

KATIE BREWER BALL

1997

OKAY, WHO *wants to ride in the trunk*, Sam asks.

She slowly turns the big silver key and stands next to its wide yawn. Sam goes to Immaculate Conception, a Catholic high school on the east side. Kids in LA have cars and they drive all over town at night underneath the shimmering streetlights, listening to punk music, sounds that are hard in a softer way than the East Coast hard of firm metal seasons. I stand awkwardly in the UCLA parking lot, hands pushed down into my short pockets, some weird cold-weather kid from Boston. It's one week into our summer theater program for teens. We have decided to go somewhere together, somewhere off campus, somewhere we can feel like actual college students instead of teenage dreamers. There are seven of us, but only five seats—Me, Lisa, Sam, Shauna, Luke, Daniel, and Gabby. No one can be left behind and the trunk is technically space in the car, so . . .

Lisa bounds toward the back of the gray Acura. She moves low to the ground, thighs spread, feet flat. Lisa takes dance classes at the city college in Riverside, she tells me how her ass is all muscle. I notice her body, what she tells me about it, what she tells me she likes about it. I like noticing things about her. Cheeks, lips, soft things. Lisa is seventeen. She is nine days older than me, and three inches shorter. She has deep brown hair that reminds me of an older field hockey girl from home. She has freckles and tells me her father is Irish and her mother is Mexican. She talks about her abuelita who lives in Barstow, halfway to Vegas, and about all the raves she goes to in the desert with her friends.

Everyone in California is so free, like beach hair or Keanu Reeves falling in love with Patrick Swayze, like sunsets and long roads flanked with banal and delicious sushi restaurants and taco stands and chain diners. Lisa wears plastic rainbow bracelets filled with alternating glow-in-the-dark beads, which were once clear but are now yellow. Her shirt is baby purple, maybe lilac, and she tucks things into her bra strap like secrets or the key to her dorm room. She lets the key hang out on one side of her bra strap and the butterfly key chain bobble hang out on the other.

She gets in the trunk, curves back along the dark gray carpeting. I step up, in, lay down, half moon-mirror her, face to face, smiling wildly.

Sam looks down at us, says something which sounds like a giggle, and shuts us in the trunk.

How far is Hollywood, I ask, more thrilled than scared.

Twenty minutes, Lisa whispers.

Oh, I whisper back.

Everything is dark in here save the little wires and rectangles that line the back of the trunk. I see red and white lines, empty boxes, dots, like a Lite-Brite or the Pleiades.

Usually I talk goofy fast around Lisa but now in the dark I'm not sure what to say. I hear the engine start and then the radio playing the song "Barbie Girl," which we have decided to ironically hate. Fake blond real Barbie sings her poppy bubblegum refrain "I'm a strong, single girl in a fantasy world," which filters through the car and into the trunk. I can hear Sam howling from inside the front of the car.

In tight spaces I become more aware of my breathing. The trunk of the car expands and contracts like a rib cage. We are moving laughing rolling up on our sides as the car turns out of the UCLA parking lot and onto the long windy stretch of Sunset. My hand involuntarily reaches out, and I grab Lisa's thigh to balance.

I laugh and gasp at the same time. The car turns again, and I breathe and brace harder. My body a jellybean or a roly-poly. It's hard to know the shape of the outside from here in the dark. Or maybe the shape doesn't matter right now. Our hands are on each other and the smooth roof of the trunk.

With each turn I brace, push against Lisa, and then soften. It smells like tires, carpeting, and Lisa, which is a mixture of cinnamon sticks and Trader Joe's shampoo. Patchouli and coconut stick to her like CK1. It makes my chest hurt, too full.

Lisa's arm is taut, clutching the curve of my hip. She slowly brings her other hand up to my shoulder, then my face. We aren't laughing any more. At a stoplight she moves her hand again, this time up my neck.

Is she teasing me? She brushes past my jaw and lands on my mouth, tugging on my bottom lip with her finger as the car speeds up again. My arm locks hard against her thigh, my body stiff but warm, so warm, humid like preseason soccer drills. She keeps her hand on my lips, pulls down again in a soft sort of yank, and I let my mouth open. I know what it's like to crave, to want the feel of something on your lips, to surrender to the sweetness of an afterschool snack from the corner store. She brushes the length of my lips, behind my eyes in the dark I see crisp

white boats on the Charles, a springtime sensation of small green buds and cold morning and water. I am flooded with it, fast movement, an event filled with bodies.

I let her pass and slide up onto my tongue. My lips press together around her, praying, whispering through the ridges of her skin, like I can feel each inlay and valley of her finger coming into my mouth and then slowly pulling back out. She does this again, pushes in the smoothness, and her fingernails catch my lip.

My body expands, takes up all the space. My lips are sandpaper and velvet. She rubs them with her finger and I'm holding the base of her hand with mine. Red electric Legos light the back of the car. I don't know where my body is—it's never been here before. Everything else hovers and floats. We're sprinting, hurling through space. The car stops, laughter booms from the steel body. I put my fingers along her lips, in her mouth, feel the gentle textures, the bulging, swollen lips and then the firm hold of her suck.

What if I could live my whole life through only the sensations of my lips, puffed out to touch it all? My body is phosphorescent and tiny microorganisms dot each swath of skin. I think of how people talk about someone having bright eyes, like Lisa's sunny ocean ones. Yesterday she taught me the word *smitten*; it's what she is, what she can be with other girls. She doesn't date them, like doesn't think it's real. But in this moment, I don't know this, don't care about any thought or rule that exists outside the trunk.

But on some level I know that what we're doing is highly dangerous and illegal, and that in a fender bender the trunk will crumple like an accordion, and we will be there smashtangled with the wire and steel bones of the car on the side of the curviest stretch of Sunset. Two theater kids, bodies leaking like cracked and oozing glow sticks. But I try not to think about this. Sam is at the wheel driving fast along the Sunset Strip, past Hamburger Mary's and The Viper Room, out toward the Hollywood sign that is just a typical fixture in her life. Sam trusting herself and us trusting Sam that cars won't clip the rear bumper or run a red light. Sam so sure of herself that she doesn't even think to declare that only a limited number of us can come; she immediately offers up the trunk as an option for our after-school field trip.

My mouth on Lisa's fingers, hers on my one-then-two fingers, I don't even notice the car slowing down, turning and turning again in the shape of a box into a parking garage. The car comes to a stop with

the shift hiccupping into park, and in slow motion Lisa and I start to disentangle our bodies. My brain knows that it's only my fingers, her fingers that have woven into me, but my skin is aglow with sensation everywhere, all the hairs on my arms and legs and neck at full attention.

If we're in a trunk it doesn't mean anything, right? What if forever is the time of the trunk?

Sam click-pops the lock from inside the car and we emerge into the glaring fluorescent lights of a parking garage. The sunset that had streaked the sky back at UCLA has now turned to a plum bruise beyond the concrete frames of the car park. Sam laughs at how slowly we are all moving as she pulls the trunk fully open to let us out. Shauna, Luke, Daniel, and Gabby gather around the back of the car. Shauna says, *Ummm, it looks hot in there* in a way where I know she knows. And then Luke is off about how he needs to get a pipe from the head shop. *But not one of those hippy glass bowls*, he says, *like, a cute one*. He means he wants to smoke weed but not actually look like he smokes weed. Luke is smooth, really gay in a clean, Jean Paul Gaultier-wearing, frosted-tips kinda way. He says his best friend is Natalie Portman.

Lisa gets out quickly, moves with the pace of everyone else. I feel confused, like waking up from a nap, which I hate, and gelatinously put one foot out and over the bumper and down. I swing the other along like a cowboy dismounting a horse only with none of the swagger, my face red hot. Whatever sex is, I think we were basically having it.

My friends float down Hollywood Boulevard along one strip mall then another. We are those teenagers from the movies, we are perfect. All femme in some way or another, all beautiful, and also filled with self-hatred. Each look forged in the last six to twelve months in quiet angsty bedrooms on one coast or the other. Walking in the warm summer night just after sunset, past stores with sex toys and red-lace teddys staring back out the window at us, I breathe. I've never been so in love with the world. Purple and pink and yellow wigs float in the storefront windows, and neon lights make the street a much sexier version of Times Square, the closest thing I know. Even the palm trees that tower over us seem to be lit up in the warmth of the car headlights.

Taller than the rest of us, our own homegrown California palm, Shauna talks animatedly about her acting career, about butoh dance and movement. She points suddenly to one thing or another in a store window, and then to a bright green Impala bouncing down the street. She tells us that she was raised as a boy, but is not a boy, never was. *Of*

course, we say, *no more, you don't have to pretend to be that anymore*. Beautiful women in tight shorts and string crop tops weave through us, and we giggle in awe. In Boston the default reaction to everything is aggression, a kind of do-you-want-to-fight look. Heads cock back, chin pops up pointing like *Hey wassup* or *Don't fuck with me*. Shoulders hunch and hooded sweatshirts pulled up to cover faces.

But on Hollywood Boulevard people make eye contact, look you up and down, and if you're lucky, give you an easy smile. Los Angeles is the promised land, the land of milk and honey, the land of long thick legs with even longer thicker heels. Stumbling behind in a daze, I double-skip to catch up with everyone, feeling like I've never been anywhere in my whole life, and grab absentmindedly at Lisa who is walking along the yellow strip at the edge of the sidewalk. All the sudden Luke and Shauna take a sharp right. Bright white windows are crammed with small glass pipes. Scanning the paraphernalia, my eyes rest on a big busty red devil bong with the word *heaven* ornately scrolled in the valley between her nips. Outside the store are two small vending machines with gumballs and lollipops. Lisa pulls out her coin purse. It's a 1970s blue plastic shell painted over with what looks like clear glitter nail polish. She puts in a coin and retrieves a lollipop from the metal slot. *How many licks does it take*, she says to us. Each one of her freckles looks at me. Silver glitter tickling the corner of her eyes. Then she looks around and cackles her big laugh. It's a look-at-me kind of laugh, and she mimes biting the head off of her blow pop in a big cartoon bite. Is she smiling at me, I wonder, and hope, but also wouldn't know what to do with. And then the feeling of "we" resurfaces, and I am somehow gratified by everything about us, every one of us, a many-armed acting troupe that maybe, I think I could even say, is a little bisexual for each other.

I slide my hand into my jeans for a quarter and twist the machine knob. I unwrap my ring pop, trying to look cute, like a hot baby with a pacifier, like the time I tried flirting with a boy in seventh grade by letting my finger dangle off the side of my lip until he finally said, *Why is your finger in your mouth?* How was I supposed to know what was sexy and what was weird? I tried to imagine how this could be sexy, us both with lollipops leaning against the wall outside the head shop.

Sucking on my ring pop, one knee bent to prop me up on the wall at an angle, I listen to them talk. Two skater boys with giant T-shirts and even bigger jeans, torn and dirty at their ends, roll by. There is a gentleness to everything here that puts me at ease. Sam can't help but look at

my friends, Lisa doesn't notice and just keeps talking about the college students she dances with, about the ballet lessons she used to take. I watch it all, take it in, let the blue raspberry ring pop occupy my mouth.

Daniel and Gabby are waiting on the other side of the door talking about Tennessee Williams, about how Daniel is the Marlon Brando of Boca Raton Community High. He is the youngest of us at sixteen, and Gabby is the oldest at eighteen. She is also the fanciest; a New Yorker who is going to Barnard in the fall. She's tall and thin, all knees and elbows with tight shoulder-length brown curls. She is an actor's actor, as in she only does Shakespeare. She doesn't try to sing and dance like the rest of us, she just acts. From Gabby I learn that acting is more respectable, more serious than the clowning the rest of us do. Acting is a brooding craft, one meant for the dark black box theater. Actors don't feel their bodies, they warm them up. They drink to die, not to party. Nothing is easy for an actor, and everything must be done perfectly. Gabby is not exactly like this, but there is something ascetic about her, something Catholic I think even though she's Jewish.

Two girls in off-matching tight denim overalls walk by arm in arm. One is wearing an airbrushed shirt with big pink flourishes around the word *baby* and the other has two tiny glossy barrettes in her long straight dark hair. Both deep wine-colored lipstick. Would they like the boys with the baggy pants, or the ones driving the low riders with hydraulics down the boulevard? Would they like Shauna or Daniel or Lisa or me? And how are you supposed to know who they like? Amidst the flashing lights and the shining cars, we are the last people they notice.

When we get back to the car, I offer to go back into the trunk for the ride home. I watch as Lisa doesn't think twice before jumping through the long car door into the backseat with Luke and Gabby. I try to mask my disappointment as I curl back into the trunk and grab Daniel's hand pulling him with me. Daniel has a mess of dyed blond curly hair straight from the shores of South Florida, a place with money and much older, absentee parents with blonde plastic surgeries. He's pretty, like an actor or a surfer, with a goofy crooked smile and blue eyes. Daniel will teach me how to hug, how to be tender, what a sweet and undemanding friendship looks like.

Daniel is beautiful, sweet. Like he is objectively hot, hotter than Lisa probably. But my feelings for him are different somehow. As we wheel out of the parking garage in Hollywood and back onto Sunset Boulevard, I take Daniel's hand into my mouth. Traces of the streetlights

peek through the cracks of the trunk. I replicate what happened with Lisa. This is what happens in the trunk, I think, like it's the most normal thing, both riding in your friend's trunk and finger blow jobs. Everyone must do this. We suck each other off, fingers and lips the whole ride home. This time it feels different and also exactly the same. There's never a risk of kissing, but this time I confidently take the lead, not nervous or scared. I am determined to suck on him and to put my fingers in his mouth.

When he takes my fingers, pulls on them, I feel it, I feel the ocean pulling down the central line of my torso from my chest like a weight tugging between my legs. I feel heavy, in a trance, so far from my body but also inside its distance, like I am hovering in a distant landscape of fingers and ridges and wet rhythms. But the stars in the galaxy are gone, and I am a body with another body in pleasure, in constraint, with skin and touch, and it's all suddenly very matter of fact.