

A NOVEL

HAPPINESS



URSULA
VILLARREAL-MOURA

*Like
Happiness*

*Like
Happiness*



Ursula Villarreal-Moura



CELADON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the
author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

LIKE HAPPINESS. Copyright © 2024 by Ursula Villarreal-Moura.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

For information, address Celadon Books, a division of
Macmillan Publishers, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.celadonbooks.com

Designed by Michelle McMillian

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Villarreal-Moura, Ursula, author.

Title: Like happiness / Ursula Villarreal-Moura.

Description: First edition. | New York : Celadon Books, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023023342 | ISBN 9781250882837 (hardcover) |
ISBN 9781250882844 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Queer fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3622.I493986 L55 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/
eng/20230524

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023023342>

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational,
or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate
and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442,
or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For women

Why would you want to be with someone if they didn't change your life? . . . Life only made sense if you found someone who would change it, who would destroy your life as you knew it.

—ALEJANDRO ZAMBRA, *BONSAI*

*Like
Happiness*

1.

The scene was this: I was seated on the 6 train, checking my mascara in a compact, when a trio of teenage boys deposited a large boom box near my suede boots. One leaned down to click *PLAY*, and within seconds they began break-dancing to “Billie Jean,” launching themselves from metal poles and twirling on the floor of the sticky subway car. The oldest boy pointed to me whenever the song mentioned Billie Jean, clarifying to fellow commuters that I was not his lover. The repeated intrusion of a finger near my chest prevented me from stowing my compact or feigning aloofness.

Anyone other than you might incredulously wonder how I could recall this night so vividly. You, however, never doubted my photographic memory, perhaps because you realized how present I was with you at all times.

As “Billie Jean” faded, the teens collected donations and their stereo, then jangled off to an adjoining train car. While watching their backs recede, I noticed several passengers

reading the January 2012 issue of *New York* magazine with your face on the cover. In a bold white font, THE RETURN OF A LEGEND overlaid your black wool turtleneck. The photo was flattering, but your aging, angular face exuded a zen serenity I knew to be counterfeit.

By this point, I'd become accustomed to seeing your face and name everywhere I turned—in newspapers, on trains, in bookstores, on TV, and forget the internet. Your web hits ranked in the 8.5 million range.

Days before, you'd emailed me that you were reading at NYU and asked if I was interested in a reserved seat. You suggested a date afterward at a martini bar. To mark the occasion, beneath my black down coat I was dressed in an ox-blood wrap dress, houndstooth hosiery, and black boots. Five of my pulse points were dabbed with ylang-ylang perfume, and physically I'd never felt more radiant. When my reflection jagged across a smudged train window, I was agog over the newfound energy in my eyes, the emotional possibilities of my mouth. It seemed that finally my dream would be deferred no longer, that we were on the brink of happening. The tectonic plates of our relationship were shifting that night, but I had miscalculated the direction.

At the 33rd Street station, a sequined mariachi quartet bustled onto the train. They positioned themselves far from where I sat and began strumming "De Colores," a song my grandmother and I had sung at night when we shared a bedroom. I wasn't accustomed to hearing Mexican folk songs in this pocket of the city, and the lyrics evoked the dried-rose scent of my grandmother's dusting powder.

After the last chord dissipated, my focus wandered back to your magazine cover. Your face, I figured, would end up

between my legs by the end of the evening. The thrill dampened my underwear, forcing me to adjust my posture.

For the past several months, my imagination had successfully obscured my role in the fantasies I concocted of us. But the probability that we would be intimate that night was high. For the thirty hours leading up to that train ride, I'd been unable to focus on much else. It had been a while since I'd locked lips with anyone, so I reminded myself that I'd have to tilt my head and keep my tongue engaged.

As the train dropped down the grid from 23rd Street to 14th Street—Union Square, I inspected myself one final time in the circular compact, admiring the lava hue of my lipstick. I lifted my arms away from my torso to allow my perspiration to dry while searching through my phone for your last email.

The halogen platform lights vanished, and the train thundered down the track toward Astor Place.

CHILE: 2015

IT WAS A HUSHED SUNDAY AFTERNOON in Santiago. Fog rolled in outside my southward window. Bossa nova filled the living room, and my Siamese cat napped on the rug. I lay on the couch, and between lulling lyrics, my eyelids kissed closed. I had nowhere to be, so I intended to let myself drift.

As the vinyl record serenely spun on the credenza, a sharp trilling interrupted the song. I assumed at first that I was dreaming of a disturbance. The menacing noise continued until I realized it originated in another room. Soon I was upright and padding toward the kitchen island.

My head swayed with heaviness as I placed the phone to my ear. “Buenas tardes,” I mumbled.

On the other end, someone exhaled asthmatically but hesitated. “Uh, he-hello?” a man’s voice finally stammered.

My neck tensed. Who was calling from the United States?

"Is this Tatum Vega? My name is Jamal O'Dalingo. I'm an investigative journalist for *The New York Times*."

Despite embracing the expat life, I still subscribed to the *Times* and read it nearly every morning. I couldn't imagine why the US paper of record was contacting me, but I was now less inclined to hang up. This stranger also had a Mississippi or Alabama drawl, a charm I'd forgotten about while living below the equator.

"Go on," I said. The sternness of my voice in English startled me.

"I'm contacting you because I'm looking into allegations against the writer M. Domínguez, a friend of yours—"

"You must be confused," I interjected. "He and I aren't even in touch, much less friends."

"Maybe not anymore, but there's plenty of photographic evidence online showing that you two were in contact for years."

My gaze tumbled down the length of my gray lounge pants. My socked feet curled against the wood floor, and again I considered hanging up.

"What's this about? Why are you contacting me?" I asked.

"A young woman has come forward with sexual abuse claims against M. Since she isn't requesting anonymity, I can share with you that her name is María Luz Guerrero."

"Oh," I breathed, rattled by this information.

"I'm curious if you'd be willing to answer some questions."

"I don't think I even know this woman. I mean, surely I don't," I replied, still drowsy and ruffled to be having such a serious conversation in a language I had almost completely retired in South America.

My eyes wandered into my living room. My Siamese, the most noble of my three cats, now stood like a soldier facing me. The vinyl record abruptly reached its end. The needle lifted.

“I promise I won’t take much of your time. Just a few questions. What do you say, Ms. Vega?”

In that moment, the only thought I had wasn’t an answer at all. It was that I had a history of not liking myself in English. I had made so many mistakes in the language. What if I lapsed back into that version of myself?

2.

You're likely wondering what all this is about—my aim in contacting you. It's been three years since rain flicked our glasses as we stood inches apart and I stared at your quivering upper lip, which always reminded me of the tilde: ~.

Last week, a journalist contacted me. Since I appeared in a number of online photos with you, it wasn't long before the media identified me. I learned that a young woman in Upstate New York named María Luz has leveled serious accusations against you. She claims you two met years ago at a library reading you gave in Albany. Obviously, I don't know María Luz like you do, but I believe her. You weren't that person with me, not exactly, but the fingerprints of our stories are strikingly similar.

Answering the journalist's questions brought you back into my lens. For years, it's perturbed me how things ended between us—rashly but with the finality of a guillotine. Even as we stood on that street corner, my heartbeat deafening the

roar of city traffic, I knew I had so much to tell you, but the words remained unformed, timid syllables under my tongue.

It's taken me all this time to come to terms with what happened between us. We spent so many years of our lives traveling together and sharing secrets, yet we were purposely oblivious to certain aspects of each other. I'm writing to you because so much of my life was spent fixated on you. And while I told myself for years that you viewed me with the same intensity, it's doubtful you ever really saw all of me. I finally see all of you, the parts I admired and the parts I denied existed. And now I need you to do the same. So, Mateo, here is an account from me to you.



Despite the fact that you were my best friend for a decade, there's a lot you never knew about me. It's important that you understand who I was before you. Your first book shaped my life, but my fascination with fiction and authors preceded you.

When I was a child, reading was a struggle because my brain refused to learn phonics. In second grade, I started memorizing words out of necessity and piecing them together in chains. After much repetition, comprehension kicked in and sentences began to excite me. Then one day when I was nine, I fell in love with Judy Blume's *Just as Long as We're Together*.

My mother claims that she and my father were sound asleep in the middle of the night when I shuffled into their bedroom in my pajamas.

"What's wrong, mija?" she asked.

I was nearly crying. I held my hand over my mouth as if to prevent a sob from escaping.

“What? Tell me!” she pleaded.

“I’m worried Rachel’s going to be left out,” I said. “What if Stephanie and Alison ignore her?” I hovered over my mother’s prostrate body and continued sharing my anxieties.

My mother had never heard me speak of girls named Rachel, Stephanie, or Alison, so her mind scrambled to place them. “Nena,” she whispered, “where’d you meet these girls? Do I know their moms?”

“No,” I said, annoyed that I had to explain what I felt was so obvious. “Only I know these girls. They’re in *Just as Long as We’re Together*.”

“What?”

“The book’s gonna end the wrong way,” I said. “Don’t you understand? Do something!”

Looking back at my childhood, I can see that my subconscious had solved an important riddle—how to counter the loneliness and boredom of being an only child.

Inside books I found quietude, a marvelous oasis. I could read stories with such ease that I was reduced to a pulsating mind. Nothing mattered but the stories, my understanding of them, how the stories affected me, and the dreams the stories ignited.

3.

The problem was that I never fell out of love with reading, or more specifically, with other people's imaginations. In high school, I realized that nearly every writer I admired was from Massachusetts. Sylvia Plath was the first, followed by Emily Dickinson, then Robert Lowell, Susanna Kaysen, and Anne Sexton. In each of their works, I identified with the suffocating sense of malaise, and in the case of Dickinson, with her isolation and misanthropy. It was a sign, I thought, that all these writers hailed from the same area. The logical choice for college was to situate myself near Boston, that fault line of literary genius.

This daydream of mine included finding a like-minded friend who'd be interested in making the pilgrimage with me to McLean to visit the legendary psychiatric hospital where my heroes had recuperated from their mental breakdowns. Together we would eat tuna fish sandwiches and split a thermos of hot coffee, just like Esther Greenwood did in *The Bell Jar*. Our lives would imitate art, or so I'd hoped.

In my first semester at Williams College, I realized the literary canon was an exclusive club of white, predominantly well-to-do Americans and Brits. You might want to take credit for my awakening, but the credit doesn't belong to you. I reached this conclusion before I read your book or had ever heard of you.

What became undeniable for me as an English and art history dual-degree student was that syllabi at Williams were homogenous. My diet consisted of the Brontës, Thomas Hardy, Ford Madox Ford, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and occasionally Henry James or Oscar Wilde.

In art history, the term "fine arts" meant work created by fair-skinned Europeans. Nearly every art movement chronicled in my textbooks had roots in the United States or Western Europe. Initially, the Clark Institute, a museum in walking distance from campus, had tantalized me. After a few visits, though, its silverware collection and ancient paintings almost convinced me that art spaces were only for the affluent. The Harlem Renaissance painter Jacob Lawrence was the only Black artist I learned about in depth. I didn't learn about Latino artists at all. The Mexican painter Diego Rivera's impressive murals were highlighted in a Latin American section of our textbook that my professor chose to skip.

I hungered for writers and painters to teach me something I didn't know about desire or consciousness. For fun, I read *Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Wasted* by Marya Hornbacher, and the somewhat risqué *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson. I lived in Sawyer Library, thumbing through shelves, searching for art books containing work by Basquiat or Leonora Carrington.

My first two years of college, I wanted to be brought into

the fold so badly that I took a number of risks. Sophomore year, I showed up uninvited to a couple of parties only to quickly learn my lesson. To my disappointment, the like-minded friend of mine—the one who would accompany me to McLean—never materialized. She or he was supposed to be the right ratio of similar to me versus different from me. But true to my inner Emily Dickinson, I preferred the hemisphere of my thoughts, and in my last two years, I made little to no effort to befriend peers.

You could say reaching out to you was another limb I crawled out on in hopes of a best-case scenario. Had I developed healthy friendships at Williams, I doubt I would have sought out a relationship with you.

It was hard to pinpoint what exactly I was learning in class, but I trusted the price tag of my education. Almost 100 percent of the novels I was assigned dealt with Europeans experiencing romantic strife or ennui because they were bored with tea parties, or they disliked a neighbor or family member. Sometimes they were strapped for money or depressed while servants waited on them. This was literature with a capital *L* and an ascot. This was what English majors like me were supposed to discuss for hours upon hours—books about English people and their “universal” problems.

Since I usually took two or three English courses a semester, I sometimes confused the assignments. So many novels had parallel structures and conflicts. But I liked these books because they engaged my curiosity about the United Kingdom, an area of the world that remained a gigantic question mark for me. Or the novels addressed religious fervor, a topic that piqued my interest as a lapsed Catholic. Still some books were tedious, requiring the

reader to know and care about boat life, horses, or Victorian dance etiquette.

It was hardly surprising, then, that I ended up in a D. H. Lawrence spring seminar my junior year. The novella *St. Mawr* had been a breeze to read, though not terribly pleasurable. It seemed to me that Lawrence regarded all his characters with disdain, from the rich American Mrs. Witt and her daughter Lou to the British society women and men, down to the servants. Lawrence referred to servants as savages and showed how lacking in substance the society people were with their frivolous banter. The one thing that made me perk up while reading it was when the main characters traveled through San Antonio, my hometown, on their journey through the Southwest. Never before had I read a mention of San Antonio in a novel for class. As much as I had yearned to flee my hometown as a teen, I now considered it a type of geographical mirror, and I craved a bit of it in New England.

I'm not going to bore you with a blow-by-blow of each of my junior- or senior-year courses, but you should know about this D. H. Lawrence seminar. If it hadn't been for this experience, perhaps your book wouldn't have resonated so deeply with me when I picked it up a few months later.

As I entered the seminar classroom, I wondered how the professor would begin the discussion, what angle he would take on the author's attitudes toward society.

I took the seat around the oval conference table closest to the door. A handful of faces around the table were familiar to me from my bakery job in town. On the weekends, I worked all day making sandwiches and often had to scrawl my classmates' names on their food orders. This is to say, I knew their hangover faces and their tipping habits.

Professor Hatch, a man in his sixties with Brillo pad hair and tortoiseshell bifocals, waltzed into class with a smirk. He tossed his paperback of *St. Mawr* on the conference table, draped his coat around his chair, and took a seat.

"It's two twenty-eight p.m.," he said, eyeing the clock. "We'll wait a couple more minutes." Hatch looked across the room before asking, "Does anyone have spring break plans yet?"

Several students shared about upcoming trips to the Hamptons, while a couple of others chattered about Miami. A reedy boy with pimply skin stumbled in and plopped himself into the only empty seat around the table. All of us had our copies of the book out, and some opened spiral notebooks for note-taking.

"It looks like we're all here," Professor Hatch said as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "General thoughts about *St. Mawr*?"

"There's not much resolution at the end," someone offered.

"Well, okay. But backing up, what's the book about?" Hatch asked as he stood from the table and began circling the classroom.

It is a narrative about a rich family, a horse, masculinity, and the idea that women sometimes can't find what they're looking for in men, so they look elsewhere. It's about boredom and searching, concepts with which I could identify then. I didn't speak up, but eventually someone did, and she summarized it similarly.

"All the women in the book are awful," one of the Hamptons guys announced.

"How so?" asked Hatch. His stride brought him close to my chair.

It was tempting to say that all the characters, not just the women, were insufferable, but I merely listened.

"They basically want to castrate the men," the Hamptons guy continued.

"Do others agree with that?" Hatch asked.

"Well, you can tell that Lawrence hates dumb people," a guy in a North Face pullover said with a chuckle.

"I don't disagree, Marshall. But how can you tell that? Show me in the text," Hatch said.

As Marshall started flipping through pages to find an example, another voice piped up, "Look at all his descriptions of the Mexican and the Welsh characters who tend to St. Mawr."

Professor Hatch ran his fingers through his white hair and nodded before asking, "And what do we make of the Mexican?"

"Phoenix?" a girl in a dainty sweater set offered.

My breath tightened in my chest as if I were trapped in quicksand. I wanted to say that the character of Mexican and Native ancestry in the novella was named Geronimo Trujillo but called Phoenix because the white ladies refused to adopt his Spanish name. It was no different from when Kunta Kinte in *Roots* was renamed Toby. This racist act of renaming a person of color for a white person's convenience had not registered with my classmates. And clearly neither had the notion that these unfavorable characterizations were offensive.

"Lawrence introduces him on page seven by referring to him as 'an odd piece of debris,'" another student added, snorting at the phrase.

"Throughout the novel, Phoenix is described as savage . . .,"

Professor Hatch began, but I missed the rest of his sentence. Instead, I found myself averting my eyes to the lap of my black trousers. Did anyone know my ethnicity? Did I look Mexican? Since freshman year, I'd been mistaken for Filipina or Polynesian, and once for Turkish. Never had I denied my heritage, but until that seminar, I'd also never had to sit through such an offensive discussion of it. Above all, I was outnumbered by people who hadn't objected to the language in the text and who treated the discussion as cold, critical analysis. My presence in the room didn't register or matter to them.

I angled my Swatch toward me and noticed a fresh scratch across the face. We still had over an hour left of class. Surely you can recall a time in your life when each minute represented a debilitating unit of torture.

Hatch continued, "Turn to page forty-two. Lawrence says, 'Phoenix was not good at understanding continuous, logical statement. Logical connexion in speech seemed to stupefy him, make him stupid.'"

I glanced up momentarily to see my classmates nodding at the passage being read. Their silent agreement reminded me of the days when I still attended mass with my family, and everyone but me seemed to believe whatever hyperbolic tale was being read from the Bible. My chest heaved, drowning my thoughts and the voices in the room.

My copy of *St. Mawr* remained untouched on the table. While my classmates listened intently to the various passages, I furiously picked at my cuticles. I focused on the skin above my right thumbnail as if my flesh could surrender what I needed. The world fell away and only my raw hands existed, one working on the other until a fat droplet of blood appeared. A gush erupted so quickly that I reached for my

copy of *St. Mawr* and plunged my bleeding thumb between the dry pages.

"And on page one thirty-seven, Phoenix is described as 'a sexual rat.'"

Pages flipped to the quoted text. Professor Hatch read more quotes until he was interrupted by a blonde wearing pearls who added, "Phoenix has skills but is disposable."

Others in the class voiced agreement with her assessment. Not one person pointed out the blatant objectification or racism in Lawrence's characterization of Geronimo.

With my hand inside the book, I neither jotted notes nor actively listened. Instead, my body buzzed with adrenaline. My heart pounded as if I were running a marathon from my chair. I swallowed the sour taste in my mouth, and after a near eternity, I heard mention of the next assignment.

"For next week, read *The Rainbow*. I think you will all have lots to say about Ursula Brangwen," Professor Hatch announced with an air of satisfaction.

When class was dismissed, I kept my hand wedged inside the book. Putting on my coat was a challenge, but I succeeded with my one free hand. It helped that no one was looking at me.

As I exited the building, I tried to recall the times I'd made eye contact with anyone in that seminar, or even with Professor Hatch, but the longer I thought about it, I realized I never had.



On the walk to my dorm, I saw Jamie smoking a cigarette in front of the computer labs. Jamie and I had met during my sophomore year, when he struck up a conversation with me

in the library. He was half Cuban and, as luck would have it, like me he was from Texas. He was one of two people I considered friends on campus. My other friend was Julissa. Remember her? The hippie chica you met in New York?

Jamie's immaculate posture and faux eyelashes made him one of the more notable characters on an otherwise uniform campus.

When I was only a few feet away, he waved me over. Snowflakes clung to his lashes, rendering him otherworldly. "Hey, girl!" he hollered. One of his hands remained hidden in his coat pocket while his gloved smoking hand welcomed me.

I stopped near him, careful to stand away from his trail of smoke. "Hey," I replied.

"Where are you coming from?" Jamie asked. "Your job?"

"No. From class," I said with defeat.

"Oh no! You say something stupid?"

It was becoming obvious to me that I should have said something, but what was the point of spotlighting problematic language in the book when I was so horribly outnumbered? The last thing I wanted was all eyes on me, or to be a bumbling spokesperson for my ethnicity.

I shook my head. "Nah, it's not worth rehashing."

With his boot, he extinguished the last of his cigarette. "What are you doing later tonight?" Jamie asked. "Wanna go to Onota Lake with me and Adam?"

"Who's Adam?"

"You know Adam! German guy in my year. Blond, tall, square jaw, blue eyes."

"Last name?" I asked.

Jamie pronounced a name I'd never heard.

“What are you doing down at the lake? Isn’t it still frozen?”

“Yeah, it’s frozen. You wanna go?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I’ll go. What time? Who’s driving?”

Jamie flipped the metal top of his Zippo back and forth, mesmerized by the mindlessness of it. I chanced a look at my thumb. Dried blood caked the skin, so I feigned coldness, crossed my arms over my chest, and hid my hands in my armpits.

“Adam has a car. We’ll go around eight. We’ll stop by your room,” Jamie said.

“I’m gonna take a nap. My last class gave me a headache.”

For a second, I considered telling Jamie what had happened in seminar, but instead we parted with unenthused waves.

It was snowing again. Dozens of flakes pinpricked my face. In those days, I never complained about New England winters. I was too terrified to admit I’d miscalculated my fit at Williams, too proud to say that perhaps Massachusetts—home of Plath and Sexton—wasn’t for me.

In my dorm, I extracted the D. H. Lawrence book from my backpack as if it were a biohazard, my fingertips gingerly pinching a corner of the bloodied paperback. I swung it into the trash can under my desk. If I had to write a final paper on it, I’d consult a copy from the library. I never wanted to think about that book again.



At eight o’clock, I sat on my bed, admiring a print of Egon Schiele’s *Sitting Woman with Legs Drawn Up* hanging over my desk. In total, I had prints of two Egon Schieles, two

Jean-Michel Basquiats, two Georgia O'Keeffes, an Andy Warhol, and a Franz Kline on my walls.

Much of the art I wanted as wall décor didn't seem to exist in print form. After exhausting the internet for the umpteenth time, looking for Florine Stettheimer's lighthearted, jubilant prints, I shut down my desktop. Even international websites with euro prices had nothing of hers for sale. It was as if the art establishment allowed only a few token women artists to be printed. O'Keeffe was the American token. It pleased me that Frida Kahlo was the representative of Latin American women artists, but I wanted more choices.

A double knock interrupted my ponderings about Stettheimer. When I opened the door, I found Jamie and an attractive blond standing there shoulder to shoulder.

"Ready?" Jamie asked.

Both men were bundled in coats and knit beanies.

"Hi," I said to Adam. "I'm Tatum."

"Heeyyy," he said slyly, training his eyes on me.

Given the glee in Adam's voice, it seemed he found me as attractive as I found him. Were we going to kiss by the end of the night? It seemed possible, even likely.

"Put on your coat and let's go, Tatum," Jamie said with an impatient spin down the hall.

I grabbed my belongings, locked the room, and hurried behind them.



Adam parked his Volvo at the edge of the lake, and we explored the area on foot in the dark. The lake was frozen, as we'd known it would be, but the woods surrounding it were a tranquil evergreen that reminded me of Nordic fairy tales.

Normally such darkness would've frightened me, but Jamie and Adam had a contagious sense of adventure.

Since lakes in Texas never froze, until this jaunt, my only experience with the phenomenon was via *The Catcher in the Rye*, when Holden wonders what happens to the Central Park ducks during winter. Sharing that reference struck me as naïve, especially because both Adam and Jamie were treating our night like it was old hat, so I kept it to myself.

Adam was the first to slide over the lake in his sneakers. He navigated the surface like a hockey player, pushing his heels out as he slid forward with determination.

"C'mon!" he hollered.

Jamie clung to my coat sleeve. "So," he asked, "is Adam a hottie or what?"

I chuckled. "He's not ugly. Are y'all cool? He doesn't strike me as someone with tons of gay friends."

"Oh, Tatum," Jamie said, tugging my arm. "He isn't going to hook up with *me*."

"Are you two gonna whisper to each other all night, or join me on the ice?" Adam shouted. His hands were cupped over his mouth like a cone, causing his voice to echo.

"We're coming," I said as I coaxed my feet forward.

Because I couldn't swim, I was deathly afraid of tempting bodies of water. But I tried to slide over the lake as if it were the most natural action in the world. As if I belonged on a frozen lake in Massachusetts with these two men.



On the drive back, Jamie dared Adam to drive with his headlights off for half a minute. We all knew the act might result in our deaths, but Adam smiled and accepted the challenge.

Internally I panicked as Adam flicked off the lights and we barreled down pitch-black roads, invisible to animals and other cars.

"Are you timing this, Jamie?" I asked as I double-checked my seat belt in the back seat and closed my eyes. "You better be timing this!"

"Jesus! We'll be fine. Only fifteen seconds left."

Until Jamie called time, I didn't breathe, only prayed, asking a benevolent universe to protect us.

Finally, Adam flooded the road with headlights, announcing, "Dare completed!"

"Nice," Jamie said, laughing.

"That was fun. The lake," I managed to say after my heart rate settled.

"When we reach campus, can you drop me off first?" Jamie asked.

I glanced up to the rearview mirror, where I found Adam's eyes waiting for mine. Was Jamie trying to set us up? What was happening? Had Adam asked Jamie to invite me?

Adam inserted a CD, and for the remainder of the drive we listened to an ambient Brian Eno album.

As Jamie requested, we pulled up to his dorm first. Even before Adam stepped on the brake, Jamie was unbuckling his seat belt.

"Good night, kids," Jamie announced as he leaped out and slammed the car door.

Adam and I watched him shuffle off in the snow toward the entrance of his building. The night was an inky black mirror dotted only with dorm lights.

"Wanna have a drink in my room first before I take you home?" Adam asked.

I worked the opening shift at the bakery the next morning, which meant I had to be up in seven hours. But this type of thing rarely happened to me. Adam was traditionally East Coast beautiful. His skin was smooth, blemish-free, and even while sitting he towered over me with his good health and strong genes. I was intrigued.

“Sure. Let’s do that.”

Are you wondering why I’m telling you this particular story, Mateo? Since this is my account, I decide what to reveal, even if what I share makes you uncomfortable.

Adam and I parked in a plowed lot and hurried toward his dorm. I knew what this was about, and I was about it too. Since his dorm had no elevators, we raced up the stairs two at a time as if a fire clipped our heels.

On the fourth floor, out of breath and gleaming with sweat, Adam unlocked a single room and we fell on his bed as if we had just escaped a Jack London-type disaster. Wasting no time, Adam cupped my face and began passionately kissing me. Up until this night, I’d kissed only two guys in my life, neither of whom kissed as well as he did. Not by a long shot. Immediately I realized I never wanted to stop kissing Adam. We continued, surfacing only momentarily for air or to miss each other’s mouths for a second before resuming.

“Are you German?” I murmured during our third break.

Adam grinned. “Yeah, my parents met in Bonn. My brother and I were born in New York, though. Do you know my brother, Max?”

I shook my head, but once he’d mentioned it, I realized I had seen someone on campus who resembled Adam.

“Do you have siblings?” he asked.

Instead of answering, I resumed kissing Adam. This time, his hands groped my breasts, and I released my blouse and unhooked my bra. We kissed until eventually Adam removed his shirt.

When we finally unlocked mouths, I said, "I'm an only child."

I'd repeated such words hundreds of times, but this night the statement struck me as a sad, lonely fact to pity.

"Oh," Adam said. "Where is your family from?"

"Texas," I replied. "We've been in Texas for hundreds of years. Since it was Mexico, actually."

Adam's mouth met mine again and we kissed so deeply that I could almost imagine us kissing every night like this until he graduated. It could be our secret. We could even keep it from Jamie, who would undoubtedly have been proud of my score.

After several minutes, Adam unbuckled his pants, then mine. His erection pushed through his boxers onto my thigh. Our mouths meandered down each other's necks, chests, and stomachs.

"Do you speak Spanish?" Adam asked. His voice was buried near the crook of my neck.

"I do," I answered. I asked him in Spanish if he did too.

"Yeah. When we were growing up, our maid spoke Spanish. She taught it to Max and me. My parents still use her."

Something like strychnine filled my veins and our kissing stopped. I backed away and leaned against the window framing his bed. My mind became dizzy with bits of conversation from the D. H. Lawrence seminar. *What's the purpose of Mexicans? Use her. Sexual rat.*

A chill from the windowpane crept over my naked skin.

For a beat, the Catholic notion of sin felt real again, and I wore it like a heavy necklace. Your writing deals with being seen or caught with the shame of one's own actions. Well, at that moment in Adam's room, I was being seen by the moon, by a creator, by an attractive racist, and by everyone who spoke or taught Spanish to a child. I grabbed my blouse off Adam's floor and stuffed my bra into my coat pocket.

"What happened?" Adam asked. "Should we have that drink now?" he said, and laughed.

As I buttoned my blouse, I noticed his walls were bare except for a rectangular water painting of a Parisian café. *What kind of personality does that reveal?* I wondered. An utterly boring one. He was boring. It was just making out. I could find a better mouth elsewhere.

A NOVEL

HAPPINESS



URSULA
VILLARREAL-MOURA

Preorder Now!