Superpowers

by DaScribbla

Summary

Whatever Michelle is feeling for Liz (it's not a crush, it's not a crush, it's so not a crush), she's quite sure that it'll never be reciprocated.

She's about to be surprised.

Notes

Tags will be updated as the story continues.

See the end of the work for more notes
Michelle didn’t like change – in surroundings, people, routine, coursework, anything. It pissed her off, left her feeling like she had at her fourth birthday party when they’d played Pin-The-Tail-On-The-Donkey, blindfolded her, and spun her around until she fell on her ass.

Now, seated on one of two beds in a hotel much farther away from home than she preferred to be, she studied her French vocabulary words and tried not to look too much at the other girl in the room. Maybe, if she stayed super quiet and frigid, she would be left alone.

No such luck.

“Hey,” Liz said, flopping down on her stomach across the other bed. “I was thinking about heading down to the pool later. You want in?”

“I don’t like to swim,” she lied, not taking her eyes off her vocabulary.

Then Liz laughed at her.

“What?”

“You’re acting like the cat I used to have when we moved,” Liz said. “We were unpacking everything, and she just sat on the box with all the china in it and glared at us.”

Michelle just hummed, hoping that with it, she could convey her hope that Liz would take pity on her and either A – leave her be, or B – kiss her already.

“I brought extra swimsuits if you don’t have one,” Liz said.

“Cool.”

“You know, if you change your mind.” She pushed herself off the bed, went to her suitcase where it was sat neatly against the wall, and dug out of it a cherry pink one-piece. Michelle tried hard not to stare. “There’s a green one in here, too,” she said over her shoulder, “but it’s a bikini.”

_Hell no._ As far as Michelle was concerned, she didn’t believe she had the necessary figure to pull off a bikini – well, wear one, at last.

“I’m good,” she said.

“Suit yourself,” Liz said, standing up with the one-piece. Then she laughed. “Ha, that’s funny. _Suit_ yourself.”

To her own pride, Michelle managed to maintain a straight face until the door to the adjoining bathroom closed. Then she buried her face in her binder and let herself freak out a little bit.

It was _not_ a crush, she insisted – well, to herself, mostly, seeing how nobody else had much interest. It was _not_ a crush. She just happened to have eyes, and Liz just happened to have a really good face. And a great personality, and a good sense of humor, and nice clothes, and a ferociously intelligent mind, and hair that smelled like flowers…

Totally not a crush.
Liz reappeared several minutes later, now wearing the pink swimsuit. If she was at all self-conscious, she didn’t show it; she unconcernedly walked by and tossed her (folded) clothes onto her open suitcase.

“Sure you don’t want to come along?” she asked, turning back, and Michelle quickly looked away so she wouldn’t know that she’d been watching her. “I’m going to go around and ask the others if they want to?”

“That’s not an enticement,” Michelle said.

Liz laughed. “You are really misanthropic.”

“Not misanthropic, just a realist.”

“So… you’re not coming?” Michelle opened her mouth to say *nope*, but something in Liz’s tone made her look up. She almost looked… disappointed? Nah, that didn’t make sense…

“Not feeling it,” she said at last.

“Okay,” Liz said, unconcernedly enough that Michelle figured that any earlier disappointment she’d detected in her tone had been imagined on her part. “Well, if you change your mind, the other suit’s in my case. Feel free.”

She slipped on her flip-flops and slipped out the door, which clicked back into place in the suddenly silent hotel room. Michelle sighed in frustration – with herself, with Liz, with the world in general – and spent some time wandering around the room, looking through the closet, exploring the tiny adjoining bathroom. Liz had already made the place her own, it seemed; her makeup compacts were on the sink, her toothbrush in a plastic cup by the faucet, Bath and Body Works shower gel in a bright pink bottle positioned by a delicate teal razor on the soap dish in the miniscule shower. Standing there, Michelle felt like a few flaps of skin. She’d only brought a change of clothes, pajamas, a comb, and a bathrobe. And her books, of course.

With a sigh, she went back, picked up her French binder, and left the room for the pool.

Everyone with the exception of Ned and Peter was there. Michelle dodged a large splash as Flash cannonballed into the six-foot section and made her way as unobtrusively as possible to the bleachers, set up her books, and started reading.

It was easier said than done for several reasons. The splashing and yelling reverberated across the entire room, making it difficult to concentrate, and moreover, Liz was seated on the cement island at the center of the pool, long legs dipping in the water, splashing Abraham and cackling.

Michelle frowned, looked down at her French vocabulary, and pushed away the nagging thought that she should have cracked and worn the bikini anyway. Not that she wanted to buy into the narrative of the Suddenly Hot Nerd Girl (Michelle didn’t really think one way or the other about her appearance, a face was a face), but, you know… if it meant Liz might look at her…

As if on cue, Liz slipped into the pool and swam to the ladder on the edge of the pool nearest to Michelle, who quickly turned her face away and focused on the page in front of her. DR AND MRS VANDERTRAMP. God, she hated verb conjugation.
And suddenly, Liz was out of the pool and standing in front of her, dripping wet and beaming. To her horror, Michelle’s face was going hot.

“What are you doing?” Liz asked. Her hair was dripping onto her shoulders in a way that was really distracting.

“Studying for French.”

“Come on,” she said. “This is, like, the closest we’re ever going to get to a school vacation. I’m relaxing and I’m me.” Then she reached over and closed her book, leaving wet prints on the pages. “Come on. At least study different, right?” She sat down beside her on the bleachers. “Tell me what… that is, in French.” She pointed to the bleachers, but her finger seemed to be indicating Flash instead.

Michelle rolled her eyes. “Ça, c’est une idiote.”

“Har. And… that?” She pointed to the little triangular flags hanging on a line over the pool.

“Ces sont des drapeaux.”

“Cool. And that?” She indicated the pool as a whole.

“C’est un piscine. And this game is piscine me off.”

“Aw, yes, I always knew you could pun!”

Michelle didn’t immediately reply; Liz was sitting awfully close, her right leg dangerously close to touching Michelle’s left one, and she was battling the usual conundrum of wanting to enjoy it like a normal person and worrying that it might mean she was preying on Liz in some way.

“Are puns your superpower?” Liz added.

“Nope. I have a superpower, I just can’t tell you what it is, ‘cause then I’d have to kill you.” And that’d be a shame, she added silently. Liz didn’t need to hear that part.

“Hey, Liz!” Flash called from the pool. “Are you going to get back in here, or keep whispering sweet nothings into Michelle’s ear?”

“What?!” Liz sounded flustered. “No, no, I’m going back. Going back right now.” She stood up, but then looked back at Michelle again. “Why didn’t you wear the suit?” she asked.

“Didn’t fit,” Michelle said shortly. “Besides, I don’t have a bikini body.”

“Everybody’s got a bikini body. But I take your point.” She flashed her a bright smile. “We’ll have to go swimming together some other time.”

“Yeah,” Michelle heard herself say as all the blood left her brain at once. “That’d be good. Fun.”

With another smile at her, Liz turned back, walked to the edge of the deepest section, and made a smooth swan dive into the water.

Water sloshed over the cement, and Michelle watched her resurface, blinking hard and pushing her hair back, laughing as the others applauded and cheered.
She went back up to their room about fifteen minutes later, and then, another forty minutes later, Liz returned as well, wrapped up in a fluffy hotel towel.

“I’ve left puddles all over the hotel,” she laughed, poised on the threshold of the bathroom. She pointed. “Mind if I shower?”

Michelle, lying on her bed with *Of Human Bondage*, already in the sweat pants and oversized T-shirt that qualified as sleepwear to her, shrugged, and she disappeared into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. After a few moments, the water started, a distant hiss through the walls.

To drown it out, Michelle abandoned her book and turned on the TV, switching the channel to *Animal Planet* just in time to see a humpback whale surface from the ocean and flop back in with a burst of spray.

In the shower, it sounded like Liz was singing Lily Allen – “he’s a late comer, my man is a bad motherfucker…” Michelle turned up the volume on the TV a little.

A few minutes later, the bathroom door opened a crack, emitting a cloud of steam, and Liz called – “Hey, Michelle, could you hand me one of the robes in the closet?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

They were stacked on the top shelf of the closet, and Michelle had to make a leap to get one. She passed it to Liz’s outstretched hand, her face turned away. A few seconds later, she emerged from the bathroom, bundled in the robe, a towel wrapped around her hair.

“Oh, I love whales!” Liz said, looking past her at the TV. She flopped on her own bed and stretched her arms over her head as Michelle returned to the other bed. The corner of Liz’s robe had flopped over, exposing one smooth knee. Michelle kept her eyes firmly on the ceiling, or on the TV screen.

They watched the program for a few minutes, and then Michelle glanced over, testing the waters, and found Liz looking at her. Neither of them looked away from each other.

*Oh hell*, Michelle thought, *she really is pretty.*

Her heart was beating faster.

Liz looked away at last, a little smile pulling at the corners of her lips, and Michelle felt herself go weak. If she’d been standing, she’d need to sit down.

“Nervous about tomorrow?” Liz asked. It sounded as though she were trying to change the subject.

“Little bit. You?”

“Hella. It’s my future.”

Michelle cracked a smile. “Academic decathlons?”

“Leadership.” Liz sat up, unwrapped the towel from her head. “I want to go into government.”

Michelle raised her eyebrows, nodding. “Fix the system from the inside. I like it.”

“What about you?”
“Hm? Oh, I’m more of a protester, myself.”

“I meant, what do you want to do?”

She shrugged. “No idea. I’m good at art, I guess. I could do that.”

“I see you in some tiny apartment in Harlem, making highly politicized Dali-esque paintings.”

“True, but I’m more of a Georgia O’Keefe.”

Liz grinned. “Oh, so vagina art, then?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely.”

They held each other’s gaze a little bit longer, and then Liz stood up, went to her suitcase, and dug out her pajamas. “D’you want to shower?” she asked.

“I shower in the mornings.”

“Okay. You can keep watching,” she added, “I’m just going to get comfy and turn in.”

Michelle nodded and, once Liz was back in the bathroom, she switched off the TV and crawled under the covers.

Sleeping in hotels was never easy. Sleeping in a hotel when there was a painfully gorgeous girl in the bed just four, easily rectifiable feet away, was on a whole other level. Michelle gave up trying to sleep around six that morning, got up, and ventured into the bathroom for a shower. The flowery scent of Liz’s shower gel still hung in the air, and once again, she felt as though she were betraying Liz’s trust by breathing it in and liking the casual intimacy of it.

When she emerged from the bathroom – the mirror steamed up enough to hide her reflection while she dressed – she found that Liz was already awake and had dressed as well.

“You want to go down and get breakfast?” she asked. Michelle blinked. “They serve a complimentary breakfast here. Six to ten o’clock.”

She’d blown the pool thing; she didn’t want to blow this opportunity, too. Besides, this sounded like a solo thing – just her and Liz.

The breakfast room on the ground floor was almost completely deserted with the exception of one middle-aged couple near the center of the room, and an older man piling his plastic plate high with cinnamon rolls. Michelle found a table in the far corner of the room and sat down with her tea and her lemon yogurt. A few seconds later, Liz plopped down across from her with her own plate, containing exactly one blueberry muffin, and a mug of coffee that was in serious danger of spilling over.

“Is that all you’re eating?” they asked each other simultaneously. Then they grinned and looked away.

Liz’s hands were shaking as she unwrapped her muffin. “I’m freaking out,” she muttered.

“It’ll be okay,” Michelle said, neatly folding up the seal of her yogurt.
“Actually, Michelle —“

“MJ.”

“What?” She looked nonplussed.

“My friends call me MJ. Or they would, if I had any.”

Liz blinked. “Does this mean we’re friends?” she asked with a hesitance that Michelle found rather comical.

“Think carefully, it’s not an offer I extend often.”

“Well, in that case, I accept.” Liz opened her mouth to say more but hesitated as though thinking something through. “Actually, MJ…” She bit her lip. “There was something I was thinking about talking to you about… well…” Michelle’s ears perked up, and she tried not to look too emotionally invested in whatever was coming.

“Maybe I should go back upstairs and study some more,” Liz said at last, heavily, and Michelle knew that hadn’t been what she’d originally intended to say. She caught her arm.

“Don’t you dare.”

“Why?” Liz looked surprised, and Michelle quickly removed her hand.

“Cause then I’ll have to eat breakfast on my own,” she said. “You know. Like a loser.”

Liz settled back into her chair. “I thought you ate lunch alone.”

“I do. But I choose to do that. It’s not cool if it’s not your choice.”

Liz laughed and took a small bite of her muffin, and Michelle thought to herself that if she could make her giggle like that every day, maybe school wouldn’t feel like such a waste of her time.

And once she won them the decathlon, and Liz literally lifted her off her feet when she hugged her, she thought that maybe, if more human interaction were like this, it would feel less like a waste of her time, too.

“There’s something I need to talk to you about,” Liz yelled in her ear, breath warm and close, and Michelle got shivers.

“Tell me once we’re out of here,” Michelle said.

But after that, Liz was distracted by Ned and then the others, and then there were triumphant photographs and museum tours and then, at last, the Washington Monument, and Michelle failed to get a moment with Liz to herself.

She was reading her book on the bench outside, iPod blasting Janelle Monáe’s *The Electric Lady* through her eardrums, when the screams started.

The monument was crumbling.
She tore her headphones out and stuffed them into her pocket as she ran to the nearest security guard.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

He shaded his eyes, squinting up at the top of the monument, where stone was crumbling off the sides of the point. “Looks like some kind of malfunction,” he said. “I’m sure Maintenance will take care of it—“

“But my friends are up there!”

She stayed standing for the full fifteen minutes – through the helicopters, through Spider-Man climbing up the side and breaking into the monument itself, through the painful couple of minutes after he disappeared. Usually, Michelle didn’t buy into superhero culture; she had never once wished that she was hyper-flexible, or that she could bend steel, or anything of that nature, but now, she would have given a year’s worth of good grades for some X-ray vision. Something that could penetrate stone.

She stayed standing through the entire thing, but her legs nearly gave out when her classmates finally emerged from the monument (frightened and wobbly-legged, some in tears). Then her legs nearly gave out again when Liz made straight for her, wrapped her arms around her neck, and clung to her.

If it had been anyone else, she would have brushed them off and told them to keep their distance. As it was, she allowed it, returned it, even. Liz was shaking against her, her frame soft in her arms.

Some of them elected to go back to the hotel and rest until it was time to get back on the bus. Liz and Michelle were among them, and when they reached their room, Liz dropped onto her bed and motioned Michelle to follow.

Liz was asleep in minutes, and Michelle found that, when lying beside her – right beside her, close enough to smell her hair conditioner – it was unexpectedly easy to relax. Carefully, not wanting to wake her, Michelle edged closer so she could catch the floral scent more easily, closed her eyes, and let the scent carry her away. There was a Charles Baudelaire poem about that very phenomenon, she thought dimly before she fell asleep, about being transported to distant lands on the waves of your mistress’s hair…

When she woke up, Liz had rolled over to face her, was wide awake, and was watching her.

“What?” she asked.


Michelle played it cool.

“Oh,” she said. And then: “Like… like-like?” Her eloquence around pretty girls was legendary. She cursed internally. Seriously?

“Yeah,” Liz said, unaware of Michelle’s internal cringing. “You like me, too, right?”

“What? Yeah. Yeah.”

“Like-like?”
Michelle groaned. “Only if you agree never to use that phrase again. I swear I’m smoother than that.”

Grinning, Liz propped herself up on one elbow. “Prove it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Hey, girl. Are you a beryllium and barium compound? ‘Cause you are a BaBe.”

“That was awful. I love it.” Liz rolled onto her stomach. “Hmmm. Are you the Winter Soldier, ‘cause I’d defy the UN for you anytime.”

Michelle almost smiled. “Shit, that was really cute. So…” She rolled onto her stomach, too, but couldn’t meet her eyes, so she stared at the headboard instead. “Does this mean that you want to date me?”

“Yes.” Her answer was simple, softly-spoken. Michelle shifted.

“No one even talks to me.”

“Yes, well, they should. ‘Cause you’re super smart, and you’ve got a killer sense of humor, and anyway —” Liz was blushing hard — “you’re, like, really cute.

They exchanged tentative smiles, and then Liz cautiously stretched her fingers out to Michelle, who somewhat awkwardly laced them together. Something fluttered in her chest.

Ugh. Feelings.

They were still holding hands when they got on the bus, ignoring the stares, and this time, instead of sitting at the back, Michelle sat at the front with her. It was a long drive back, and when Liz fell asleep on her — her head on her shoulder, her hand going slack in Michelle’s hand — she glanced out the window at the scenery that rushed past and, for the first time, found herself smiling like an idiot.

She fell asleep too, eventually, and when she woke up, she found that Ned had sent a Snapchat to everyone. It was a photo of them curled up in the seat together: #Naptime, heart-emoji, rainbow-emoji.

She flipped him off because it was her duty, but Ned and Peter just grinned and gave her two thumbs-up each, and, looking back at Liz, she couldn’t quite suppress her own smile.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Because the only person who should kiss Michelle Jones upside-down is Liz Allan.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Michelle had gotten on the bus to Washington a day ago, she had been friendless and without achievements. When she stepped off again at the school—reeling at the huddled group of parents desperate to see the kids they’d very nearly lost—she’d won the competition for the entire school and had a girlfriend who’d napped on her shoulder the last twenty miles. They’d agreed to keep that second bit of information to themselves for now, however; Liz’s mom was near tears as she threw her arms around her, and Michelle had understood that now was not the time.

Still –

“I have a girlfriend,” she announced while her parents were driving her home. Her mother was behind the wheel, still in her work clothes. Hot pink silk button-down blouse, black pencil skirt, black blazer, pearl earrings. Her father nodded to her in the side-view mirror from his spot in the passenger’s seat. His tie matched her mother’s blouse.

“Good for you,” he said.

“Does she have a name?” asked her mother.

“Liz.”

“Oh, Liz!” her mother said in recognition.

Her father frowned. “Which one’s Liz?”

“Oh, honey, you remember Liz. She was at open house. The decathlon captain.”

Her father frowned some more. “She’s the one you roomed with, right?”

Her mother took one manicured hand off the wheel and swatted his shoulder lightly. “Eric!”

“Yeah.” Michelle couldn’t resist the slight grin.

“Well, just be responsible, please. But we’re glad you’re happy,” her father said. Then he added, “Oh, by the way, honey. I just remembered that Kim woman called again, she’d decided she wants gardenias after all…”

Michelle put her earbuds in to tune out the sound of her parents talking business. Her mother planned weddings, which her father then photographed, and she suspected they were both equally bemused by their daughter, who felt that weddings were outdated and pointless practices that only remained relevant for tax purposes.
“Hey, is it true about you and Liz?”

She’d never talked the kid before in her life, mostly knowing him as the head that sat in front of her in her computer class, but there he was, turned back to face her. She wasn’t impressed.

“Yeah.”

Rumor had gotten around pretty quickly in the first few days. The price of dating someone at the top of the social food chain. If this kid hadn’t heard about it, he clearly lived under a rock.

“Hot,” he said.

“We don’t exist for your sexual consumption,” she said automatically, turned her eyes back to her computer screen, and quickly minimized the article that read 35 UNIQUE DATE IDEAS FOR 2017 when the teacher walked her way.

Her unique date idea for 2017 turned out to be piling with Liz on the sofa in her parents’ den, eating candy corn, and watching *The Brooklyn Nine-Nine*.

“Sometimes I look at a girl, and I wonder how I could have possibly thought I was straight,” Liz said.

“Rosa?” Michelle asked.

“Rosa,” Liz agreed. “By the way, I told my parents the other night.”

Michelle took another handful of candy corn out of the bag. “How’d they take it?”

“They were cool with it,” she said. “I kind of dropped the bisexual bomb and the girlfriend bomb all at once so they didn’t have room to question it, really.” Liz grinned. “They want to meet you.”

“That’ll be interesting,” Michelle said dryly. She popped a piece of candy in her mouth, and the episode on the TV ended. Within seconds, the next one started.

“When you come to my house, I have to show you *Pride and Prejudice,*” Liz said.

Michelle lifted an eyebrow. “Seriously? Jane Austen?”

“Jane Austen is feminist as fuck.”

Michelle just gave her a skeptical look. “Have you ever read her?” continued Liz. “Or seen one of the movies?”

“Okay, no, I haven’t.”

Rolling her eyes, Liz threw a pillow at her. “Then don’t knock it ’til you try it.”

“But I do know that the women always get married at the end, and honestly—“

“Beyoncé’s married,” Liz pointed out.

“Barely.”

“So’s Michelle Obama.”
Michelle pressed her lips together.

“I concede the point,” she said at last. “But I’m still not sold.”

“You just don’t like to lose an argument.” Liz was grinning, something warm in her eyes.

“Maybe, but that has nothing to do with the point –“

Liz kissed her.

For years, Michelle had prided herself on her ice-cold exterior, which was matched only by her equally frigid interior. She was an ice queen. An ice bitch, if you will.

It all turned to slush with one peck on the lips.

She opened her eyes. “No fair,” she said. “You can’t do that in the middle of a debate.”

“No?”

A pause.

“Do it again.”

Liz giggled and leaned forward to kiss her again. She was wearing some kind of vanilla-flavored lip gloss; by the end of it, Michelle would be wearing it, too. Her sweater was gray wool and bunched up nicely in Michelle’s fingers. The TV show played on unheeded.

They were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. Her parents had returned from work.

“Oh, hi, Liz,” said her mother, poking her head around the corner as Michelle jerked back to the other end of the sofa, face hot enough to melt. Her mom tactfully pretended not to notice.

“Hi, Mrs. Jones! It’s great to see you again!” Liz was up on her feet, looking and sounding flustered, but turning on the charm effortlessly, and Michelle found herself a little envious of her sparkling new girlfriend. She didn’t care whether or not people liked her, but she did wish sometimes she could make herself understood.

But that was a very small thought. She pressed the backs of her fingers against her lips to hide the smile creeping across her face. Then, when she caught Liz’s eye, she lowered her hand, and the smile blossomed up, huge and unstoppable.

“You’re really cute when you do that,” Liz said after her mother had disappeared into the kitchen. “You’re cute all the time, but. Wow.”

“Ugh, stop it!” Michelle complained, not really meaning it. “I have a reputation to maintain!”

They didn’t hold hands for the first few days, mostly out of a mutual shyness, but by Monday of the next week, the rumor mill had done most of their work for them, so the only thing left to do was confirm it.

Which meant meeting Liz’s friends.

In some ways, Michelle had been dreading this part even more than meeting Liz’s parents (Liz’s mother was a very cool nurse-practitioner, as it turned out; she still hadn’t met Liz’s father). Liz’s
friends were all academic over-achievers, captains of various varsity teams, Homecoming queen runner-ups, prom queen nominees, A-Honor-Roll alumni. Michelle didn’t eat lunch at the same time as Liz, so the meet-and-greet happened during PE, during a merciful freebie day, which meant that the athletes showed off, and everyone else sat on the bleachers and talked.

All of the girls there looked unfairly good in their jersey shorts and T-shirts, and Michelle felt in turn like a collection of bones in her own uniform.

“Oh my God, you were serious?” one of them said when Liz introduced Michelle. “I mean – wow, hi!” This last was directed to Michelle, who nodded and didn’t return her smile. She had a predisposition to be distrustful of pretty, popular girls – stereotypical, perhaps, and not exactly feminist, but middle school had left deep scars. And speaking of middle school – the only girl in the clique she immediately recognized was Betty Brant, and Michelle had gotten the measure of her personality pretty extensively back in eighth grade when Peter had finally been permitted to use the boy’s locker room, and Michelle had caught Betty exchanging meaningfully raised eyebrows with her friends.

“How long has this been going on?” Betty asked Liz.

“Since decathlon. MJ’s really smart,” she added, reaching down to where Michelle was seated on the level below her and squeezing her shoulder. “She won the competition for us.”

The others expressed dutiful congratulations, and then, mercifully, the conversation turned to other things. After a while, Michelle lost interest and pulled a book out, leaned her head back against Liz’s shin while she read.

“If I had to choose,” Liz was saying, “I’d marry Falcon, fuck Captain America, and probably kill… yeah, I’d kill Hulk, too.”


“First of all, it’s Michelle,” she said. “And I’d fuck Black Widow, marry Scarlet Witch, and kill Iron Man.”

“Really?!” Betty had chosen to marry Iron Man.

“Sic semper tyrannis,” Michelle replied coolly. “He represents almost everything wrong with this broken capitalist hellscape we live in.”

Liz coughed hard, trying to mask a laugh and failing. Betty opened her mouth as though she were about to say something, but whatever it was, she seemed to decide against it.

“Anyway, I saw this really cute dress at Anne Taylor Loft the other day,” she said at last. “I’m thinking about getting it for Homecoming if it’s still there this weekend. Wanna see?” She pulled her phone out of her pocket and pulled up a badly-lit photo of something sky blue and unfairly pretty. The good dresses always went to the undeserving. Michelle returned her attention to her book as the others made noises of approval. Liz’s hand reappeared on her shoulder, and Michelle pressed her cheek against it.

“Are you guys going to Homecoming?” asked one of the other girls who was possibly named Ryan.

“Yeah,” Liz said. “I mean, if you’re cool with it, MJ.”

Michelle glanced up at her – wow, she was pretty even from this angle – and shrugged. “Sure.”
“I didn’t think Homecoming would be your thing,” Betty said. “You know, since you’re all anti-establishment and alternative.”

Michelle rolled her eyes. “I am anti-establishment,” she said. “But she’s my girlfriend and, you know, I value her opinion. And her desires.” She punctuated the whole thing with a wink for the sake of Betty’s momentarily scandalized expression, then stood up with her book in hand, and headed across the gym for the locker room.

It was close enough to the end of the block that Coach Wilson didn’t stop her, so she was able to go inside and change back into her normal clothes before anyone else got there. Then she got her backpack together and went to the narrow bench outside the main part of the locker room, just off the bathroom, and took out her sketchbook. She wanted to draw, but the inspiration wasn’t there. She was distracted.

There was a distant whistle and then, seconds later, a crescendo of female voices sounded outside the locker room. Michelle took out her iPod as the rest of her classmates poured inside but found that she couldn’t decide between Solange and Hayley Kiyoko. Much as she hated to admit it, the stiffness of earlier had rattled her. Sometimes personalities just aren’t compatible, she told herself, echoing the words of several guidance counselors from middle school, and also her dad. On the first days of school, when teachers passed around note cards and told their new students to write down something they wanted them to know about themselves, Michelle always wrote the same thing: ‘does not play well with others.’

“Hey.” Liz had reappeared in front of her, wearing her normal clothes and a concerned expression. “Can I sit?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

Liz dropped her backpack on the floor and sat down next to her. They stayed there in silence for a while, then she gently took the pencil from Michelle’s hand and began drawing in the corner of the open page of her sketchbook. She glanced down after a few seconds. Liz had drawn an impressively neat octopus, a speech bubble coming from its mouth: you octopi my heart.

In spite of herself, she gave her a tiny smile.

Liz put her arm around her, and Michelle leaned against her, head on her shoulder. She wasn’t normally so tactile, but it was nice to be close, just for today.

“Why’re you friends with Betty?” she asked after a few seconds.

“I don’t know. We do a lot of the same stuff.”

“She’s a transphobe.”

Liz sagged. “I know,” she said. “And she changed on the other side of the locker room just now.” She bit her lip, looking disquieted, and Michelle kissed her cheek, squeezed her hand. “Like I said,” she added, “we do a lot of the same stuff. It’s hard to escape her. We try to tell her when she’s being… you know. Whether or not she listens is something else. I’m sorry she acted like that.”

“I’m sorry I acted like that.”

“I’m sorry I made you do that.”

Michelle tilted forward an inch and kissed her briefly. “If one of us says sorry another time, I’m going to have to take drastic action.”
Liz rolled her eyes, grinning, and Michelle just knew that she was going to intentionally apologize, but they were interrupted by a quiet cough. They looked up to find Possibly Ryan standing there, her backpack over one shoulder.

“Just wanted to say that you guys are really cute,” she said. Then she lowered her voice and added, “I’ll talk to Betty. I really hope you come to Homecoming, though. It’s going to be lit.” She gave them a wink and strolled back into the locker room proper.

“Faith in humanity partially restored,” Michelle said grudgingly after a moment or two. Liz nodded. “Ryan’s cool.” Then she kissed her, but they were interrupted again, this time by the bell signaling a class change.

“The bell is homophobic,” Michelle muttered as they reached for their things.

“Okay.” Michelle leaned back in the recliner in resignation as a nearly empty mini carton of cookie dough ice cream sweated against her jeans. “You were right. Jane Austen is feminist as fuck.”

“Told you.” Liz ejected *Pride and Prejudice* from the DVD player and slid off her own recliner to put it back in its case. “You know,” she added, “you remind me a lot of Mr. Darcy.”

Mid-spoonful of ice cream, Michelle gave her a look. “Come on,” she said. “I am totally an Elizabeth Bennet.”

“You’re weird and standoffish and don’t know how to tell a girl she’s pretty,” Liz said with a grin. “Totally Mr. Darcy. *I’m* Elizabeth.”

“That too.”

The front door opened with a rattle, and a male voice called – “Doris, Liz? I’m home!”

Liz leaped to her feet. “That’s Dad. Come on, you gotta meet him.”

Cautiously, Michelle followed her into the hall, ice cream carton in hand, where Liz was hugging a tallish man surrounded by suitcases and several plastic grocery bags. Michelle leaned back against the nearest wall, feeling like a sixth finger.

“Mom’s still at work,” Liz was saying.

“Good, then it’ll be a surprise.” He looked up and caught Michelle’s eye. “You must be MJ,” he said. He held out his hand. “Hi, I’m Liz’s dad.”

Michelle awkwardly shifted the ice cream carton to her other hand so they could shake hands, and she nodded coolly. “Hi.” He nodded back as he hoisted up the grocery bags.

“Can I give you a hand with the suitcases?” asked Liz, but her dad just shook his head and said they could get it later as he headed into the kitchen.

“You staying for dinner, MJ?” he called. “I stopped by the store on my way back, figured we could do pizza homemade?”

“I’m a vegetarian, actually,” she said, awkwardly following her girlfriend into the kitchen.
Liz’s dad shrugged. “Not a problem. I’ll make it half and half. You eat peppers?” She nodded, and he added, opening the cabinets over the stove to take out a pan, “So, what’re you studying?”

“Don’t grill her, Dad,” Liz protested, embarrassed, as Michelle said, “Studio Art, maybe?” She opened the trash can by the fridge and tossed the ice cream carton out.

“Ah, one of those bohemian artists types,” he said. “You ever see that film, uh, name escapes me at the moment… the one with Nicole Kidman and the swing?”

“MJ doesn’t like Baz Luhrmann, Dad.”

“Understandable,” he said in a commiserating tone. “That Great Gatsby movie was… weird. I mean, Leo as Gatsby? That’s just not right.”

Michelle nodded, a tight smile on her face, not knowing what to say next.

“Hey, Dad?” Liz piped up suddenly. “MJ and I are going to go up to my room, if that’s okay?”

“Okay! I’ll call you down for dinner, and, um,” he added, “if you need me to take like an hour-long trip to the CVS or something, just let me know.”

“Dad!” Liz exclaimed, going red.

Michelle stopped Liz on the landing. “Why did you drag me out of there?” she asked.

“You were getting uncomfortable. I could tell. Thought I’d better intervene.”

On impulse, she opened her mouth to say that she didn’t need anyone else watching out for her, then she saw Liz’s expression – concerned, a little embarrassed – and figured that perhaps it was good someone was looking out for her.

Her girlfriend’s room looked like every photograph of a teen girl’s bedroom that she’d ever seen on Pinterest: fairy lights strung across the wall behind the bed, a crowded bulletin board hanging over a desk cluttered with highlighters, pens, binders, DVDs, books, a vanity covered in makeup compacts, lotions.

“You going to just keep on looking or come on in?” Liz asked. She sounded embarrassed. “I know, it’s kind of basic. But I’m kind of a basic bitch, right?”

Michelle stepped properly inside and sat down backward on the chair by the desk. “This is so… nice,” she said. “You’ve seen my room. It’s…”

“Kind of crazy? Yeah.” Liz was grinning. Michelle’s room was notoriously littered with books, half-finished art projects, clothes she was in the process of sewing. Even the walls were covered in layers of acrylic paint: trees, a vague attempt to emulate Van Gogh’s Starry Night on the ceiling. She could be basic, too.

“You know, I’ve always kind of envied you?” Michelle said. Liz sat down on the bed, legs up against her chest.

“What do you mean?”
“Like… it’s easy for people to like you.”

Liz frowned. “But it’s easy to like you, too?”

“Normal people don’t like to put that much effort into a friendship, babe.” Michelle laughed. “You know, if we’d gone to the same middle school, I probably would have hated you.”

“What?! Why?”

“’Cause I was going through my not like other girls phase,” she explained with air quotes. “And anyway, I had a lot barely contained rage back then that I now channel into activism? So.” She half-smiled. “I think I secretly wanted to be one of the pretty, popular girls, but the rest of me couldn’t handle the indignity. And anyway,” she added, “all the pretty, popular girls at my middle school were white, and I wasn’t about to cannibalize like a whole half of my identity so I could sit with the cool kids, right?”

“Mood.”

They sat in silence.

“You know,” Liz added after a moment. “It’s really weird you say that. You always seem so confident in who you are.”

“Fake it ‘til you make it.”

“I kind of envy you, too,” Liz said. “You march to your own drum. That’s really admirable.”

Feeling suddenly vulnerable in a way that she wasn’t used to, Michelle twisted around and took in the contents of the desk, searching for something that could change the conversation’s subject. She held up The Breakfast Club. “The ending of this one? Where Whats-Her-Name gives Allison the makeover? I seriously thought they were going to make out.”

“Honestly though,” Liz said, sounding as relieved as Michelle felt. “That one and The Devil Wears Prada. Totally should have been lesbian romances. And The Duchess, holy shit. Actually… you know what…” And she cocked her head to the side thoughtfully.

Michelle frowned. “What?”

“I got these new lipsticks recently? They really pop on melanin and like… you’d look so good in the red one.”

“Aw shit, that’s not what I meant…” Grinning, Michelle ran her fingers over her lips. They were parched, a scab forming on her lower lip where she’d been absentmindedly picking at it earlier in the day. “I can’t carry off lipstick.”

“Okay.” Liz stood up and went to her vanity, started rifling through the top right drawer.

“What?” Michelle asked warily.

“Challenge accepted.”

Liz’s room had Bluetooth speakers as well. After just the first few songs off one of Liz’s playlists (Lana Del Rey, Rihanna, MØ) and what felt like a pound of makeup and eighty makeup brushes, Liz swiveled Michelle back around to face the mirror.
It was hard to recognize the face looking back at her. She looked older, more polished. Using a brush and some sort of foundation, Liz had managed to make the pimple on the corner of her jaw disappear, and her eyes were alive with liquid liner, mascara. Her lips glistened scarlet. Her face had angles she’d never noticed before.

“Can I fix your hair a little?” Liz asked when Michelle didn’t immediately speak. She nodded, and with confident hands and a brush, Liz moved her part to the left, combing the stray hairs out of her face. “What do you think?” she asked a little nervously.

“It’s… I mean… what?” Michelle frowned at her reflection. “It’s just so weird because, like… it just never occurred to me that… like… I could look…”

“Like a model?” Liz suggested.

“This is hella weird,” Michelle said with a shaky laugh. Liz’s hands drifted down the sides of her neck, rested on her shoulders. “I feel like I’m in drag.”

“You look so good! Like –“ And Liz’s expression took on a wry look as she looked her up and down – “that’s hot. Really hot.”

Over the Bluetooth speakers, the playlist switched to Lorde.

Grinning, Michelle tilted her head back, and Liz dipped her face down. It was clumsy – no doubt always the case with upside-down kisses – and tasted a lot like lipstick.

“Okay, can we do a take two but, like, for real?” Michelle said, eyes still closed.

There was a rustling noise in front of her, and then a creaking sound, and then Liz was kissing her again, this time with her nose in the proper place. Her hands were drifting into a pretty proper place, too.

Michelle opened her eyes just briefly enough to see that Liz had sat down in front of her on the desk, her high-low skirt gathered up around her knees to expose a pair of smooth knees. Over the speakers, Lorde was singing about explosions. Michelle pulled Liz closer until she was half in her lap, and after a few more kisses, she’d discovered that her powder blue bra had lace on it, and Liz was wearing most of her lipstick. She smelled like coconut.

“Pizza’s up!” came a distant call from downstairs.

They sagged against each other, Michelle’s face buried in her neck.

“You smell really nice,” she mumbled. Tilting her face up with a finger under her chin, Liz gave her a quick kiss.

“To be continued?” she said with a crooked little smile as she climbed awkwardly off her, tugging her T-shirt back down with an air of embarrassment.

“To be continued,” Michelle agreed. “But I think you ought to pop by the bathroom first. You’ve got Urban Decay on your neck.”

The pizza was pretty good – not nearly good enough to merit an interruption, but still, pretty good – and Michelle was surprised by how much she actually liked her girlfriend’s dad. While he was in the kitchen refilling his water glass, she leaned over to her and whispered, “He’s a literal suburban
barbecue dad. I didn’t think they actually existed.” Liz giggled.

Meanwhile, Doris (Michelle was under strict invitation to call her by her first name, although Michelle suspected that by the end of the month, she’d be calling her Mom) complimented her on her eye makeup, and surreptitiously brushed a spot on her own neck while making eye contact with Liz, who reached up to find a smudge of lipstick that she’d missed earlier. Doris gave her a knowing little smile and said nothing. Cool mom, Michelle internally labeled her.

She didn’t immediately go upstairs to Liz’s room after dinner; instead, she slipped into the hall bathroom and washed off the makeup until she was just Michelle “MJ” Jones again, not a sultry model she didn’t know. As she left the bathroom, headed for Liz’s bedroom, she passed the master bedroom, where she heard two low voices through the crack in the door.

“… yeah, work’s been rough, lately. Having some backlash from the guys.”

“That was Doris, sounding concerned.

“Nah, course not. Though I’d like to see any of them try and suggest there’s something wrong with my little girl. It’s just other stuff.”

She hid a very small smile and continued on her way.

Liz was sitting on her bed. She grinned when she saw her and swung her legs off the bed, dropping the book she’d been reading, Bridget Jones’s Diary.

“You took it off?” she asked.

Michelle shrugged. “It’s pretty, but it’s not me, you know?” Then a little stab of insecurity jabbed at her, and she added, a little uncertainly – “Am I still hot?”

In answer, Liz strode over to her, ran her hands through her hair as she pressed their lips together. Walked her backward until she was against the vanity, and Liz was pushing makeup out of the way to hoist her up onto it.

“What do you think?” she whispered against her mouth. “Do you think you’re hot?” Her hand was in her hair, and her hips felt strangely fragile beneath Michelle’s hands.

Michelle grinned. “Tiger, I think you just hit the jackpot,” she said and pulled off her own T-shirt.

Chapter End Notes

Not sure when the next chapter will be posted, seeing how my life has gotten super crazy lately, but it will definitely happen at some point.

End Notes
Comments feed my soul and make me sing.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!