

Emily Alice Katz

Summer Knowledge

The only thing I'm sorry about is that I tried to pants you when we were in seventh grade.

It was only like the second time you had come over to my house. We were twelve. You still had frizzy hair and braces, but you were already taller than me. You wore your soccer shorts, and your calf muscles looked so much like little Thanksgiving turkeys that I wanted to test my teeth on them.

I pinned your elbows behind you. You slid halfway on the couch and then you sort of kneed me sideways and also yanked my ponytail pretty hard. I got the point, and it was over. I don't know if you yelled at me then or if you said anything at all. You didn't need to. You had kept your shorts up.

Either you didn't talk to me for a long time after that or else I didn't talk to you, I forget which. But it turned out, later, that you didn't even remember what I had tried to do that afternoon in the basement, when we were twelve.

You and I weren't friends again until spring of freshman year in high school, when we sat across from each other in art.

Mr. Granley: "Heidi, help Renny with her drawing, please, for the love of God." (Referring to my pathetic attempt at a still life.)

When he turned back to his desk, I squeezed my boobs—screw you, Mr. Granley!—and left two charcoal handprints on my white shirt, the one with the oversized buttons, remember when that was cool? And your laugh said *you are crazy but you are HILARIOUS*. You showed me some tricks about gridding the paper, to help with perspective.

I look like I should be good at art, but I'm not. You look like you shouldn't be good at art, but you are. You look like you should be nationally ranked in tennis, which you are. You look like you should be in the brochure for some expensive artsy college in Vermont, laughing on the marble steps of the library in a vintage cardigan

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with an arm around the shoulders of some guy in an understated college sweatshirt. You will be in that brochure.

When we became actual friends, spring of freshman year, my mom asked what your last name was. She was like, Rubenfeld? What kind of a name is that?

The record store on Moreland wasn't hiring for the summer and neither was the second-hand clothing store and the lady at the hippie grocery said "maybe," but she never called back. The owner of Delmore's (DELI AND MORE!) hired you on the spot.

Aunt Pat throws ten bucks at me every time I pull a couple of weeds out of her garden, but I'm going to have to get some kind of job, eventually.

In case you're wondering, I haven't touched the necklace money. If you don't believe me, I can show it to you. You keep pretending not to think about it. Like you've forgotten that you know.

Aunt Pat: "Everybody makes mistakes, honey. It's how you make amends, that's the thing that counts. I can keep on helping, Renny honey, till you get on your feet."

For the record, I'm on my feet a lot more than she is.

Thank God Aunt Pat's pervy deadbeat husband died two years ago. Otherwise, I would never have moved into Rumsey Manor, even if she had begged me. Lucky for me the upstairs apartment, above the bed-and-breakfast, was free. Starting in January. Just before my parents kicked me out. I moved in in February. It isn't even really big enough for a second person but, after graduation, I thought it might be fun for you to spend the summer with me in town, and you thought so too, at least originally, if you recall.

It took me a while to notice that no one ever, ever stays in the bed-and-breakfast. Aunt Pat is loaded, same as my mom. She doesn't need paying guests.

It's true the apartment is kind of cruddy, with the tiny kitchen and the peeling bathroom linoleum and the weird closet in back that's nearly big enough to use as an extra bedroom except that you can't stand all the way up in it, so it's only good for watching tv in. The point is that she can't look for a real renter yet for the upstairs apartment, because she's planning to renovate first. That's what she said when I moved in, and she's still saying it. So I can stay at Rumsey Manor

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basically as long as I want. Though when you leave for school at the end of August, I might leave too. Where to, you ask? Maybe somewhere else in town. Or maybe Athens, along with everyone else from high school. Maybe New York. It's not exactly an urgent question. Yet.

You mentioned Ashwin, like, three times in the course of your first two days working at Delmore's, so I had to come see for myself.

Of course you had fancied up the menu chalkboards on the wall with sunny beach scenes. Sand and crabs and palm trees and even an adorable Dalmatian puppy carrying a bucket in its mouth.

Guy Next to Me in Line [short shorts; mint chip in a cup]: "Who did the artwork? It's AMAZING!"

And, just like that, you were already MVP at the fucking sandwich and ice cream shop on your third day working there.

"What is with his accent?" I asked you when we got home to the apartment. I was talking about Ashwin.

You told me that he's from *here* but he used to spend half the summer every year with his aunts and cousins in Leeds and blah blah blah. Then you started talking to me about bhangra music like you actually knew something about it.

I swear to God, I didn't see Ashwin's cd anywhere after that week in June that you spent listening to it nonstop, dancing around like you were a sparkly rainbow waterfall. Do you think I would bother to steal his dumb cd? Is that really what you think? Just because I said I would be ecstatic never to have to listen to those songs again?

And no, there wasn't any room for me to dance with you in that pathetic excuse for a kitchen, that's why I didn't, not because it was Hate Everything That Heidi Likes Week, which is what you claimed. Just so you know.

Did you tell Ashwin about the meathead with the backwards baseball cap who spent our entire junior year yelling, *What's up, Thelma and Louise?!?* at the top of his lungs when he saw you and me together?

It happened a lot.

Did you tell Ashwin about how once, when you were sleeping over, I think it was sophomore year, you laughed so hard at something I said that you actually peed a little bit in my bed?

But back to Rumsey Manor. It was so hot that day, the day I found the stash. And I was so bored.

I went back to the closet to watch a video, but there was nothing I hadn't seen five million times. So there I was, contemplating the crappy tv and VCR your parents lent us, with nothing to do.

It's not like I hadn't noticed the wall panel behind the tv before that. But it hadn't occurred to me to open it, till then.

When you got home from Delmore's, I was sitting on the ratty carpet in the closet. You stopped in the doorway, holding your hair up off your neck with one hand.

"What are you doing?" you said. "What is all that?"

You kneeled down next to me and poked a finger at the stack.

"It's not Garfield," I said. "Some of it is superheroes but a lot of it is crazy shit, fat naked devil women and stuff."

You scooted up behind me to get a closer look. You put your chin on my shoulder. You smelled like your sea breeze deodorant, which was working overtime, even with the window units on.

In the top left panel of the comic in my lap, a woman stood in a grocery-store aisle, bending down to examine a row of laundry detergent, ass up in the air. Thinking so hard that she didn't notice the squirrely dude jerking off across the aisle from her.

"Whoa," you said.

"I've heard about this stuff. Underground comics. From the sixties. These are, like, collectors' items. Art. With a Capital A."

You rocked back onto your heels and snorted at me.

"I'm serious," I said. I hit your knee with mine. "This is probably worth a lot of money. These must have belonged to my aunt's second husband." Of course. He was a total perv.

"Did he hide them back here? Do you think your aunt knows?"

I shrugged. "Maybe he hid him. Or maybe Aunt Pat couldn't bear to throw them away. Maybe they used to read these in bed together, for inspiration."

You made a gross-out face.

"I think we should sell them," I said.

You looked away from me then, toward the dark hole that the comics had come from.

"That seems kind of drastic," you said. "You can borrow some money from me if you need it. Anyway, I don't want us to get in trouble."

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What else is new? I thought. I might have rolled my eyes.

"Seriously, it's a bad idea," you said. "I bet you're right and your aunt knows the comics are back here. She might even check once in a while. Aunt Pat is on your side. Why mess it up? You know?"

And then we heard Aunt Pat trudging up the stairs of Rumsey Manor. I'd been begging her for ages to check the malfunctioning stovetop, and it sounded like she was finally coming up to do it. She always walks around like she doesn't have a place in the world she needs go, which is a fact. Have you ever noticed that we never see Aunt Pat without a glass of something-or-other in her hand? I'm sure that slows her down.

We put the comics back into the crawlspace. We closed the panel before my aunt even made it to the top step.

It was Saturday. Almost August. Ashwin was coming over for the first time, to watch a movie with us. In the closet.

But first the three of us went to the rice and beans place on Euclid, across the street from the video store.

Ashwin blew his straw paper at you. He was sitting right next to you. The straw paper hit your ear and then dangled from your hair. He pinched the paper and with his other fingers he lifted the curling hairs away from it, so he could pull it out. Just with his fingertips, one strand at a time. Like he was performing surgery on a butterfly.

Then the waiter finally came, and I could look at my food instead of Ashwin's stupid face across from me.

"Is this really Cuban food?" Ashwin said. "Are there Cubans in Atlanta?"

"I wonder if you could tell if someone was Cuban, just from looking at him," I said. "I mean, if you were too far away to hear him speaking Spanish. It's not like with Indians. You people are pretty easy to pick out of a crowd."

You got all red in the face then. "Jesus, Renny!" you said. "You sound like your mom."

I was about to grab a napkin from the holder, but instead I reached over and yanked Ashwin's bangs away where they had flopped over one eye. I pushed his face back. Hard but not too hard.

"Ow," Ashwin said. "What's that all about?"

"Just kidding," I said.

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The ceiling fans rattled, tick-tick-tick.

Your left arm and Ashwin's right arm were close enough that the hairs touched.

At the video store Ashwin went straight to the concert movie section. You stood under the poster of Betty Page, facing the shelves of new releases. I pulled out a few of the featured retro-horror flicks and picked the one with the best cover art and tagline. You were ignoring me.

The owner of the video store straddled the space behind the check-out register, like always. He asked me if I needed help.

"That's your comics place upstairs, right?"

He said it was.

"I have something to show you," I said.

I could have stripped naked right then and there, and you wouldn't have turned in my direction. You hadn't asked me why I had lugged a gym bag from Rumsey Manor. You had walked next to Ashwin the whole way to the restaurant, with me behind you, and then to the video store (me still behind you) and so the bag had banged against my legs and only mine.

But I know you knew what was inside. You are a lot of things, including most of the time a goody-goody, but you are not a moron. You pretended that you didn't know what I was doing.

I put the bag on the counter and let the owner open it himself. He tried to act all cool about it, probably so he could low-ball me.

"Where'd you get these?" he said. I shrugged. "I think I might be able to take 'em off your hands."

"Huh," I said.

He rubbed his chin. "Let me make a few calls," he said. "I'll get back to you."

We watched the movie we got, you and me and Ashwin. *Dracula's Daughter*. He was wearing a lot of aftershave, but the closet still smelled like the inside of a sleeping bag, as usual.

At the apartment door, you and Ashwin made up a secret handshake and I nearly puked, just from embarrassment on your behalf. And then he pulled you into a hug. Like you were a couple of eight-year-old girls.

Is it weird to say that I could see myself through his eyes, just in that one second? Standing there behind you with my arms crossed

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and my hair hanging in front of my face? I wonder if he knew what I wanted right then: him, falling backwards down the stairs of Rumsey Manor.

See you at work on Monday, he said.

All through the spring, before graduation, you kept trying to make me talk about what happened with my parents last February. Why I moved out. And then when I finally did tell you what happened, you never mentioned it to me again. Not once the whole summer in Rumsey Manor. So far.

For the record, I really don't think it was that one incident that made the difference for my mom. What's one stupid necklace when you have a million? Really it was more the little things that pissed her off over time.

I mean, she was mad to begin with. At first it was because I kept refusing to go to church. Then my mom got mad about the nose ring. My dad let me keep it in. He was like, I want you to see how people treat you when you look like that.

Then my mom and dad were *both* mad. They were pissed that I got a D in Econ fall semester. There was no way to explain that Coach Hollis was not only the Econ teacher but also an idiot and that I couldn't tell him to keep his googly eyes to himself and to stop saying obnoxious things about my nose ring, but I could stop showing up, and that's exactly what I did.

But then, with the last thing, the thing that happened back in February, my dad, who never yells, yelled. My mom was sitting there at the dining room table in her crisp pink button-down. Like she had dressed up for the occasion. Which she probably had. She was so tremble-y that her hair was shaking like a gelatin mold. Sniffing and swallowing. She didn't say a word.

Dad: "How much did you get for it?" (My mom's necklace.)

I told him how much.

Dad: "Did you use it to buy drugs?"

Me: "Do you seriously think I'm on drugs? Do you even know what a person on drugs looks like?"

Dad: "Do *you* know what a person on drugs looks like?"

Me: [silent]

Dad: "I expect you to pay us back for it."

Me: [silent]

Dad: "Let me be clear. It's not about the money. It's about *trust*. It's about *moral fiber*."

He actually said that.

Dad: "You're going to stay in school until graduation and then I don't care what you do."

I could have given all the money back right then, as it turned out. We didn't go to Charleston for spring break after all. You ended up going to New York with your parents instead.

Putting me in the apartment in Rumsey Manor was Aunt Pat's idea but she didn't come out to the 'burbs to pick me up. She is the laziest person on earth and also usually tanked, let's face it, and she probably didn't want to have to talk to my mom and dad in person while they were still so pissed at me. Even though they all agreed to the plan. Obviously.

So it was my dad who carried my trunk and my three cardboard boxes from my room to the car and then he was the one who carried them up the steps of Rumsey Manor, to the apartment on the second floor.

"Good luck," he said to me, and then he closed the door behind him.

I'm looking at you now in the dark while the roaches outside fling themselves at the window screen.

I never told you, but the guy called me the week after we all went to the video store together. Video Store Guy didn't ask me again where I got the comics. He didn't accuse me of anything, just so you know. But I am almost one-hundred-percent certain that he somehow figured it out. He probably knew my aunt's dead second husband, come to think of it. Of course the neighborhood pervs all know each other. Duh.

No, he said, he didn't want the comics. He said no with a kind of tightness in his voice. Like he had to work really hard to keep from saying *young lady*. As in: "*Young lady*, you're lucky I'm not getting you in a heap of trouble, because I sure could." Like he's my fucking dad. Like he's a paragon of virtue and not a sketchy dude who makes a living renting vintage porn and weird old horror movies that no one's ever heard of and also selling dirty comics.

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You're asleep in bed. The comics were in the crawlspace, where we had left them. I grabbed as many as I could fit in my gym bag, along with some clothes and a toothbrush. And your favorite sweatshirt. And also Ashwin's missing cd. Surprise. (You won't remember Ashwin's face ten years from now. I guarantee it.)

I left the necklace money in an envelope on top of the tv. Give it back to my mom if you want. She can buy herself a super-deluxe necklace to replace the one I sold. The truth is, for the record, she never wore it anyway.

The truth is, she never liked you. By the way.

I lie down next to you. You've been taller than me since middle school. Your feet reach almost to the end of the bed, past mine. I'm itching to stub my toe along your calf. Just to test the tightness of the muscle underneath, to feel how your skin would dimple against the bulb of my big toe. To press hard, but not too hard. And then I'm thinking about how I want to dig my fingernails into your waist until they leave marks, in that spot where your shirt is pushed up from the top of your undies.

I'm thinking all of a sudden about how I want to bite you. Vampire-style. To put my mouth right there in the space between your neck and collarbone and suck. I can almost taste your sweat already.

But I don't do any of those things. I get up. I unlock the front door to the apartment and step onto the landing. I've got my bag with me. Inman Park in the middle of the night, in summer, from a bike, is giant roaches scuttling and roses dropping petals and cars locked tight.

Someday you'll reach for your senior yearbook, mark me with a fingertip. A feeling chiming in you, like an elevator opening its doors. You'll read for clues. Dear Heidi. LYLAS: Love ya like a sister.

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