



BLOOD MOON

**“Shouts down the shame,
chips away at the period
taboo. . . . A bold and
vital new voice in feminist
literature.”**

—Samantha Shannon,
author of *The Bone Season*

Lucy Cuthew

BLOOD MOON





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**Lucy
Cuthew**



Walker Books

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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**For
Bronwen,
Helen,
Kirsten,
and
Rachel**



PART ONE

A Slice of Night

I perch on the bench in
the planetarium staff room
and take out my phone,
with its smooth black-and-gold
star-spangled case, and
read all the messages
from today while I wait
listening to the silent room,
checking it's empty
before I get changed.

There's a message from Dad
and a ton in the chat
with the girls called
PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY
(the only thing
any of us can make).

Dad

I will be the one in the
white ford behind the trees
at five past zero
hundred hours. D x

I think he's being *funny*,
but I don't get it.

He's on another planet.
At least he's agreed
to pick me and Harriet up
out back,
and not INSIDE
the ice rink,
like he wanted to.

I open PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY.

Harriet

Just getting ready!!

Bethany

Remind me why we're going
to an *ICE-RINK* birthday party.
Are we ten again?

Leylah

Apparently it's free cuz
Jackson's on the ice hockey team,
but it's totally so he can show
off to everybody.

Harriet

He can show off to me.
Apparently he's amazing.

Bethany

I thought you liked Lee?

Harriet

I can multitask.



Bethany

Ha.

I'm secretly into it.

Marie

I'm openly into it.

It'll be fun.

Harriet

What you all wearing?

Leylah

Shorts and a crop top . . .

And a giant hoodie,

to get past the parental police.

Marie

Erm . . . Ley, *ICE* skating . . .

I'm wearing two pairs of leggings

and three shirts

under my sweater.

Leylah

Ugh. Changing now.

Warm clothes are so

unflattering on me.

At least I'll be allowed out.

Harriet

You always look lovely.

Has anyone heard

from Frankie today?



Me
I'm here!
Just finishing work.
Tell me when
you're there. XX

I finish typing,
then take off my uniform
and let my dress
slink down over my
not-completely-flat
(but also not-yet-
satisfactory) chest.

A dab of concealer,
a pump of face mist:
I'm good to go.

*Jackson Twigger's
Sweet Sixteenth
at the ice rink.*

(Although . . .
Jackson Twigger.
Sweet?
LOL.)

While I wait for the girls,
I scroll through my phone.
Harriet's posted a photo
of herself in our tree house.
#GettingReady #InstaMakeup

#Starlight #StarGazing #NightsOut

She looks really pretty,
her eyes all smoky,
but I know
the photo
is from
ages ago.

It shouldn't annoy me,
but we're *not* getting ready
in our tree house tonight,
and I hate when
she's being fake.

Under the photo
Jackson's replied,
"ur hot."

Harriet's written
"thanks babe" and
added a winky face.

(Does she actually *like* him
or does she just like flirting?)

Harriet

We're here!
Bring it, beatch.

I pull on my sneakers,
then open the door
to the atrium,



where Vidhi is
putting away a wooden box
of sparkling meteor rocks.

I wish I'd waited here
talking to her
about astronomy
instead of looking
at what Harriet's posting.

"Have a good time,"
Vidhi says.
"You were great today.
You're clearly
really
into this."

"Thanks," I say,
her compliment
blazing inside me
incandescently.

"Don't forget to send me
your application for the
summer program.
Or you can
just bring it
next Saturday.
I'll make sure
Elaine gets it."

"I won't forget," I say,
a flutter of nerves
at the thought of her

and the director
of this whole place
reading my essay.

“Thanks, Vidhi,
see you Saturday.”

“I’ll be rooting for you!”
she says,

which means

the World

to me.

(Vidhi did the exact same
summer program when
she was sixteen,
and now she’s got a
PhD in Astronomy.
#LifeGoals)

I push open
the double doors
and breathe in
the streetlight night.
Over the buildings,
the crescent moon
is a sharp, bright slice
of otherworldly light.

I snap a quick picture.
The moon comes out tiny,
all of its majesty
lost by my phone’s
complete inability
to take a picture of something

so far from me.
I know Harriet
will find it funny.

Me

Took this and thought of you.
#ShitPicturesOfTheMoon

Harriet

LOL. Get your ass in here.
Skating's starting soon.

Sweet Sixteen

“Frankie!” Harriet screams,
waving at me,
bracelets jangling,
as I walk into the chilly
and unnecessarily
brightly lit room.

The music is loud,
and our crowd
spills out of a booth
near the rental skates.
I climb over the back
of the seats
and slide in
between Harriet and Marie.

Jackson is already strutting
in front of the group,
talking loudly,
as though we’re
his own personal audience.

There’s Bethany,
Leylah,
Marie,
Me,
Harriet (laughing loudly),
Dev,
Lee,
and Charlie.

Jackson is telling everyone
how last weekend
he got a new mountain bike
on his actual birthday.

Then went out riding
and met two girls
who were all over him
because

babes love bikes.

Then he tells us how
he ended up banging
them both
as a birthday present.

(Yeah, right.)

He shows us all
a picture of him
straddling his bike,
with two girls kissing him,
one on each cheek.

“How long do we
have to listen to this?”
I mutter to Harriet,

but she doesn't
answer me,

and Jackson is still going,
gesticulating grotesquely
with his overmobile groin.



Harriet grins at me
and fans her crotch,
then rolls her eyes
like she's about to faint.

I whisper to Marie,
"Is it just me,
or is Jackson disgusting?"

but Marie's not listening.

Then Jackson looks at me,
scathingly.
Maybe he heard me.
I hope he did.
I don't care if he hates me.

Harriet's eyes stay
fixed on him.
Then she laughs
at something he says,
and throws back her head,
like a wolf howling at the moon.

As she does,
her tilted-up chin
leaves a gap and
I notice someone I hadn't
previously seen:

Benjamin Jones.

He's sitting between
Dev and Lee



in a leather jacket,
looking explosively hot.

He turns his eyes to me,
and right then

something physical

happens

down below.

He's so good-looking
I can feel the photons
bouncing off him
and colliding
with me.
#InstantCrush



Noticing

The next time Harriet laughs,
my and Benjamin's eyes meet
in the tiny bit of space-time
her thrown-back head creates.

I smile at him slightly.
He smiles back at me.

I don't know when
we last spoke,
but recently I have noticed him
noticing me.

Only now it's not just
noticing each other,
or looking at each other.
We're really
seeing each other.



Blushing

“What are you
blushing about?”
Harriet’s whisper
is like sandpaper
on my eardrum.

“I’m not!”
I say, my voice high,
my larynx tight.

I thought she
was too busy
watching Jackson
to notice the color
of my cheeks, but

she’s staring at me,
a single raised eyebrow
grilling me.

My cheeks grow redder
under the heat.

I could tell her
I’m giving Benjamin
the eye,

but I prefer
the privacy of
realizing



I like Benjamin
and not telling her.

I usually tell her
everything.

“Fine, ignore me,”
she says, climbing over me.
“I’m going to talk to Lee
while my hair still
looks amazing.”

(Which one is it?
Jackson or Lee?)

Then she leans back in.

“By the way,

Blushing Fact:
apparently
it’s not just your cheeks
the blood rushes to
when you’re embarrassed.

It’s your lady lips too.”

She nods at my crotch
and grins,

and I whack her.

“Harriet! Yuck!
You make everything
disgusting!”

“That’s why you love me,”
she says



as she leaps off the bench,
sticks the landing,
and flicks her hair back
like she knows
she looks amazing.

Her skirt is hitched up.
Stuck on her tights,

and I try to tell her,
but the music is so loud.

And anyway,
right then I catch
Benjamin's eye again
and am presented,
instantly,
with confirmation
of her blushing fact.



Milkshake

Harriet squeezes onto
the end of the bench,
leans in to whisper
something to Lee,
and pushes Benjamin
one person closer to me.
I listen to him
chatting to Dev,
wondering how
I can join in.

Then the waitress
brings our shakes.
No one can remember
who ordered which flavor,
so she dumps them all
in the middle
and everyone *l e a n s*
across the table,
 milkshake spilling
 and finger licking.

I scrunch up my face
at the stickiness
and pull my elbows away
from the mess.
Harriet catches me,
rolls her eyes at me.



Then pulls the last shake
slowly toward herself, saying,
“O-o-o, Oreo,
o-o-o how I love you-co!”

“Really,” says Marie,
sarcastically.
“You’ve never mentioned it.”

Harriet picks an Oreo
out of the shake
and swivels off
the top cookie
so she can lick the filling.

She shrugs as she says,
“I know what I like.”

Then Jackson leans in and says,
“Want mine?”
and picks the Oreo
off the top of his shake,
twists one cookie off
and, leaving a trickle
of chocolate syrup
across the table,
offers it to Harriet
to lick the cream.

I turn to Marie,
so I don’t have to see
Harriet’s tongue
near Jackson’s fingers.
(It’s so unnecessary,



the
flirty,
touchy,
licky,
publicness
of what they're doing.)

When I look back,
Dev's getting up,
and
Benjamin
is
right next to me.

I sip my milkshake,
wondering how
to talk to him,
without anyone
noticing.

And even though it's obscene,
I can't help wondering whether
he's watching as
I put my lips to my straw
and suck.

And there I go again.
I'm blushing,
but just then

Benjamin's arm
brushes my elbow

the music gets louder

and I'm just about
to speak, when



and Jackson shouts,
“Let’s do this!”

Everyone gets up
to go and get rental skates,
and our moment
is broken.



On the Ice

Us girls
do swooping laps
under the disco ball,
which draws circles,
shedding sparkles
in time with the beat.

We laugh at the boys
who can't all skate,
and watch Jackson
zigzag backward,
like the show-off he is,
pulling Harriet after him,
holding her hands,
her hair flying behind her
and her laughter erupting
in flirty explosions
over the music.

And

a l l n i g h t ,

I try to get

near Benjamin.

Then,
before midnight,
the lights turn low,
and a slow
song comes on



and there he is,
in front of me.

“Hey,” I say,
over the bass.
“How are you?”

“Good, thanks,”
he says,
sliding closer.
“You?”

“Good,” I say.

Then he slips
and wobbles a bit
and his hand shoots
out,
so I take his fingers
in my palm,
helping him
balance.

We’re skin-to-skin.
His hand is warm.
And I’m worried
I’m going to say
something stupid,
or weird,

which is weird,
because *stupid*
is *so* not my thing,

so I say,
“Shall we skate?”

He nods and gives me
a sheepish grin.
“Sure thing.”

And we drift apart a little bit
as we circle the rink,
and before I know it,
we’re talking,
and it’s so easy.

“Do you usually come here
on Saturday nights?”

“No!” I say, laughing.
“I work at the planetarium,
then usually I go home,
and Dad makes me
and Mom a pizza
and we have
movie night.”

“Nice.”

“What about you?
What do you
normally do?”

“Not this!” he says,
slipping again
and tightening his grip



on my hand.

“I play rugby with a
club team on Sunday mornings,
so I just get
an early night.”

“Wild,” I say, smiling
while trying to stop
picturing me and him
having a wild night in.

“If I don’t have rugby,
and I’m feeling really crazy,
I sometimes stay up
until, like, midnight,
watching science stuff online.”

“What kind of
stuff do you like?”

“Space stuff,” he says.

“Mostly. Some of it
is so amazing.”

I want to whisper,
You’re amazing,
but instead I say,
“Yeah, amazing.”



Dark

**It's as
dark
as night
on the ice.**

And in the darkness,
no one can see
what you're doing,
or thinking.
And that
makes me
bold.

I slide along beside him,
our fingers touching,
and just like that
we're holding hands.

I look around,
quickly checking
if anyone is looking,
but Harriet is with Jackson,
pushing Dev into Marie,
being so obvious it's embarrassing.
She doesn't see me.

The disco ball
rotates above us.
His face is speckled
with the silver flecks



of the turning light.

I want to say,
“I like your face,”
but instead I just blush
and breathe in

his leather jacket
and something sweet,
like

“Cherry ChapStick?”

“Huh?” he says.

“Are you wearing
lip balm?”

Benjamin chuckles
and takes my arm,
to draw me closer.
“Yes,” he whispers.
“But don’t tell anyone.
It’s my sister’s.”

“Why are you
wearing it, then?”
I tease.

“Because it’s cold
and I’ve got chapped lips
and she left it
in my pocket.”

“You share clothes with
your sister?”

He laughs. “We’re close,”
he says and shrugs.



“And it’s a great jacket.”

“It is,” I say,
laughing as we

lap the rink,
our arms going slack and taut
pulling each other closer and
drifting away because of

centrifugal force.

“Huh?” he shouts.
“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”
I shake my head.
My hair flies out behind me.
I feel like Beyoncé.

“You did!” he says,
pulling me close again.
“You said *centrifugal*.”

“Well, it is,” I say, laughing,
although strictly speaking
centrifugal is a fictitious force,
a mere explanation of a sensation.
But the music’s too loud
to go into that now.

He laughs and suddenly
brakes with his skates,
swinging me around him,
demonstrating he
knows exactly



what I mean
by *centrifugal*.

I take his other hand
and twirl around him.

We stay like that
for what feels like
an eternity,
staring at each other,
until he pulls me in
and—

in my mind
the word

KISSING

explodes like a neutron star
leaving a black hole,
sucking everything in.
I'm freezing.
I don't know how to *do*
this kind of *kissi*—

Then suddenly
the disco ball halts,
the music stops.
Our hands drop.

Midnight strikes.
The magic disperses.
And in the flight to escape
the bright electric light,
I lose Benjamin.



Smelly Feet

We're just changing our shoes
when Benjamin
comes up to me.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I say, hoping the smell
from my socked feet
isn't wafting his way.
(I've been at work all day.)

"I've got to go,
but it was fun
skating with you.
Thanks for helping me."

I want to say something
smart or witty,
but I don't know *what*.

"Yeah," I say, "it was, um . . ."

"Centrifugal?" he offers.

I laugh, impressed,
and a bit annoyed
he got there first.

"You're great on skates,
by the way,"



he says, then grins
and walks away.

Leaving Harriet,
Marie, Bethany, and Leylah
staring at me.



Benjamin Likes Me?

We say goodbye to the other girls.
I walk out next to Harriet,
with smelly feet,
on cloud nine.

As we weave under
the lit-up parking lot trees
to meet my dad,
Harriet goes on and on
about who likes who
and how Jackson
is so much nicer
when you talk to him
one-on-one.

Then she blabs on
about how Marie and Dev
would make a cute pair
if only they weren't both
so shy and how she's
going to try
and help Marie by getting
her to send Dev a
flirty selfie.

“Maybe I should do it for her?”



“No,” I say. “Don’t.
Just leave it.”

“All right, all right,” she says,
while I’m thinking
Don’t ask about Benjamin.

I don’t want her interfering.
I want to keep it for me.

“So,” she says.
“Benjamin Jones?
Would you?”

“No,” I say quickly.

Then Harriet
wrinkles her nose and goes,
“Well, I think he’s into *you*.
Do you want me to help you?”

“No!” I say.

“He’s pretty hot,
don’t you think?”

“Sure,” I say.
#Understatement.
But I can’t help
smiling as I think
about him.

Harriet looks at me,
then stops and



cocks her head and says,
“You look so pretty.
Smile like that again.
I’ll take a picture of you.”

So I do.

Gossip

Dad picks Harriet and me up
behind the skating rink
at five past twelve,
like he promised.

“Very cloak-and-dagger,”
he says as I get in the front seat.

I have no idea what he means.
Nothing new there.

Harriet tries to get in the back,
but it’s covered in Dad’s cycling crap.

“Sorry!” he says, reaching behind
and shoving his stuff out of the way,
“I’ve been mountain biking today.”

“Cool, where did you go?” Harriet asks,
like an enormous suck-up,
giving Dad the cue to go into
way more detail than
anyone wanted him to.

Finally Dad asks me, “How was work?
Did you ask about the form
for the internship?”

“Mmm-hmm,” I say.

“What’s that?” Harriet says.



“Oh, just that summer thing
at the planetarium.
It’s kind of nerdy.”

“Ooh, will you get one for me?
I’ve always thought
it sounded cool,” she says,
more to Dad than me.

“You can just apply online,” I say.
“I only picked a form up
because I was there today.
It’s a ton of work, you know.
You have to get a reference
from someone in astronomy.
And you need to be free
all summer.”

“Imagine if we both got it!
It could be amazing.
You and me! Doing astronomy!”

“Yeah,” I say, glancing
at Harriet in the back.
“That would be amazing.”

“So, what about your night, girls?”
says Dad. “Anyone *make out*?”

“Dad!” I groan.

“What?” he says. “I just want
a little gossip. Consider it my fare.
Come on . . . who made out with who?”



“Uh. No one calls it
'making out' anymore,” I say.

“What do they call it?”

“*They* don't call it anything.
And *you* don't talk about it.
Don't even think about it.
We'd rather give you *money*
than gossip.”

We're waiting
at a red light
when Harriet leans
into the middle,

and I glance at her face
glowing red
in the reflected light

all confessional,
and says,

“I didn't make out with anyone,
but Jackson did ask
if he could DM me.”

“Gossip!” Dad squeals, clapping,
like he thinks he's one of us.

“You have always been
my favorite, Harry.”

“Traitor,” I mutter.
Harriet ignores me.

The Tree House

Harriet's and my telescope
lives in the tree house
between our yards,
where we used to

have tea parties
and make mud pies
and rose perfume
out of decomposing petals
and mulchy leaves.

Now when we use it
we stay up late, talking
and stargazing
and taking photos of
stars and
planets and
the moon.

Then we sneak to the bakery
to get the first pastries,
before finally going
to sleep at dawn.

I'm exhausted from
standing up, talking all day,
but Harriet wants
to go to the tree house tonight,
and our parents say it's OK.



I move the telescope
to the waxing crescent moon:
a perfect sliver of possibility.

“It’s clear,” I say to Harriet.
“You should come and see.”

But Harriet lies
on her back,
dangling her legs
over the edge,
making the canopy rustle
in the night breeze.

“I’m busy,” she sighs,
her eyes on her phone,

missing the stars
shining bright
right above us.



Top Three

“Busy doing what?”

“Thinking about
Mr. Number One,”
she says,
rolling onto her tummy
to face me.

Me and Harriet always
play Top Three.

The top three things we’re
thinking about,
or worrying about,
or obsessing about,

on any given week,
or night,
or hour.

Harriet’s top three recently?
Boys, boys, boys.

“OK, then.
Who is he?”

“Actually,
there’s a new entry . . .”
She sits up,
pulls her knees into her belly,



and performs a drumroll
on the floorboards
with her feet.
“At number one . . .
Elon Musk.”

“Ew!” I say.
“Elon Musk is not hot.”

“Yes, he is. He is so hot.
And really smart.
I’m talking
major
cooch

quivers.”

(Ugh.)

“I’ve been reading
everything I can
about space travel.”

“And me, for my application,”
I say, then immediately regret
mentioning it.

“Ooh! What do we have
to do for it again?”

“Write a long essay.
And get a glowing reference
from someone with evidence
of your passion for astronomy.”



I know I'm making it sound hard.
"I was thinking of asking Mr. B
to write one for me.
And to check my application."

"Oh, Mr. B!
He's still top three."

"Please, Harry.
We've talked about this.
He's too old!
And he's a *teacher*."

"Hey! No judgment,
remember?"

"OK. Sorry.
Go on, then.
Let's have it.
Top three."

She puts down her phone
for a moment,
using her fingers
to check off her crushes.

"One: Elon Musk.
Two: probably still Lee,
Three: Mr. B . . .
and his thighs."

Harriet lies back again,
picks up her phone,
and sighs.



“His *thighs*?” I say.

“WTF?”

“Shh,” she says, jabbing me.
“You’re interrupting my fantasy.
He was covering PE on Friday.
Tiny shorts.

His thighs are
unbelievably
meaty.”

“MEATY?” I shout.
Then gag.
“Don’t say ‘meaty.’”

“Mmm,” she says, sighing,
rubbing her thighs,
“meaty meaty meaty.”

“What was he doing
covering PE?”

“I think he was subbing,”
she says to her phone.
“I’d sub for him any day.”

“What does that even mean?”

“No idea . . .”
she says, giggling,
lifting her head up
and twisting to look at me.

“But he *is* dreamy.”
She grins, then she
lies back again,

and I look down at her,
with her legs swinging
into the cool evening,
stirring up the oily
scent of the tree.

“What about Jackson?”
I ask, to get away
from thinking about Mr. B
in tiny shorts
and to stop her saying
the *m*-word again.
“Do you like him?”

“Kind of,”
she says, shrugging.
“We’re messaging right now.
Should I send him this?”
She turns her phone
to show me
a pouty,
booby
selfie.

“Oh my god!” I scream.
“You are crazy.”

“What’s the big deal?” she says.
“Come on, he’s asking me
for a selfie.”



“He’ll show *everyone*.
Like he did with those girls.”

“I’m only showing a little bra.
You know, you can be
such a nun.”

“Only compared to you,” I say.
“You’ve got the hots
for everyone.”

“And you for no one.”

I think about mentioning
Benjamin,
but she’s still focused on
her selfie anyway.

“Maybe I won’t send it.
It’s not that flattering.
What do you really think?”

“Don’t send it,” I snap.
“Don’t be so nuts.”

“You’re no fun anymore!” she says,
and slaps her phone down
and flips over to look at me.

“What about you, O queen
of the parched vag?
What’s your top three?”



Benjamin,
Benjamin,
Benjamin,
I think.

But I say,
“My essay,
my reference,
and whether we’ll get
that picture of
the blood moon
in a couple of weeks.”

“Oh, yeah, the blood moon!”
she says, clapping her hands,

surprising me that she’s
still excited about our
joint love of
astronomy
and photography.

I feel a bit bad that
I thought she wasn’t
interested in anything
except boys.

“I’ve been researching
what we should do with
this blood moon.
I have tons of ideas
we can try.”
She gets out her phone



to show me.

“See this one,” she says.

“Wouldn’t the silhouette
of the tree look amazing?”

“Totally,” I say.

“I just hope
the sky is clear.
The forecast is really bad.”

“Don’t worry,” she says.

“I just know it’ll be
the perfect night.”

I love how Harriet’s
always so positive.
“I hope you’re right.”

“I’m *always* right.”

She grins. “Now,
back to boys,
tell me who you like.
Is it Benjamin?”

“No,” I say,
a bit too quickly.

“Come on, I’m bored.
Give me something juicy.”

“I have nothing juicy,” I say.
“Although, maybe there’s
something you can tell me . . .”



“Anything.”

“OK . . . so say I *did*
like somebody . . .
Hypothetically.
How would I know
what to do,
you know if I ended
up *with them*,
intimately?”

Harriet snorts. “Intimately,”
she says, doing an all-too-accurate
impression of me.

Then she breathes out dreamily.
“Don’t worry,” she says, sighing.
“When you’re with someone
you really like
you just *k n o w* what to do.”

“I believe
that’s true for you.
You’re always so relaxed talking
to somebody you like.
But you’re so much more
confident than me.”

“I’m not really,” she says,
and for a moment she looks
small and weak.
Then she rolls back her shoulders
and pushes her chest out at me.



“I’m just faking it
until I start making it.”
She pouts and waggles her
eyebrows at me.

“What does *that* even mean?”

“I don’t know,”
she says, giggling,
then she gets up
and moves over
to the telescope.

“OK, let me have a look,”
she says, nudging me.

“And Frankie,”
she adds, putting her face
to the eyepiece,
“if you do like someone,
just be yourself.

 Yourself is great.”



Little Lies

On Sunday morning,
Harriet messages me
asking if she can use my printer,
under the pretense that mine is better
because you can print almost anything on it,
including something
she says she needs for her French project,
but I know she wants to
 do homework
 together.

I'd rather do it
 on my own,
because lately,
Harriet is always
distracting me
or copying me,
or talking about
the latest boy
she likes.

I tell her she can use it later
because I'm going
to help Mom with work
at her school's lab,
and instead
I slip out of the house



and go down to the library
to work alone.

And while I work
I think about the possibility
of Benjamin
popping in to get something
and coming over to talk to me.
Or sitting opposite me,
and us doing our
homework together
and talking
passionately
about physics and stuff
because Benjamin
is sciencey like me.
Or maybe us
ending up
in between two quiet shelves . . .
kissing or something.
#Hypocrisy



Dress Code

Harriet opens her front door
wearing a low-cut T-shirt,
reeking of perfume,
and with so much makeup on
I wonder for a second
if it's Saturday,
not Monday.

“You're not going to school
like that, are you?” I ask
before I can stop myself.

“Good morning to you too,”
she says, rolling her eyes.
“I can wear what I like.
Anyway, it's the *natural look*.”

“RuPaul style.

You're going to
get into trouble.”
Why does she have to
be so reckless?

I wonder whether she's
dressed like this for Mr. B.



I still can't believe
she likes him.

“For what?
Wearing a T-shirt?
Come off it.
Still rocking the nun vibe
I see,” she says, taking in
my skinny jeans
and retro NASA hoodie,

which I was hoping
made me look clever,
rather than nunny.

“If nuns can be astronomers,
then sure,” I say, laughing it off,
but wishing I'd worn
just a bit of makeup.
I wonder if I'll see
Benjamin today.

Just then, Harriet's mom
comes out of their kitchen,
drinking a green smoothie,
her slinky bathrobe
sliding over
her bare legs.

“Bye, girls,” she calls
as she heads upstairs.
“Give 'em hell.”

Distractions

Our class is gathered
for assembly
in the auditorium,
with the principal.

The audience lights are
on, and Mr. Adamson
is going on and on
about (the girls')
dress code.
#We'veHeardThisOne

"We must eliminate distractions
to your education.
Exams are soon.
I don't want anyone failing.

I don't want to see
short skirts . . ."

(he says this to
three girls
in the front row)

"hair dye . . ."

(at Bethany,
who has dyed hers
bright blue)

"or inappropriate makeup."
(at Harriet)

"They are all distracting."



“For who?” Harriet hisses in my ear.

“Him? The crusty old perv.”

I wish she'd stop
drawing attention
to herself,
but she does have a point.

I'm not sure who
is going to find it hard
to concentrate in class
because of Bethany's
cobalt-blue bob.

And if anyone does,
I can't help thinking
that's their problem.

I glance around the room,
wondering where Benjamin
usually sits in assembly.

When it's almost over,
I spot him,
a few rows
in front of me.

He doesn't see me.



Shameless

Mr. Adamson pushes past us
as we leave assembly,
“Excuse me, ladies.”

“Sorry, sir,” I say,
moving out of his way.

Harriet flutters her lashes
at his back and says,
“I hope I don’t make anyone
think about anything
uneducational today.”

“Stop!” I hiss.
She’s so reckless.

“What?” she says.
“That jerk has the nerve
to suggest that my makeup
might make someone fail
their exams.
I’m not OK with it.”

“You are shameless.”

“And you’re a coward.
You hate him
as much as I do.
Don’t pretend
you respect him.



“Sorry, sir!” she says,
doing a mean impression of me.

Then she trots off
to catch up with Leylah
and Bethany, saying,
“Did your dad go insane
about your hair?”

But before they’re too far away,
she turns around, hands in prayer,
and says, “See you in physics,
Sister Frankie.”



Changes

Me and Harriet
have been besties
since I can remember.

I know when
we were in second grade
in Mr. Parlow's class
literally *everything*
was funny to us.

I wish we could go back
to being silly all the time,
but the feeling of it,
the freeness of it,
is gone.

I wish Harriet would stop
reminding me
I'm not as fun as I
used to be.

Although, now I wonder
if I was ever as free
as she seems to be.



Chances

Harriet wants us to sit at the front
of the physics lab,
probably so that Mr. B
can see her smoky eyes,

but it suits me
because I want to know
if he got my email asking him
to write a reference for me.

“Today, we’re looking at
weight and mass,” he says.
“Settle down now,
let gravity guide you
to your seats, ha ha.”

Harriet laughs really loudly.

All through class,
I scribble madly,
taking in every word
he says

while Harriet drops her pen
every five minutes,
and struts to get it,
bending over

o u t r a g e o u s l y s l o w l y
right in front of Mr. B.

After class I linger



wanting to ask
about the reference
on my own,
but Mr B comes over to me.

“I’ll write your reference
and give it to you Friday.
Do you want me to
read your application too?”

“Yes, please,” I say.

“I think you have
a really good chance,”
he says.

I feel my face flush
with pride that he has recognized
this is *my* special thing.

“I’ll email it later,
if that’s okay,” I say,
picking up my bag.

“Absolutely,” Mr. B says.
“Nice hoodie, by the way,”
he adds as I go through
the doorway.

Behind me I hear Harriet say,
“Can you look at mine too, sir?”

“Of course,” says Mr. B.
But then he says,



“You have it now?
OK, stay behind.
I’ll take a look at it
right away.”

I hear her say
“I just love the stars . . .”
but I have to move to let
the rest of the class
file out.

So it’s from outside
that I watch her
lean over his desk

(so inappropriately)

while he reads
her application

before mine.



We'd Be All Right

No chance of stars,
it's raining,
but even so
Harriet and I
go up to
the tree house
after dark.

“So, did Mr. B
like your application?” I ask,
while she gets her laptop
out of her backpack.

“Yeah,” she says vaguely.

“What did he say?” I ask,
wondering if
he thinks she's got a
really good chance.

“Oh, you know.”

“No,” I say. “What?
Did he read the essay?
Did he suggest any changes?
Did he think it was a good topic?”

“Frankie, can we
just leave it?”



“Sorry,” I say.
If it was me
I’d want to talk about
it all evening.
“I was just asking.”

Harriet scowls at me.
“Look, we’re not all
Mr. B’s favorite,
you massive physics nerd,
so it wasn’t exactly a shower
of glory. And I don’t feel
like talking about it.
Especially to you.”

“I’m sure it’s great,”
I say, trying to sound
encouraging
but realizing I probably sound
patronizing.

She’s on her phone,
so I set up the laptop,
then wait for her

as she laughs
then sighs and frowns.

“What’s up?” I ask lightly,
hoping we can
change the tone.

“It’s Jackson,” she says.
“He won’t stop messaging.”

“I thought you liked him.”

“I did,” she says. “But now
it’s getting kind of boring.”

“I told you not
to get involved.”

“No, you didn’t.
And now he’s obsessed.
And you know how
he told us he got with
those two girls that night?
They’re his cousins!”

I burst out laughing.
“That’s incest.”

Harriet whacks me.
“Obviously nothing happened.
He lied to brag.
I’m not into that,
know what I mean?”

“Totally,” I say.
But I want to stop talking
about Jackson and get on
with our evening.

“How do I get rid of him?”

“Tell him you don’t like him?”

“Ooh,” she says, typing,



“I’ll tell him I’m busy
and I’m in love with someone else.”

“Harry,” I say. “That’s lying!
Just tell the truth.
And then can we please
watch *The Walking Dead*?”

“Absolutely,” she says,
hitting send
and then turning it
to show me.

She’s written
that she’s *with me* with me
and not to contact her again
because of my jealousy.

“Harry!” I say.
“You’re ridiculous.”

“It’s fine,” she says.
“Everyone lies a bit.
He’ll know what it means.
I’m saving him face.”

I’m just glad
she’s not taking things
any further with him.

She tucks her phone away
and pulls the snacks out
of her backpack,



then reaches over to the laptop
and presses play.

We nestle into the pile of pillows
and with the fairy lights twinkling,
and us alternating eating
tortilla chips and tangerines,
we spend the evening
scream-laughing at the
incompetence of everyone
except Rick Grimes.

(Actual cooch quivers.)

“You’re drooling!”

“Am not.”

“You can’t have the hots
for Rick, and tell me
Mr. B is old.”

“Different rules
for the apocalypse.”

“Stab it!”
Harriet shouts.
“You idiot.”

“Shut the door!” I yell.

“Use the machete!”
Harriet screams.



“Run away!” I say.

“Use the machine guns!”

Harriet says.

“Lock the doors and hide!”

I say, feeling safe

up here, in our tree house,
where no one can get us,

watching other people
being clueless,
and knowing, if it was us,

we’d be all right.

Well, actually,

I’d be scared shitless.

But Harriet

is actually pretty brave.

Lunchtime

In the dining hall
I sit with Leylah and Bethany
and subtly scan the room
for Benjamin.
I start to eat
my saucy spaghetti
(carefully)
(in case Benjamin's watching me).

Harriet sits down heavily
and sips her large
black coffee.
"Ugh." She shudders,
swallowing, grimacing.
"This is so bitter.
It's disgusting."

"Why are you drinking it, then?"
asks Leylah, laughing,
opening a can
of soda.

"Because I'm dying," Harriet says.
"I didn't go to sleep until four a.m."

"Sexting Jackson?"
says Bethany, nudging Harriet.



“I told you,” she says,
leaning away from Bethany,
“I ended it with him.
And your lunch
absolutely stinks.”

“All right,” says Bethany.
“Don’t take it out on me.”

“I’m sorry,” says Harriet,
running her hands over her face
and groaning. “I’m just so tired.”

“What were you even doing?”
I ask. “I was with you
until about ten.”

“I was rewriting
my application to
send to Mr. B.”

“Oh,” I say.
I feel a pang of jealousy.
What if hers was
better than mine?
“Did you get it done?”

“Barely,” she says. “I sent it
this morning, then had
about two hours’ sleep.
But I think I made
a horrible mistake.”
Harriet groans



and folds her body forward,
resting her forehead
on the table.

Marie says,
“Nothing good gets done
after ten p.m., if you ask me.”

“Well, I didn’t,” Harriet says
from under her hair.

“I’m sure it’s not as bad
as you’re imagining,”
says Leylah.

“What if it’s worse?”
Harriet mumbles.

I try to think of
something reassuring
to say, but just then

I see Benjamin
walking toward me
and I’m briefly distracted
wiping my face
and smiling at him.

He grins at me
as he walks past me.
God, he’s dreamy.

When I look back,
Bethany is patting Harriet’s head.



“I’m sure it’s great.”

“You’ll feel better
after a good night’s rest,”
says Marie.

“Enough with the sleep, Marie,”
Harriet moans.
“And Beth,” she adds,
“you had better
not be getting
tuna in my hair.
It took me an hour
this morning.”

And we all giggle
as Bethany licks
her fingers
quickly
before resuming her patting.

Extraction

That afternoon, in history,
a freshman
knocks on the open door,
with a piece of paper
trembling in her hand.
“I have a message
from Mr. Adamson.”

Ms. Wyse
beckons the girl,
lowers her glasses,
reads the note,
and sighs.
“Harriet Prosser,
he wants to see you.”

Harriet glances at me.
She looks worried.
Then she gets up
and quietly slips
out the door,
and as I hear her footsteps
fade down the hall
my stomach knots.

What’s she done?

