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# WATCH US RISE



BLOOMSBURY

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LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

**AUGUST**

# 1

## JASMINE

I'm a month away from starting my junior year of high school, and I just found out my father only has four months to live.

I don't really hear all of what Mom and Dad are saying. Just the important words like "cancer" and "out of remission" and "stage four."

Chelsea is the first person I call. We've been friends since elementary school. I know once I tell her, she'll tell Nadine and Isaac, which is good because I only want to say it once.

I don't know what I'd do without Chelsea, Nadine, and Isaac.

They are the kind of friends who make even the ordinary day fun, who scrape every dollar they can to chip in on a birthday gift. The kind of friends who know the magic of making Rice Krispies Treats, the joy of curling up under blankets to watch back-to-back episodes of a favorite show with bowls of popcorn that we eat as fast as we can and make more. They are the kind of friends that show up at my house—even though I told them not to—to make sure I am okay.

Here they are on my stoop. Chelsea saying, “I needed to see your face.”

Nadine hugs me. “We won’t stay long . . . unless you want us to. Whatever you need, we got you.”

Isaac doesn’t say anything. He just looks at me, and I know he knows this feeling all too well. His mom died when we were in elementary school. I was too young to drop everything and rush over to his house back then, but I remember when he came back to school, his eyes empty of the light they usually carried. I remember when our teacher had us make Mother’s Day cards to take home and how he left to go to the bathroom and never came back. After school, when I saw him in the hallway, his eyes were red.

Isaac just sits on the top step of the stoop, right next to me, and really, that’s all I want. Just someone to be here. Yeah, he knows.

We don’t last long outside because it is too hot. Harlem’s sun is blazing down on us, so we go inside and sit in the living room. Dad is on the sofa. I sit next to him. No one knows what to say or do when they see Dad. Dad cuts through the tension, acting like his normal self, like today is just a regular sunny New York day. “The young *art-ivists* have arrived,” he says. He calls us *art-ivists* because we’re all growing into ourselves as artists and activists. Well, that’s what he says.

Chelsea is the poet.

Nadine is the singer (and a pretty good DJ too).

Isaac is the visual artist.

I am the writer and actress.

According to Dad, art is never just art, and since there is so much going on in the world we should be using our art to say something, do something. So when he asks, “What have you all been up to this summer?” and we answer in syncopation with shrugging shoulders, saying *I don't know*, he says, “you mean to tell me you all haven't created *anything* this summer?” He gives us all a disappointed look and says to Chelsea, “Not even one poem?” Before she can answer, Dad says, “And, Isaac, I know you know better.” He says this to Isaac because Isaac's grandparents were part of the Young Lords Party, a Puerto Rican civil rights group. They helped to start *Palante*, a newspaper in the South Bronx that told news of the Young Lords. “There is no way you get a pass for not doing anything meaningful this summer,” Dad says.

Isaac doesn't even try to talk himself out of it.

Dad keeps fussing. “You all have had so much time to take advantage of the city, and you haven't done anything? *That is* some kind of tragedy.” He is smiling, kind of.

“There hasn't been much to do,” Nadine says.

Dad shakes his head. “There's always something to do in New York.” He starts coughing—hard—and everyone panics, rushing to get him water, tissues. Chelsea especially. “I'm okay. I'm okay. Just allergies,” Dad says. “Dying people have regular ailments too.” He laughs, but none of us do. Then he says, “I know Jasmine told you. Thank you for loving her enough to come over.”

Chelsea wipes a tear from her face. “My mom and dad told me to ask if there is anything we can do?” Her voice sounds frail, and that is never, ever a word I think of to describe Chelsea.

Isaac says, “Yeah, my dad was asking too. He said he’d call a little later.”

Dad looks like he is actually trying to think up something. He says, “I’ll reach out to your parents if I need to. But, um, I do have something I’d like the four of you to do.”

I lean forward. Nadine and Isaac sit up straighter. Chelsea says, “Anything.”

“Well, like I said, I think it’s tragic that you all are wasting your summer away. I didn’t grow up in New York,” Dad says. “I wish I’d had this rich culture at my fingertips.”

“Dad, what does this have to do with us supporting you?” I ask.

“Oh, I don’t need the kind of support you think I need, sweetheart. I need you all to keep on working on you—your education, your life as artists—”

“*Dad—*”

“Just indulge me for a moment, okay?”

I sit back, lean against the cushions.

“Listen, I don’t want your pity or worry,” Dad says. “I want each of you to be out there learning and growing and discovering. You all are such talented artists—and I mean that. Get out, go see the places that present poetry, visual art, and theater made by people of color. Study some of the greats so your work can be influenced by them.”

“Are you seriously giving us another summer challenge?” I ask. It’s not the first time Dad has sent us on a summer scavenger hunt of the city, but usually it’s a little more thought out. Like the time he sent us out with a map of Harlem and challenged us to find historical landmarks and spaces essential to the Harlem Renaissance. We had to take a photo in front of each place as proof. And then there was the time he challenged us to only go to movie theaters that showed independent films. We had to share our findings and write reviews. We’re used to him sending us out with maps and a list of instructions. But I didn’t expect this today.

“Let’s call it the Brown Art Challenge,” Dad says.

We all just look at him, blank stares.

“I’m serious. You want to show how much you love and care about me? Keep living,” he tells us. “Go out and find some inspiration. Create some art in response to what you see.”

Chelsea is the first to agree, saying, “Where should we start?”

And just like that, the four of us are sitting with Dad plotting and planning: Bronx Museum, Studio Museum, El Museo del Barrio. “And bonus points to the person who can surprise me with a place that’s not on the list,” Dad says. “But not the Schomburg Center. That would be cheating.” Dad works at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and in some ways, it’s my second home. I love it when an exhibit is just about to open and Dad brings me, Jason, and Mom to see it before anyone else.

Mom comes home with my brother, Jason, who is eight. He’s



been at summer camp all day and doesn't know about Dad yet. Mom gives me a look that tells me my company has to leave. And I wish they could stay because that would delay the moment my brother finds out that our dad is going to die. That would keep in these tears that want to fall so bad. I have been swallowing them since Chelsea, Nadine, and Isaac showed up. No matter how much Dad is trying to keep things normal with his New York City scavenger hunt, no matter how much we all try to laugh at his corny jokes, these tears are here. Pressing against my chest.

Mom says hello to everyone and takes Jason upstairs. She looks tired and worried and not like my mom at all.

Dad stands. "Thank you all for coming over."

We walk to the door. Chelsea opens her mouth, I think to say goodbye, but instead an avalanche of tears falls. And then Nadine starts. Isaac is looking down at the hardwood floors. Just staring.

"It's okay to cry," Dad says. "Feel whatever you need to feel. But listen, everything doesn't have to change just because the cancer is back. You four are starting your junior year. I want things to be as normal as possible, just like every other school year. No matter what happens this year, you all need to stay focused, do your best. Don't let me or any distraction get in your way," he says. "You all are just beginning."

**Praise poem for the summer—**

*by Chelsea Spencer*

Here's to the warmth & every yes.  
To the grind of summertime  
dripping cones & chlorine haze.

Here's to float & exist, show up.  
Every challenge accepted. Revival  
in East Harlem. Freedom!

Fighters printmaking our past  
to light up our present. We're here.  
The future of us.

How we study our ancestors.  
Dance ourselves into existence.  
Electric grind. See the struggles.

Together, we arrive, arms linked,  
lungs loud as life. Our hearts  
conjuring words

& poems. All of us riding each wave  
toward eclipses & ellipses always  
the ongoing. Always ahead.

Facing forward. Our lives a ripple  
a nonstop jump-start.  
Making our mark.

**SEPTEMBER**

# 2

## CHELSEA

No matter how hard I try, I will never look like the cover of any magazine . . . not that I want to, but well . . . maybe I want to just a little bit. This is the third outfit I've tried on this morning.

There's a pile of T-shirts with my new favorite slogans on them: Cats Against Catcalls (with five super-cute kittens on the front) and one that says Riots Not Diets. I've tried them both on, mixing with biker boots and plaid pants . . . definitely not working. I try another look.

I take out my bag of makeup to choose the right shade of super-lush, kissable liquid lip color. I have been reading that fuchsia is the new "it" color for the fall, and that it really makes your lips pop, but the colors my mom picked up for me last week are not quite cutting it. I turn them over, making sure she got the right shades, and read: Pure Doll and Diva-licious. *Ewww*. The patriarchy is even showing up in the names of my lip gloss? Unbelievable.

*The Spencer women have never won beauty pageants.* My mom first said that to me when I was in the second grade and my best friend won the Mini Princess Contest at the New York State Fair. I was seven, and I had no front teeth, legs that rivaled a giraffe's, and a fully grown nose. My mom also told me that a beauty contest was a totally old-fashioned way to judge young girls, and it was created by some sexist, corporate machine that was trying to get women to stay in their place.

She used the line again in the ninth grade when I wasn't voted onto the basketball homecoming court. She took me for a hot fudge sundae and told me that women have to learn how to stand out with their words, with their fierce minds, and that courage lived in the actions we made, and not in our bra size or the texture of our hair.

I nodded along and pretended I believed the same thing. The next day I bought a bunch of beauty magazines and started to study what I needed to do to be beautiful on the outside.

That was two years ago. A lot has changed since then.

"Hurry up," my sister, Mia, calls into my room.

"I'm trying, just give me a second!"

"You look fine just the way you are," she calls back, not even seeing what I'm wearing or how I've managed my hair. I have abandoned my intricate routine of gel, comb, mousse, straightening iron, curling iron, and hairspray . . . that would totally derail us getting to school on time. Who cares if Jacob Rizer calls me a frizz factory. *Screw him.*

I kind of like the way I look, and everything feels different

and new. I've grown into my nose and learned to embrace my big hair. As for my body, I am currently not at war with it, and even though I still have no breasts to speak of, at least I can sometimes go without a bra. Freedom!

I study myself in the mirror one more time and dab concealer around the patch of zits that have decided to accompany me on my first day. I apply midnight-black mascara to my eyes and a blush that's called Color Me Perfect to my cheeks. *Gag.*

"Almost there," I call back, finally deciding on a shirt that says: Girls Just Wanna Have Fun-Damental Human Rights. I put on a pair of skinny jeans (ugh, labeling pants with the word "skinny" is completely superficial and against everything I stand for, but still . . .) and a floppy straw hat that I got over the summer. Not perfect, but not horrific either.

"I've been ready since seven thirty," Mia brags, swinging into my room. Of course she's been ready for hours. Mia wakes up ready. She's a senior. We're only a year apart, so we're practically required to be close, but since we're so different, we get along pretty well. Mia is just confident. She's the captain of the varsity basketball team and wears her hair cropped short. "You look good, Chels—very feminist-y."

"You both look great just the way you are, and you're both going to be very late to school if you don't pull it together," my mom says, peeking her head in. "Could you please be on time for your first day?"

"Yes, yes, we're on it." I say.

"And remember," Mom finishes, "it's what's on the inside that

matters. But you two also look very good on the outside. Now get moving, and try not to focus so much on how you look,” she says, walking out.

I grab my book bag and journal, and one of my poems falls out.

Mia grabs it. “This new?” she asks, starting to read.

“Kinda new. I started it over the summer. Figured it would be a good reminder for the year.”

Mia reads it out loud.

### **Advice to Myself from Chelsea to Chelsea**

Be reckless when it matters most.

Messy incomplete. Belly laugh. Love language.

Be butterfly stroke in a pool of freestylers.

Fast & loose.

You don't need all the right moves all the time.

You just need limbs wild. Be equator. Lava.

Ocean floor, the neon of plankton. Be unexpected.

The rope they lower to save the other bodies.

Be your whole body. Every hiccup & out of place.

Elastic girl. Be stretch moldable.

Be funk flexible. Free fashionable. Go on.

Be hair natural. Try & do anything, woman.

What brave acts like on your hips.

Be cocky at school. Have a fresh mouth.



Don't let them tell you what's prim & proper.  
Not your ladylike. Don't be their ladylike.  
Their dress-up girl. Not their pretty.  
Don't be their bottled. Saturated. Dyed. Squeezed.  
SPANXed. Be gilded. Gold. Papyrus.  
A parakeet's balk & flaunt. Show up uninvited.  
Know what naked feels like.  
Get the sweetness. Be the woman you love.  
Be tight rope & expanse. Stay hungry.  
Be a mouth that needs to get fed. Ask for it.  
Stay alert—lively—alive & unfettered.  
Full on it all. Say yes when it matters.  
Be dragonfish. Set all the fires.  
Be all the woman they warned you against being.  
Be her anyway.

She laughs and pulls me into a hug.

“What?” I ask, pulling away.

“I love your mind, Chelsea Spencer. I'm excited we get one more year in high school together.”

“Me too. Just give me one more second,” I say, grabbing a stack of beauty magazines from my nightstand. “These are for poetry research. I have a ton of new ideas for my club this afternoon, and I want to share them with my crew.” I leaf through a copy, pausing at an article about keeping your hot bikini body through the holiday season, before stuffing them into my bag. “I mean, I just feel like our club needs to get more focused and

serious. What's the point of writing if we have nothing important to say, right?"

I grab my phone to call Jasmine.

"Hey," Jasmine says, "are you already at school?"

"No, I'm still home. Mini fashion crisis. Don't judge me. Are you excited?" I ask.

"Yes," Jasmine says. "We have so much to catch up on."

"It has been too long since I've seen you! I can't wait to share my new poems and this essay I've been working on. And I have a new piece you'll love. We are gonna totally shut down the patriarchal systems of oppression this year!" I can see Mia rolling her eyes and pushing me to get it together.

"You're out of your mind," Jasmine says, "and I love it. See you soon."

\* \* \*

We head to school, stopping to get Mia a bacon, egg, and cheese at the bodega, and run into Isaac on the corner of 181st Street and Wadsworth. He's coming out of Esmerelda's Bakery with a bag of doughnuts, and he looks super laid back, as always, wearing one of his signature worn superhero shirts. He's the brainiest guy I know and is built like he could be a linebacker, even though he hates sports. He once told me that football is built on violence and racism, and it is corrupting and exploiting kids in low-income neighborhoods.

"Cool shirt, Chelsea," he says, giving me a quick hug. "Doughnut?"

I shake my head no, while Mia reaches her hand in the bag. She is always hungry.

“Nothing for you?” Isaac asks.

“I’m too nervous, and I kinda feel sick to my stomach,” I say as we get closer to the school. I wipe some of the blush off my face. “Do I look like a clown?”

“Are you serious?” Mia asks. “You look fine, Chelsea. Stop freaking out. Just be normal.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” I say. “And I don’t know why I’m so nervous either. It’s not a big deal. It’s just junior year. It’s just . . . I guess I just want to make this year matter, and I’m not totally sure how, but it’s fine. It’s all gonna work out, right?” I ask, reaching my hand in the bag to grab a chocolate-covered doughnut, figuring a little sugar would probably make things better.

“Well, I mean, it’s kind of a big deal,” Isaac says, pulling out a doughnut and eating it in two bites. “I mean, here’s the thing, Chelsea—this is our time. We gotta make the most of our junior year. This is what colleges are looking at, and this is the time we make our mark as artists. We have work to do, I mean serious work to do, so yeah, I get why you might be nervous.”

“He’s right,” Mia says as we get to the front of the school. “That’s what everyone looks at for college, so it’s true, junior year is when it all really matters.” Mia smiles at me and gives me a quick hug before she runs off to join her teammates, who are standing in a huddle on the corner.

“Great,” I say out loud, to no one in particular. “I’m glad this

is a huge deal and I have a ton to worry about, and that I'm wearing way too much blush and that I definitely wore the wrong outfit." I survey the crowd. Most of the girls are in sundresses and leggings. "Am I the only one who chose a quirky, cool, liberal shirt to kick off the year?"

"Yes," Isaac says, scanning the crowd, "and that's why we love you. Hey, give this to Jasmine when you see her, okay?" he says, handing me the bag of doughnuts and turning to walk into school.

"You got her a doughnut?" I ask.

"I got everyone doughnuts."

"You love her," I say, swatting him on the arm. "You totally love her."

"I totally hate you," he says, smiling.

# 3

## JASMINE

If I had a superpower it would be to make myself invisible.

Not so I could eavesdrop on people's conversations to see if they were talking about me—although that would be pretty cool. I would use it only in moments when being seen causes me to feel like nothing. Like right now. Everywhere I turn, I am reminded that something is wrong with me. Today, it's the posters plastered on the dingy tile walls of the subway station at 135th and St. Nicholas. I'm heading uptown from Harlem to get to school, and this is not what I want to see first thing in the morning.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Overweight children may not outlive their parents.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

BIG kids become BIGGER adults.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

It's not about being big boned.  
It's about eating big meals.

**FIGHT THE WAR AGAINST  
CHILDHOOD OBESITY.**

War?

America is at war with me?

I try not to look at the posters, but it's hard not to, since the print is so big and the chubby kids in the pictures look so sad and helpless.

I walk down the platform so I can get on at the last car. It's usually less full, so hopefully I'll get a seat. It feels good to be out of the house actually going somewhere other than the store for Mom, the pharmacy for Dad, or the park with Jason.

All of August was spent running errands and watching Jason after his summer camp ended. Now that Dad is sick, Mom has me on the tightest leash possible. That whole Brown Art Challenge excursion didn't even happen—not for me anyway. Every time I made a plan to meet up with Chelsea, Nadine, and Isaac, an emergency would happen with Dad or Mom would need me to watch Jason. I couldn't even stay at the summer drama camp the whole time. After all the auditions and fund-raising I did, I had to leave after only the second day because Dad was admitted to the hospital. But now with school starting, my time will be *my* time and I can get back to acting. I'm in the August Wilson Acting Ensemble, a social justice theater club at Amsterdam Heights. We're known all over the city for being one of the best theater ensembles for teens, and we put plays on every year, inviting the whole community. We fill the auditorium every time. We even travel sometimes and get to take special workshops with Broadway actors.

At Amsterdam Heights High School, all students have to

join a social justice club. Clubs meet after school, and it's my favorite part of the day. I could have chosen Animal Rights, Environmental Justice, the LGBTQIA+ Club, or the We Are What We Eat Food Justice Club. Our school is all about social justice and equity, so our clubs all have to have some kind of social consciousness to them. But even at a place like Amsterdam Heights, as a black girl who isn't a size 4, I stand out. Maybe that's why I chose theater club. I like experimenting with my voice, changing my look. It's kind of freeing, being someone else.

The train pulls in, more crowded than I expected. I squeeze myself into the jam-packed car. The door closes just as I bump into a man who is trying to keep his balance by holding on to the silver pole that is covered with sweaty hands of all colors and sizes. The train jerks forward, and I grab on to the man's arm so I don't fall. "Sorry," I say.

"No worries." He steps back as much as he can to make room for me and moves his hand an inch up the pole. I hold on. Then he looks me up and down, leans forward, and says, "I like 'em big."

I really, *really* wish I was invisible.

I refuse to look at him. I just stare ahead at the woman right in front of me whose back is to me, so all I can see is her twisted hair pulled back into a bun. I study her neat bun, wondering how she got it to stay that way.

The train chugs along, stops at 175th Street. I wish I could get off here, but the walk is too long. I can feel sweat seeping through my clothes.

The man keeps talking. Maybe to me, maybe to himself. “I sure do like ’em big.”

An elderly woman sitting in front of us clears her throat, loud. I look at her—she eyes me to move to the other side of the train. “There’s a seat over there,” she says, pointing. I can barely squeeze my big body through the maze of people standing. I make my way to the seat, wondering the whole time why this woman told me to move instead of telling that man to shut up.

Once I get to school, I go straight to the auditorium where club sign-up sheets are. We’re allowed to change every year, but pretty much everyone chooses the same club, so when Meg Rivers comes up to me and says, “Oh, so you’re choosing the ensemble again?” I don’t answer her. I mean, I’m literally writing my name on the list when she asks me.

Meg is the best singer in the school—and she knows it, which makes me like her voice a little less. She’s white and rich and thin and so many things I am not. She’s always looking at me with a smile that seems forced, a high-pitched tone in her voice laced with pity or maybe disgust. I’m not sure. I finish writing my name.

As I walk away to find Chelsea, Meg says to the girl next to her, “It’s so brave of her to keep joining the acting club. I mean, it would be one thing if she was just working backstage, but she actually auditions for leading roles.”

My phone buzzes with a text from Chelsea. I walk faster. Their laughter trails behind me, lingers like cigarette smoke.

I find Chelsea at the sign for the poetry club. She hugs me



all dramatic, like she didn't just talk to me this morning. I guess I'm more irritated about how today has started than I realize, because Chelsea lets go of me and says, "What's wrong?"

On our way to our lockers, I tell her about the man on the subway and the woman who told me to move. And Meg Rivers.

"I hate it when women reinforce sexism," she says. "And you should have said something to Meg. I mean, she can't treat people that way." Chelsea is all fired up now. "If you don't confront Meg directly, you should at least talk to Mr. Morrison," she says.

"I am absolutely not going to say anything to Mr. Morrison."

"Why not?"

"Chelsea, if I spoke up every time someone at this school said a micro-aggression against me, I'd always be saying something. Sometimes for my own sanity, it's just better to walk away."

When I say this, Chelsea's eyes turn sad and she stops nagging me about it.

I used to be so confused that at a school all about social justice, there was still a lot of racism and sexism—and actually all kinds of -isms. But I guess we're all here to learn how to be better because we know we need to do better. Maybe that's the whole point.

Just before we get to our lockers, Chelsea says, "Oh, I almost forgot. Isaac asked me to give this to you." And when she says Isaac, she drags out the syllables and adds extra emphasis. She hands me a brown paper bag. Inside there's a glazed lemon poppy seed doughnut wrapped in thin, white wax paper. My favorite. I pull it out and take a bite. Chelsea says, "Why is yours so fancy?"

I laugh.

When we get to our lockers, Isaac and Nadine come walking toward us. Nadine's mom is a celebrity stylist, so Nadine wears the most fashionable outfits out of anyone in this school. Her mom is Japanese, and her dad is Lebanese. She speaks Arabic and Japanese fluently, and she has been to more countries than any of us because she gets to travel with her mom for photo shoots and fashion shows.

We all hug each other, and the first thing Isaac says to me is, "How's your dad?"

"Okay today," I tell him. I take what I need and leave the rest of my stuff in my locker. Chelsea does the same.

We all walk together, making our way to our classes.

"What club are you doing this year, Chels?" Nadine asks.

Chelsea says, "Um, if you have to ask I think we need to reevaluate our friendship."

Nadine laughs. "I was just checking to see if any of us switched it up."

"I did," Isaac says.

Chelsea, Nadine, and I all say, "Really?" at the same time.

"Yeah, I wanted to do something different, so I switched from Art and Social Justice to the August Wilson Acting Ensemble."

"Really?" Chelsea sings. She grabs my hand, squeezes it.

Isaac acts like his decision is no big deal, but we all know how much he loves to draw, how he is always doodling in his notebook. "What about you, Nadine?" he asks. "Still doing Music that Matters?"

“Of course. I’ve already talked with Mr. Hernandez. We’re going to analyze songs by Chance the Rapper and Kendrick Lamar and compare the lyrics to poems written during the Harlem Renaissance.”

We are midway down the hall when Nadine stops walking. “My class is that way,” she points. “See you at lunch.” She hugs each of us.

Chelsea says goodbye, too, and goes the opposite way.

Isaac and I keep walking in the same direction. “What class do you have first?” he asks.

“Creative writing.”

“Me too,” Isaac says.

“With Mr. Valásquez?”

“Yep.” Isaac smiles.

“Same English class and the same club? We’re going to be together a lot this year,” I say. We turn right at the end of the hallway and walk upstairs to the second floor. “Hope you don’t get tired of me,” I say.

Isaac smiles. “Never.”

# 4

## CHELSEA

Three weeks into the school year and I've got my lunch routine down—if I bypass stopping at my locker and go straight to the cafeteria, I can secure a table for me, Jasmine, Nadine, and Isaac before it gets too crowded.

“Beef patty day is officially my favorite lunch,” Isaac says, shoving his tray next to mine.

“Every lunch is your official favorite,” I say, grabbing one of his onion rings. “But I have to admit, this is pretty good.”

Jasmine and Nadine slide into our table with their trays. For the first five minutes, nobody says a word while we open milk cartons, apply heaping amounts of ketchup to our plates, and take our first bites.

“I'm always hungry,” I say. “My entire morning is spent looking at the clock and waiting for this moment right here. This is my favorite part of the day.”

“Me too,” Jasmine says. “We can finally talk. So much is going on—”

“Yeah, I know,” Isaac says. “How’s your dad doing?”

I know how concerned Isaac is, but I also know that Jasmine doesn’t want to talk about her dad all the time. She doesn’t want to be known as the girl whose dad has cancer.

“He’s fine. Everything’s fine,” Jasmine says.

“Because I know when my mom was sick, we . . .”

“It’s not the same thing, okay, and everything is fine,” she says again. I can see the hurt in her eyes, and I put my hand on her back. Isaac can’t help but compare the situation to his own mom. He is always asking me what we could be doing for Jasmine. I wish I had an answer. The only thing I know to do now is to change the subject.

“Can we meet after clubs today?” I blurt out, trying my best. “I need a post-poetry-club support group.”

“Sure,” Nadine says. “Let’s grab dinner at Burger Heights. Does that work?” she asks, eyeing Isaac and Jasmine.

“Yeah, that works for me. That’d be good,” Jasmine says. Isaac nods that he’s in.

\* \* \*

“Welcome, young, brilliant poets,” Ms. Hawkins says, opening her door and ushering us inside. She welcomes us in the same singsong fashion every day of clubs. She is the guidance counselor/social worker/lover of poetry who has been our advisor since my freshman year. She really does love poetry in a deep way. The only real problem is that her love of poetry seems to have stopped accumulating in the seventies. Ms. Hawkins was born in the fifties, and I only know that because she mentions it

every other week when explaining why it's so important to look to our past and study our history in order for us to understand the work that's happening today . . . but we somehow never quite get to the work that's happening today.

We all pile into her office, which is full of beanbag chairs and has two mini love seats, a round table with a few chairs, and posters of poets everywhere. There is one of Langston Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Phillis Wheatley, and Allen Ginsberg. She has a quote by Audre Lorde on the back of her door that reads: *Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.* I love that—I love the thought that poetry can be in our bones, can hold us up and shape our whole lives. I've been writing since the sixth grade, when my mom bought me a fancy gold journal that came with the smallest lock and key I'd ever seen. I wrote every day, and I've kept a journal since then, with poems about my pet goldfish, the weather, food, and most recently, love, heartbreak, and beauty, or lack thereof. I look around the room. There are seven of us total, including two new freshmen who always seem ready to go, with their journals already out in front of them. The rest of us are sophomores and juniors, and one lone senior . . . my nemesis: Jacob Rizer. He's obsessed with forms like sonnets and sestinas. He's always answering every question and making sure we understand what he's doing in his poems. And he's always picking a fight with me, trying to push and get me to react. Sometimes I think it's flirting, but there's always an edge to it. Ms. Hawkins loves him the

most, and since it's the last year for both of them—with Ms. Hawkins retiring (finally) and Jacob graduating, I'm pretty sure they're both gonna weep when spring comes. I had hoped there would be more new people this year, but September is almost over, and it seems like poetry is destined to stay the lowest-attended club at Amsterdam Heights. But as Ms. Hawkins always says, *As long as I am here, and at least two of you, then we are considered an official club.*

“I hope you brought your fresh minds and open hearts this afternoon,” Ms. Hawkins says, smiling wide. “Let’s get started, shall we? I am eager to continue getting to know you, so let’s begin class today with the six-word memoir introduction.” Ms. Hawkins has spent the last couple of weeks on identity—we wrote an *ars poetica*, which is kind of like a vision for how we want to live our lives, an *I Come From* poem, and then wrote a poem about a food that represents us. Mine was about veggie patties from the Concourse Jamaican Bakery—they represent me because they’re spicy, unexpected, and completely addictive. I thought it was hilarious, but no one laughed when I read it out loud.

“Get creative—show me something the rest of us don’t normally see,” Ms. Hawkins says. “And for an example, I’ll share my six-word memoir first: poetry is my heart and mind. There, see how easy it is?”

“That’s really original,” I say, under my breath but loud enough for the freshmen to hear me. Neither of them laughs.

“Your turn,” Ms. Hawkins says. “Show me who you really are!”

I look around again to see if I can catch anyone's eyes, but they're already writing. I look at the blank page in front of me. I can't think of anything of write. I try out a bunch: *Hearts and minds are my poetry*. Um, no, that's pretty much what I just made fun of Ms. Hawkins for writing. *I am a big jerk sometimes*. No, too obvious. *From New York, likes to write*. Yuck.

"Okay, time is up," Ms. Hawkins says as her small timer buzzes. "Who wants to share first?"

The two freshmen shoot their arms into the air, as if they've been waiting their whole lives for this moment. I roll my eyes, but then catch myself.

"Puerto Rico lullabies me to sleep," one of the freshmen, whose name is Maria, says first.

"Lovely, beautiful," Ms. Hawkins says. "It tells me something about where your heart is and shows who you are. I can't wait to hear more. Next?"

The class goes one after the other: *Always dreaming of my next meal*, we all laugh. *High rise honey, NYC all day*. *Illusion is a concept I adore*. I have no idea what that one even means. *Born and raised in Washington Heights*, and *Boogie down Bronx—my first love*. Both solid. I look down at mine one more time.

"I'll go," Jacob says. "For this assignment, I chose to do a haiku instead." He looks around the room. I really roll my eyes this time. "A haiku," he continues, "is a poem composed of three lines, each line containing a different number of syllables, five-seven-five to be exact. Generally, haiku are focused on the small changes in nature. For my example, I chose to do it my way. Here's mine:



Whirr of the subway  
The doors open to my life  
A train jets away”

“Oh, wow. These are just wonderful,” Ms. Hawkins says, standing up and moving to her whiteboard. “Just wonderful and unique. I love them, and I know you will love our standout poets that we’re going to study this year.”

I raise my hand. “Uh, Ms. Hawkins, I didn’t go yet.”

“Oh my goodness, Chelsea, I am so sorry I forgot you. And you are like an open book, so I know yours will reveal something.” She smiles in my direction.

“Um, so my six-word memoir is: *Rages against the myth of beauty.*” I look up at Ms. Hawkins, ready for her to compliment my line.

“That is a good start, Chelsea, and I want to push you even more to take more risks in your writing, and think about the details, the specifics. You are a veteran in this group, so keep that in mind.”

“But that is specific,” I say, not meaning to start an argument, but annoyed that mine was the only one that got a critique, “and it says something about what I want to push against in the world. I mean, I think that’s the whole point of Poets for Peace and Justice, right? That’s why we’re all here.”

“I thought the club was called Peaceful Poets,” Maria says, looking at her friend Amaya.

“It doesn’t really make a difference what it’s called,” Jacob says. “It’s the poetry club . . .”

“What? No, uh, it *matters*, and it’s called Poets for Peace and Justice because we want to use our art to disrupt society and push against what’s happening in the world,” I say.

“No, that’s what you want. The only reason we came up with a name is because you pushed for it so much. No one except you calls it that anyway.”

I look up at Ms. Hawkins, who looks uncomfortable and is writing on the dry-erase board. “Ladies and gentlemen, can we please focus on the writing activity for today. No fighting in the poetry club.” She has written “William Carlos Williams” and “Emily Dickinson” on the board.

I sigh—loudly.

“Is there an issue, Chelsea?”

“There’s always an issue with Chelsea,” Sonya Pierce says, leaning toward Jacob, her coconspirator.

“No, there’s no issue,” I say, glaring at Sonya. “It’s just that I thought we could look at some more modern poets this year and think about how they are writing and how we can use those poems as models . . .” No one says anything, so I keep going. “I was thinking about the Nuyorican Poets—I mean, we should definitely take a field trip downtown because we could do an open mic night or the Friday night slam, and learn about Miguel Piñero and Miguel Algarín, or we could study the Black Arts Movement . . .”

“We do study that, Chelsea,” Ms. Hawkins interrupts, gesturing toward her books by Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka.

“No, I know, but we could look at how they influence the

work today, like the Dark Room Collective with Tracy K. Smith and Kevin Young. We could look at *June Jordan's Poetry for the People* and think about how the work from the past informs the work today, *now*, that's happening *currently*," I add, to make sure I'm getting my point across.

"Well, you know what I say," Ms. Hawkins cuts in, "you have to know your history to even think about understanding your present."

"That's the whole point," Jacob says, sitting up in his seat. "Clubs at Amsterdam Heights are about learning our history."

"We've learned it," I shout, surprising even myself. "Sorry, I just . . . I feel like we've been really pushing the classics in here."

"Because the classics are what define language and history, they . . ."

"I understand how you feel," I say, lowering my voice just a little. "But to be honest, I don't even know if I agree with all the classics anyway, especially considering that the canon, whatever that means, was created by white men, who published other white men, and basically kept women and people of color out of the conversation as long as possible."

"Oh, please," Jacob says, interrupting me for the second time. "The classics are classics for a reason, okay?" he says, reaching out his hands and holding onto my shoulders like he's trying to school me.

"Yeah, a racist reason. And by the way, stop talking over me," I say, staring directly at Jacob and pulling my arms away.

"Excuse me," Ms. Hawkins says.

I keep on. “Unlike you and Sonya, I don’t wanna spend all my time writing super-vague poems about forests and animals and pain,” I say. “I wanna write poems that matter, that fight for something.”

“So dramatic,” Jacob says. “And if you don’t wanna be part of the club, or do the kind of work we’re doing, then why are you even here?” Jacob asks.

“Yeah, I don’t even . . . I don’t know. I—you’re right. I quit,” I say, packing up my bags and stumbling as I gather my journal and drop a copy of *Living Room* by June Jordan that I was going to share with everybody. I pull my hat off the seat behind me. I can’t believe I wore a floppy straw hat to school again. I can’t believe I just quit, and most of all, I can’t believe I just blew up in front of a bunch of people who are now gonna spread the word that Chelsea Spencer has lost her freakin’ mind, and even more I can’t believe that I still care so much about what everyone else thinks.

“Ms. Hawkins, I’m sorry.” I swing my backpack on and walk out. I make it as far as my locker before I burst into tears. “So stupid, so stupid, so stupid,” I whisper to myself. I hear a basketball bouncing behind me, and I look up, panicked, since I didn’t realize anyone was in the hallway.

“You okay?” James Bradford is standing behind me. He’s only the hottest guy in our class. At six feet tall, he’s smiling down at me. I look up at his face, perfect teeth, perfect skin, and he’s just started to grow his hair out and is wearing it in a short Afro. Meanwhile, my skin is broken out everywhere . . . again . . . and

I'm crying and carrying a journal full of six-word memoirs—  
not cool.

“Oh, I'm—I'm totally fine, I just, I—I quit the Poets for Peace  
and Justice club,” I blurt out.

“There's a poetry club?” James asks, starting to smile.  
“That's cool.”

“Yeah, it is cool, or it *was* cool. I mean, poetry is awesome,  
it's a way to rage against society and . . .” I look up and see James  
laughing. “Shut up,” I say, pushing the basketball against his  
chest and walking away. My crush is the worst.

“No, it is cool! It's cool, Chelsea,” he calls after me. “See ya  
in gym tomorrow. See, gym? That's actually cool.”

I smile to myself but don't look back. He doesn't deserve it.  
But he knows we have gym together. Maybe he's even checking  
for me in gym class. I love it. I hate myself for loving it, but I  
love it just the same.

When I get home, I collect all my six-word memoirs and  
write one whole poem. None of it makes me feel any better.

### **Rage Against the Myth of Beauty**

Love the way you look, always.

Love your wild hair and lungs.

Love your hips and each thigh.

Love your crooked teeth, wide smile.

See your face in the mirror.

See the way your nose erupts.

Call your face a beautiful carnival.  
Don't ever read beauty magazines alone.  
Who are beauty magazines for anyway?  
Trust and know who you are.  
Being a teenager really sucks sometimes.  
Sometimes quitting is the only way.  
To figure out what comes next.

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