dreams. I'd wake up and peek over at the map of the United States on my wall, just to make sure Portland was a real place. I mean, if no one I knew had ever been there or even heard of it, then I had a right to wonder whether Portland, Oregon, existed or not, right?

Coming out had taken over my brain space these last few days, but before, when I had a little extra breathing room, all I thought about was how Portland was going to be different from the Bronx. I assumed that I'd have to go vegetarian or at least limit my meat intake to chicken and bacon, the most understandable can't-live-without-them types of meat. Harlowe wrote about not eating meat in *Raging Flower*.

"Red meat comes from what the patriarchy calls 'the industrialization of food' but in reality, it's the separation of humanity from their own food production and from Mother Earth. It's also wholly dependent on the enslavement of other individuals and animals. That terror and disregard for life seeps into our souls and bodies with every bite. It's an absolute poison to the pussy. Don't believe me? Go down on a meat-eater and tell me if you can't taste the sadness."

I definitely couldn't "taste the sadness," but I'd never hooked up with a vegetarian, so I couldn't really compare and contrast. *Vegetarian* was another word that I couldn't connect to. The idea of living with Harlowe in Portland pushed me to create room for ideas outside of my everyday life. Like, anything was possible in that space with her; if she wanted me to be vegetarian, I would. If she wanted me to howl at the moon with a bowl of period blood on my head, I'd at least give it a try. Things that I'd normally laugh at became possibilities from the moment I began reading *Raging Flower*. Portland could be anything I wanted it to be.

I imagined that Portland would be a place without bullshit. No piles of garbage lining the blocks, fermenting in the hot sun. No doped-up hoodrats trying to fight each other on the train. No young dudes trying with winks and hollers to stick their things inside every girl who passed by. No one getting shot on the street by cops. Just groups of young, gay weirdos being able to chill and be free without hassle from anyone. Yeah, everyone would probably be white, but white people seemed to totally be okay with gay stuff and just being different in general. It had to be a utopia if Harlowe lived and wrote *Raging Flower* there. It had to be more soul-affirming than the fucking Bronx, right?

Sitting at gate 14, I texted Ava back:

No revolution here, just sad lesbian me leaving on a jet plane. Life is weird. Call you when I get to Portland.

Still no message from Lainie. Her mixtape was packed in my duffel bag. Her parents didn't know she was gay or that we were in love. They just thought we were super-close new college friends.

I'd wanted to say good-bye to Lainie in her twin bed: late at night, deep inside of her, with my lips pressed against her collarbone. But no. Lainie felt it'd be inappropriate and a little odd if I slept over the night before she left for D.C. Instead, we went shopping at Banana Republic—the only store she ever shopped at—so that she could have a new wardrobe for her political summer. After the mall, we said good-bye in secret. Seated across from each other at a greasy, podunk Hartsdale diner that hadn't changed its appearance since the 1970s, our elbows resting on paper placemats advertising local businesses. We shared an order of fries. Lainie dipped a french fry into a puddle of ketchup. "Scenes just aren't a thing in my family," she said. "It's not like we'd be able to kiss and be cute at the airport, like in front of my parents. Please don't be upset."

"I'm not upset, Lanes," I replied, touching her foot with mine. "I get it. I'm just going to miss your face. That's all."

Her heart felt far away from mine, like they were beating in different time zones or different dimensions of love. I should have asked for her to fight for us and to shed some fucking tears over a summer apart. If I was gonna spill my truth to my family, then so should she. But I didn't have those words—didn't even know I wanted those things—until after she was gone.

All I wanted was her in my arms all night, but the clanking of dishes, the smell of stale coffee, and the absolute hetero-vibe of Westchester kept me so aware of how unattainable that was. Where could our type of love grow anyway?

After dinner, we made out in the parking lot, in the backseat of her mom's Corolla. Kissing was its own good-bye. Her lips found my lips. Our love was safe if we kept it on our tongues and in between our teeth. When we came up for air, Lainie said, "Let's make feminist, power-lesbian mixtapes and fall in love all over again."

"There's absolutely nothing else worth doing, babe," I replied, holding her hand over my heart. She smelled like all the reasons I didn't want to say good-bye, not even for a summer.

Portland, Lainie, Mom, Harlowe. Harlowe, Portland, Lainie, Mom. I was sitting at the airport, waiting for my flight, and those four elements of my life banged around in my head, fighting for space. Mom didn't hug me good-bye. Lainie still hadn't called me back. Flying off into the unknown, alone and feeling so raw, pushed my anxiety into overdrive. My chest tightened up. I took deep breaths and heard a familiar wheeze in my lungs. Airlines should assign buddies to everyone flying solo for the first time. Fumbling in my bag for my inhaler, I checked my phone again. Still nothing.

"Now boarding Flight 333, New York to Portland, Oregon," called the Southwest gate attendant, her voice snapping me back to earth. I called Lainie again. It went straight to voice mail, so I left a message.



“Sweet babe,” I said, smiling big despite my anxiety, “I’m about to board my flight. Lainie, I know we’re gonna change the world. Like on some fuck-the-patriarchy-forever type of love revolution. Call me tomorrow. Te quiero mucho.”

We were going to be Thelma and Louise, minus the part where we drive off a cliff. Like Thelma and Louise if they were renegade feminist lesbians who had totally taken women’s studies classes on purpose. Lainie and I were going to do the damn thing.

The takeoff terrified me. I prayed to la Virgen. It wasn’t something I did all the time; showing reverence was one thing but reaching out to her was something way more sacred. I was fucking scared. I needed some all-powerful woman to tell me everything was going to be okay. I closed my eyes and whispered the prayer I learned as a kid, the one I’d hoped she’d written for us: “Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women. Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.”

With or without hugs or sweet words from Lainie, I was off into the world, off to see this Portland, this Harlowe. I slept on the shoulder of Mary: a deep, warm sleep. No dreams and no wheezing lungs.