

ALESSANDRA IN LOVE
by Robert Kaplow

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ONE: BRING UP THE VIOLINS

I can't seem to get Wyn Reed off my mind. I've spent the last half hour blasting music through this house, dancing by myself in the living room. I think if anybody saw me, they'd have me arrested. I'm a pretty wild dancer when no one's around.

Let me describe Wyn. First, of course, he's got the *face*. I don't know what it is, but there's a certain kind of face that consistently throws me off-balance. The face isn't classically handsome; I doubt many people would even stop to look twice at it—it's too elusive, too unreadable, too distant—but somehow it attracts me.

And this is *not* just another suicidal romantic obsession. I mean, I've had enough of those this week. I'm telling you, this guy is a serious candidate for Mr. Adequate. When he walked into orchestra the other day, I took one look and my heart stood up and sang the Hallelujah Chorus. He had just moved here from Millburn. He's a senior. Perlmacher introduced him to the orchestra. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like you to meet Wyn Reed." And there was this tall kid with the palest skin I had ever seen—and these dark, dark eyes. He wore a black short-sleeved shirt and tan pants. He stood with this cello case under the stage lights looking embarrassed and smiling uncomfortably. But there was something amused and confident in those eyes, too—something suggesting that all his modesty was an artfully conceived performance, that he *knew* how good he was, that he was certain he was better than any other player on that stage.

It was a look of self-assurance I'd seen before. Last year the *face* had belonged to Bayard Lees. I was looking at Bayard's photograph in the yearbook the other day, and I was somewhat ashamed to notice that much of his magic still persisted. But I was a callow tenth grader then. And there he was—Bayard Lees, one of those kids who seemed to have popularity and ease born into them. He sang in a rock band called Toenail Fungus. He looked like Jim Morrison if Jim Morrison were fifteen and had crooked teeth. Wild brown hair, torn shirt, suede boots with cowboy fringe. He carried a copy of *No One Here Gets Out Alive* next to his Latin book. Like

every other girl in the school, I was hopelessly in love with him or thought I was.

So I did what every other fifteen-year-old girl does in that kind of situation. I stole his English folder. I figured that if I read his essays, I'd learn *something* significant about him. One day after school, when the custodians had left the teachers' rooms unlocked to clean them, I lifted his English folder from Ms. Derrero's filing cabinet. This is not a confession that inspires me with much pride. I swear I was sweating, I was so sure I'd get caught.

That night I closed my door, sat up in bed, and carefully read his handwritten paragraphs on "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" and "The Most Dangerous Game." I studied his vocabulary quizzes and his punctuation exercises. I labored over his book report on *Childhood's End*.

The only significant thing I learned was that he couldn't spell the word "definitely." He also had a lot of trouble with "receive." Hours of my life I had spent watching this guy, reading the irony of his brown eyes, listening to every word he said in class as if it were the key to his secret heart. I had spent half a year investing him with a poet's magic...and there was nothing there.

But did the truth stop me? Certainly not.

One night, under the influence of a passionate loneliness, I sent him a letter. It was anonymous, of course, My father has reams of this creamy-gray construction paper, and I neatly printed in the middle of one sheet: *You have a most beautiful soul, Bayard*. I bicycled to the next town to mail it. It was raining, and the more soaked I got, the more I felt I was suffering some well-deserved punishment for my own reckless stupidity. I looked at the letter one last time. A raindrop touched the corner of the envelope. Then I placed it in the drawer of the mailbox and let it close. There was no stopping it now. "What are you doing, Alessandra?" I said out loud. "What ridiculous thing are you doing now?" Looking back a year later, I write these things with a certain humor, but at the time there was nothing humorous about it. I see myself then as this glum little ghost. I remember waking up in the morning, looking in the mirror, and being surprised that I looked like a normal human being.

Well, about a month after mailing him the letter, we were all at the tenth-grade picnic at Sandy Hook. I'd spent the day walking the shore with my best friend, Melissa, a bright-red towel draped around me to hide the fact that I'm a little overweight. For a while I watched Bayard play tennis with our history teacher. I liked the way he crouched in concentration before each serve. I liked the sharp *pock* of the ball bouncing against his racket.

Melissa and I sat giggling on the bench like the true addled-escents we were.

“Alessandra,” Bayard called to me. “You wanna play?”

I laughed. “I don’t know how.” I pulled the towel closer around me. Melissa was dying.

“I’ll teach you.”

“No, I’d rather watch.”

He shrugged. “Does your friend want to play?”

Melissa turned scarlet and exploded in laughter. She left eventually, but I stayed and sort of shared in the energy and exhaustion of their game. They took a break, stood near me, drinking sodas and wiping their brows.

I sat reading *Salad Anniversary* in my one-piece leopard-spotted bathing suit.

“Alessandra,” said Mr. Aviano, “that report of yours on Charles Beard was one of the most brilliant student essays I’ve ever read. I started Googling certain sentences, thinking: There’s no way she could have written this. And the entire thing turned out to be yours. Amazing.”

I looked up and smiled.

Bayard—his Jim Morrison hair all wild with sweat—was suddenly interested. “Can I read it?” he asked. “If Aviano says it’s brilliant, it’s gotta be worth checking out.”

“Alessandra is probably the best writer in the school.”

“You’re embarrassing me.”

Mr. Aviano laughed. “And everything she turns in is on this weird gray construction paper. I can tell it’s her work even before I look at the heading.”

Bayard’s gentle glance felt like a bullet in my heart. He was fast. He’d made the connection in one second. I looked down, suddenly fascinated with a popsicle stick. *You have a most beautiful soul, Bayard.*

“As soon as I get an essay on gray paper, I know it’s Alessandra’s. I usually put it on the bottom of the pile just to give myself something to look forward to.”

Bayard was kind enough never to mention it.

All right, bring up the violins. Long shot: Alessandra walking barefoot on the sand, crying behind her oversized glasses.

Why do I have to relive every painful episode in my life? The most exhausting part is that I waste my time imagining *other* ways it might have turned out. I spend half my life replaying conversations in my head, fixing up the dialogue so that *this* time it finally comes out right.



Now I hear the front door opening, the hall door slamming.

“Alessandra, anybody call?” asks my mother.

“No.”

I wait for her to find something to criticize me about—the bathroom isn’t neat enough; the kitchen has a tomato seed in the sink.

I wish my parents would go on vacation for a while.

If it weren’t near midnight, I’d probably take another shower. It’s the only time I seem to feel genuinely at ease. I probably waste more water than anyone on the East Coast. I love the perfume of the shampoo, the rush of steam, my music player blaring out the Bards of Passion. “*Detoxify your heart!*” sings Throb, and I sing along.

Melissa bought me a huge ceiling poster of Throb for my birthday. He’s wearing a torn t-shirt and mirror sunglasses. He needs a shave.

Ode to Throb

by Alessandra F. Hogarth

Throb, Throb, Throb, Throb,

Throb, Throb, Throb, Throb,

Throb, Throb, Throb, Throb,

Take off all your clothes.

Slowly.

Well, as Aviano said, I’m probably the best writer in the school.

It’s past midnight now, and all I’ve got is sixty pages of collateral reading to finish for history, a chemistry lab to copy over, and an essay on women’s roles in *Othello* to write for English. Hey, another night with two hours of sleep, another morning without breakfast, and A.F.H. is ready to face the world!

I keep thinking about the various guys I’ve been hung up on. *Why?* I mean, who wants to write any more letters on gray paper? Who wants to watch the clock turn to four in the morning and you haven’t slept one minute because you’ve been thinking about some guy who doesn’t even care that you exist? Isn’t there a time in your life when you stop chasing people? Stop begging them to love you?