

## What We Hoped it Was

By Annie Marcelino

[link](#)

There's something about middle school PE. Dressing out in the jungle that is the locker room<sup>1</sup>, the chatter of lions and bears and gazelles melting into a soft buzz. Stepping outside as the wind bites your skin through the cheap PE shirt fabric.

The chipped white paint decorating numbers on the blacktop, designating the rows we were meant to sit in before class started. I sat at number 28, you at number 29. I'd look at you, your legs folded, angular, back hunched forward, a frame for the book you were holding in your hands. A gazelle, for sure. You'd turn and look right back at me, the look in your eyes a challenge.

My cheeks would turn a cherry red, the clumsy ostrich that I was.

I'd go back and recount every single detail, every single interaction with you, trying to remember the way the corners of your mouth curled upwards or the way you swept your hair behind your ears when your bangs fell over your eyes. Scene after scene after scene I would replay in my head, the frames of a film tick-tick-ticking across the backs of my eyes.<sup>2</sup>

Her,

her,

her,

her.

The word felt like oil on my tongue. Oil - thick, heavy, a tar I couldn't choke down. I'd feel it strike the back of my throat, impossible to throw up no matter how hard I gagged, impossible to swallow no matter how tight I shut my eyes.

### The Bet

You gave your book to me, layers of sticky notes wedged between the pages like an old explorer mapping out his journey. Two boys on the cover, a rip off of Harry Potter<sup>3</sup>, their eyes staring fiercely at the viewer. A book about wizards, about rivals, but you flashed your charming grin and said that you thought the boys would end up together by the end of it. I shook my head, they were enemies, there was no way.

Okay, you said. Then I'll finish the book, and then you read it. Another dare.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mean Girls*, 2004. A classic.

<sup>2</sup> "But I'm the kind of girl that you write songs about

Mystery you can't get out your head before you sleep at night" - *Dying is a Beautiful Thing To Do* by Easha

<sup>3</sup> Rainbow Rowell, *Carry On*, 2015. Looking back, not the magnum opus I thought it was. The words are cheesy and the story weak (sorry Rainbow Rowell), and it really is just a fanfic of Harry Potter. But I think it was because it was hers, and because it was the first book I was introduced to that had LGBTQIA+ characters as the protagonists.

My eyes would pause with every page turn, taking the time to run my fingers over your scribbled notes. Words like *See, I told you so* and *Look!! Right here!* in your slanted writing, messy in the way a doctor's would be<sup>4</sup>.

I'd think of your own slender fingers turning the pages, grinning the same way I did every time the main character tripped, or every time his nemesis would teasingly smirk.<sup>5</sup>

You were right of course, they ended up together in the end.

### **The "Date"**

Halfway through the year, my hand would end up entangled with yours as we walked to the quad from PE. We'd never talk about it - I'd never have to ask, you'd never have to accept - but somehow day after day, there we were, hand in hand. I would sweat and my feathers would ruffle, but you'd stay calm, the only signs of difference a quick glance and the whisper of a smile.

And just like that, we were downtown, standing together in the bookstore staring at the YA novels. Neither of us were brave enough to call it what it was, but we both hoped that it was. I would choke on my words, every sentence another crack fracturing my throat. You were quiet too, for once your face was a bright red like mine<sup>6</sup>.

Near silent, until you cracked a joke, and the tightly knotted ball of string in my chest unraveled. God, all the words I wanted to say. They came pouring out, except one.

Mahal kita, Mahal kita, Mahal kita.

### **The Fallout**

Weeks and events passed our lives.

1. **Bliss** - Stolen glances followed by knowing smiles (and cherry red cheeks). My knee brushing against yours as we sat cross-legged in the gym. Your head on my shoulder, my back ever-so-tense in an effort to stay still, afraid I would scare you off.
2. **Falling Out** - I used to lie and say I didn't know how it happened, but I know. It was gradual, just like it was in the beginning. Our friends were loud, peppy, and it felt like we

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<sup>4</sup> Why do they do that? You would think a readable prescription would be important.

<sup>5</sup> We used to joke together, I was the Simon and she was the Baz. Simon, of course, was the "chosen one", but he was clumsy and ungraceful, always blowing things up with his magic. Baz was the elegant prodigal son, coming from a long line of talented wizards, calculated and perfect with every move he made.

<sup>6</sup> "You ought to know that I think we're one and the same" - *The Perfect Pair* by Beabadoobee

were always surrounded, always pushed together like doubled pawns<sup>7</sup>. Our secret no longer ours.

- 3. Carry On** - And that was it. I was mad, so, so mad at first. My wings spread and shaking as I cried and cried. You, once an untouchable gazelle, turned lion, cold and uncaring. The dare in your eyes still a challenge, but no longer welcoming<sup>8</sup>.

It was years later that you texted me. We had talked the occasional small talk from time to time, but never for longer than needed. Your text was short, but concise. And I realized I meant just as much to you as you did to me. I realized I was wrong - I never was an ostrich, you never a gazelle or lion.

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<sup>7</sup> “Doubled Pawns.” Wikipedia, March 28, 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubled\\_pawns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubled_pawns).

<sup>8</sup> “Once you pull the trigger,

We’ll become separated into two

For the last time, shall I hold your hand” - *Smile, Wait for the Flash* by GIRIBOY

## Bibliography

Waters, Mark, director. *Mean Girls*. Paramount Pictures, 2004. 1h 37m.

In the cultural phenomenon *Mean Girls*, most known for its exaggerated depiction of high school, Cady Heron - a new girl from Africa - finds her place in school with the help of the “popular girls”. Cady compares her classmates to the animals she is used to observing in Africa, with the story building up to an all-out jungle fight at the height of the conflict.

I found the metaphor of animals very striking, it simplifies the complex emotions high schoolers/middle schoolers feel to a very raw concept. In the movie, the metaphor exposes what many people ignore, that at the end of the day humans are animals. I wanted to replicate that feeling of reaching into the core of humans, stripping them down to their natural instincts. This simplicity allowed me to focus on the connection between the two characters, and I added some of that complexity back into the mix at the end of the essay, where I removed their animal characterization.

Rowell, Rainbow. *Carry On*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015.

*Carry On* is a YA novel about Simon Snow, the “chosen one” meant to fulfill the prophecy and save the magic world from the Humdrum (essentially Voldemort). In addition to the Humdrum, Simon must deal with Basilton Grimm Pitch, his longtime nemesis and roommate.

*Carry On* was the first book I read that spotlighted LGBTQIA+ characters, and I’m forever grateful to the person in my essay for introducing the book to me. Although it didn’t sink in at the time, I saw a lot of parallels between my life and Simon’s. Although I’m far from being a wizard, Simon feels clumsy and sometimes useless, especially compared to his counterpart Baz. I took their relationship and mirrored it to mine, emphasizing the way I would put my crush on a pedestal, believing they were perfect. Baz is also Simon’s first same-sex partner, a situation similar to mine.

“Doubled Pawns.” Wikipedia, March 28, 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubled\\_pawns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubled_pawns).

Double pawns is when two pawns of the opposite side are facing each other. Because of this, the pawns are stuck in the position, both unable to move in any direction until another piece is introduced.

I chose pawns to represent this phase in our relationship because it felt like more outside people were in control of it than us ourselves. Our friends were always pressuring us to hold hands or sit next to each other (as middle schoolers do). I chose chess specifically because I imagined the way people move the pieces (pushing them forward, slightly dragging them across the board) the same way people will push others, both metaphorically and physically. I reference doubled pawns specifically because that's what it felt like, being so close but unable to make any advancing moves.