

MELINA

May 2013

Many years after Melina graduated from Bard College, the course she remembered the most was not a playwriting seminar or a theater intensive but an anthropology class. One day, the professor had flashed a slide of a bone with twenty-nine tiny incisions on one long side. “The Lebombo bone was found in a cave in Swaziland in the 1970s and is about forty-three thousand years old,” she had said. “It’s made of a baboon fibula. For years, it’s been the first calendar attributed to man. But I ask you: what man uses a twenty-nine-day calendar?” The professor seemed to stare directly at Melina. “History,” she said, “is written by those in power.”

The spring of her senior year, Melina headed to her mentor’s office hours, as she did every week. Professor Bufort had, in the eighties, written a play called *Wanderlust* that won a Drama Desk Award, transferred to Broadway, and was nominated for a Tony. He claimed that he’d always wanted to teach, and that when Bard College made him head of the theater program it was a dream come true, but Melina thought it hadn’t hurt that none of his other plays had had the same critical success.

He was standing with his back to her when she knocked and entered. His silver hair fell over his eyes, boyish. “My favorite thesis student,” he greeted.

“I’m your only thesis student.” Melina pulled an elastic from her wrist and balled her black hair on top of her head in a loose knot before rummaging in her backpack for two small glass bottles of chocolate milk from a local dairy. They cost a fortune, but she brought Professor Bufort one each week. High blood pressure medication had robbed him of his previous vices—alcohol and cigarettes—and he joked that this was the only fun he got to have anymore. Melina handed him a bottle and clinked hers against it.

“My savior,” he said, taking a long drink.

Like most high school kids who had notched productions of *The Crucible* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* on their belts, Melina had come to Bard assuming that she would study acting. It wasn’t until she took a playwriting course that she realized the only thing mightier than giving a stellar performance was being the person who crafted the words an actor spoke. She started writing one-acts that were performed by student groups. She studied Molière and Mamet, Marlowe and Miller. She took apart the language and the structure of their plays with the intensity of a grandmaster chess champion whose understanding of the game determined success.

She wrote a modern *Pygmalion*, where the sculptor was a pageant mom and the statue was JonBenét Ramsey, but it was her version of *Waiting for Godot*, set at a political convention where all the characters were awaiting a savior-like presidential candidate who never arrived, that caught the attention of Professor Bufort. He encouraged her to send her play to various open-submission festivals, and although she never was selected, it was clear to Melina and everyone else in the department that she was going to be one of the few to make it as a produced playwright.

“Melina,” Bufort asked, “what are you going to do after graduation?”

“I’m open to suggestions,” she replied, hoping that this was where her mentor told her about some fabulous job opportunity. She wasn’t naïve enough to believe that she could survive in New York City without some sort of day job, and Bufort had hooked her up before. She’d interned one summer for a famous director in the city—a man who once threw an iced latte at a costume designer who hadn’t adjusted a hem, and who took her to bars even though she was underage because he preferred to drink his lunch. Another summer, she’d been behind the cash register at a café at Signature Theatre and behind a merch booth at Second Stage. Professor Bufort had connections.

This whole business ran on connections.

“This is not a suggestion,” Bufort said, handing her a flyer. “This is more of a command.” Bard College would be hosting a collegiate playwriting competition. The prize was a guaranteed slot at the Samuel French Off-Off- Broadway Short Play Festival.

The professor leaned against the desk, his legs inches away from Melina’s. He set down his chocolate milk, crossed his arms, and smiled down at her. “I think you could win,” he said. She met his gaze. “But . . . ?”

“But.” He raised a brow. “Do I have to say it? Again?”

Melina shook her head. The only negative comment she ever received from him was that although her writing was clean and compelling, it was emotionally sterile. As if she had put up a wall between the playwright and the play.

“You are good,” Bufort said, “but you could be great. It’s not enough to manipulate your audience’s feelings. You must make them believe that there’s a reason you are the one telling this story. You have to let a bit of yourself bleed into your work.”

And therein lay the problem: you couldn’t bleed without feeling the sting of the cut.

Melina began to pleat the edge of her T-shirt, just to avoid his gaze. Bufort pushed off the desk and circled behind her. “I’ve been acquainted with Melina Green for three years,” he said, drawing close. “But I don’t really know her at all.”

What she loved about playwriting was that she could be anyone but herself, a technically Jewish girl from Connecticut who had grown up as the least important person in her household. When she was an adolescent, her mother had had a terminal illness, and her father was struck down by anticipatory grief. She learned to be quiet, and she learned to be self-sufficient.

No one wanted to know Melina Green, least of all Melina herself.

“Good writing cuts deep—for both the playwright and the audience. You have talent, Melina. I want you to write something for this competition that makes you feel . . . vulnerable.” “I’ll try,” Melina said.

Bufort’s hands came down on her shoulders, squeezing. She told herself, as she did whenever it happened, that he meant nothing by it; it was just his way of showing support, like the way he had pulled strings to get her jobs in the city. He was her father’s age; he didn’t think about boundaries the way that younger people did. She shouldn’t read into it.

As if to underline this, suddenly, he was no longer touching her. Professor Bufort raised the chocolate milk again. “Show me what scares you,” he said.

That year Melina lived in an apartment above a Thai restaurant with her best friend, Andre. They had met in a sophomore playwriting class and bonded over the fact that *Our Town* was overrated, that the musical *Carrie* was underrated, and that you could both love *Phantom of the Opera* and find it uncomfortably rapey.

As soon as she walked through the door, Andre looked up from where he was watching the *Real Housewives*. “Mel! Vote on dinner,” he said.

Andre was the only person who called Melina by a nickname. Her name, in Greek, meant sweet, and he said he knew her too well to lie to her face every time he addressed her.

“What are my options?” Melina asked.

“Mayonnaise, Vienna fingers, or take-out Thai.”

“Again?”

“You’re the one who wanted to live over Golden Orchid because it smelled so good.”

They looked at each other. “Thai,” they said in unison.

Andre turned off the television and followed Melina to her bedroom. Although they’d been living in the apartment for two years, there were still boxes on the floor and she’d never hung up any art or strung fairy lights around the headboard the way Andre had. “No wonder you get shit done,” he murmured. “You live in a cell.”

Like her, Andre was a playwriting major. Unlike her, Andre had never actually finished a play. He would make it to the end of the second act and decide he needed to revise the first before he could finish, and then get stuck endlessly rewriting. For the past semester he'd been working on a retelling of King Lear with a Black matriarch who was trying to decide which of three daughters deserved her secret recipe for gumbo. He'd based the main character on his grandmother. He handed her the mail, which today consisted of a manila envelope addressed to her in her father's messy handwriting. The relationship between Melina and her father had decayed during her mom's illness to the point where putting any weight on it was too tender, but in his own sweet and distant way, he tried. Lately, he had gotten interested in genealogy, and he told Melina he'd discovered she was related to a Union general, Queen Isabella of Spain, and Adam Sandler.

She tore open the packet. Just found this ancestor on Mom's side of the family. First published female poet in England—1611. Maybe this writing thing is in your blood!

The note was clipped to a small sheaf of papers. She glanced at a photocopied picture of a severe-looking Elizabethan lady with a stiff white ruff around her neck, and then tossed the packet onto the mess of her desk. "My ancestor was a poet," she said dismissively.

"Well, my ancestor was Thomas Jefferson, and you see where that got me." Andre propped himself up on an elbow. "How was Bufort?"

She shrugged.

"What are you submitting for the competition?"

Melina rubbed her forehead, where a dull ache had started. "What makes you think I'm going to submit anything?"

Andre rolled his eyes. "A Bard playwriting competition without an entry from you would be like Scotland going into battle without Mel Gibson."

"I don't even know what that means."

"To be fair, he's better at makeup than you are, which is criminal because I've never met anyone else with those weird-ass silver eyes of yours, and if you knew what mascara was, they'd pop even more," Andre said, looking her over from her messy braid to her torn cargo pants to her ratty sneakers. "Do people who see you ever, like, offer you handouts?"

Andre was always harping on how she put no effort into her appearance. It was true that sometimes she was writing so fiercely she forgot to shower or brush her teeth. And that she liked to wear leggings and fuzzy sweatshirts when she knew she had a long night at the laptop ahead of her. "What are you entering in the competition?" she asked, changing the subject. "I don't think I'll have anything ready," Andre hedged. "You could," Melina said, looking him directly in the eye.

"But you're going to win," he said, without even an ounce of rancor. It was one of the reasons she loved him. They were in the same program, and instead of their relationship being competitive, it was supportive. Andre, she knew, would have and had clapped back at other students who were convinced her success at Bard wasn't deserved, but rather the rumored result of an affair with Bufort. It would have been funny, if it hadn't hurt so much—she hadn't even kissed a guy in the four years she'd been at college, much less embarked on a torrid May-December romance. She sighed. "I . . . don't know what to write about."

"Mm. You could try that idea about the thing that happened in Vegas that didn't stay in Vegas."

"I feel like comedy wouldn't be taken seriously," Melina said. "Isn't that the point?"

"Bufort wants me to do something personal," she said, pronouncing the word like a curse.

"Something painful."

"Okay then," Andre said, "write about something that hurts you."

She wrote a play called *Reputation*, where none of the characters had names. They were The Girl. The Boy. The Best Friend. The Nemesis. The Father.

The Girl was fourteen, and invisible. For years she had been fading, in direct proportion to The Mother's illness. After the funeral, she disappeared entirely, edged out of sight by The Father's grief. Until one day, The Boy—eighteen—said hello.

She was certain that it must be a mistake, but no. He saw her. He spoke to her. And when he touched her, she could see herself again— hazy, but coming back into focus.

The Boy was everything she was not: he took up space, he knew everyone, he was impossible to miss. In his presence, she felt bigger and solid and seen.

It started with kisses. Each time his mouth touched hers, she felt a little more substantial.

Wherever he put his hands on her, she could see the outline of her body. But when he rucked up her skirt and started to unbutton his pants, she shoved him away and said no.

The next day at school, the Boy's Best Friend was talking about her to people she did not know.

The Boy said she climbed him like a tree, he said. She was tight as a fist.

Her Nemesis walked by with a friend. I knew she had to be a slut if he was interested in her.

The Girl's face burned so hot she was certain people could feel her embarrassment, even if they could not see it. She found The Boy and demanded to know why he'd lied.

Don't you want to be with me? he asked.

Yes but.

I have a reputation to uphold, The Boy said. Does it really matter what they think, as long as you and I know what's true?

She wanted to walk away, but he caught her hand, and like magic, she flickered into view.

The Girl had a reputation now, too. When she stood in the line at the cafeteria, unseen, she heard herself described as easy. Changing in the locker room for gym class, she heard herself described as desperate.

The Girl spent more and more time with The Boy, because he was the only person who seemed to know who she really was. In private, he was mostly kind and sweet. She thought maybe she saw a version of The Boy that was invisible to everyone else, too.

One night, he pushed up her skirt again and began to unbutton his pants. Everyone thinks you're doing it, he said. So you might as well.

This time, The Girl didn't say no.

Did she choose? Or did she give in under pressure?

Did it matter?

Because at the moment The Boy pushed into her, she manifested fully and permanently into view—albeit a messy, aching footnote in someone else's story.

Professor Bufort loved the play. He called it raw and thoughtful and provocative. Melina's play was chosen as one of the three finalists in the competition, along with one from a Middlebury student and another from Wesleyan. On the day of the judging, where there would be a reading of each play performed by Bard theater students, Melina spent the morning riddled with nerves and throwing up. This was the first play she had crafted where she was the main character, albeit buried under layers of language.

If people found the play lacking, was she? She couldn't separate herself from the script, she couldn't look at the actors playing The Boy and The Girl without seeing herself at fourteen, untethered after her mother's death, latching on to the only person who seemed to want her company. She couldn't hear the words she had written without remembering that lost autumn, when she had no voice, and others filled in the silence with lies about her that became truths.

If that wasn't stressful enough, she had altered the play the tiniest bit, adding a scene for the final reading that Professor Bufort did not know about. For all she knew, it could get her disqualified. But the play wasn't finished, not without the epilogue, which made it relevant in the present day.

The auditorium was packed. Andre had saved her a seat in a spot that was all too exposed for her tastes, only a few rows back from the stage. She mumbled apologies as she clambered over people who were already seated.

"I had to tell people I had mono to keep them from sitting here," Andre said.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm fashionably late."

He glanced from her messy bun to her Crocs. "No. You're just late."

Professor Bufort stepped onto the stage. "Thank you all for attending the readings that constitute the final round of the inaugural Bard College Playwriting Competition. It has been a struggle keeping our judge this year a secret," Bufort said. "You know him for his incisive reviews, and his coverage of the theater industry as a whole. Please welcome, from The New York Times, theater critic Jasper Tolle."

Andre and Melina looked at each other. "What life is this?" Melina whispered. "Jasper Tolle is going to judge my play?"

Everyone knew him—even people outside the business. Hailed as a wunderkind who had been hired by the Times at twenty-six, and then—with his sharp and cutting commentary—he'd attracted a following that either despised or adored him. Within three years he'd moved from covering black box productions in northern New Jersey to Off-Off-Broadway to select shows geared toward Millennials, like *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* and *Murder Ballad*. Jasper Tolle was half the age of the senior critic at the paper. He had fan accounts on Instagram and Facebook. He made theater—an art form usually embraced by audiences with gray hair—cool again.

"Holy shit," Andre breathed. "He's hot."

He was, Melina supposed, for someone in his early thirties. He had white-blond hair with a cowlick in the back, and behind his tortoiseshell glasses, his vivid blue eyes glittered like cut glass. He was tall, lanky, and looked aggrieved, as if this was something he'd put on his calendar months ago and now regretted.

"He is giving sexy Voldemort vibes," Andre murmured.

"Never say that again."

Bufort pushed the handheld mic toward the critic, who cleared his throat, cheeks reddening. Interesting, Melina thought. He was a critic who liked to hide behind his words.

Not much different than a playwright.