

Tips

on Having

a Gay (ex) Boyfriend

CARIE  
JONES



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*He wants to know why it happens.*

*“Why,” he asks. “Why?”*

*You shake your head.*

*“I don’t know,” you tell him.*

*He leans back on your mother’s stupid corduroy couch, looks away. With his index finger, he flicks a leaf from her tropical plant. He waits for you to talk.*

*What are you supposed to say?*

We walk outside first. We walk outside beneath the October stars and hold hands in the cold, cold air. The dim light from neighbors' windows wishes us well. No cars drive by because there aren't that many people in Eastbrook, Maine, driving around at eleven, a sad fact but true.

I wait and walk, quiet, because in the house Dylan said he had something important to tell me. I figure it has to do with college next year, seeing other people, that whole thing, all that stuff we've already decided about how we'd finish out this year and the summer together and then see how things go. His mouth makes a cute little worried line the way it does right before he has an advanced algebra test. I want to kiss it, make him stop worrying about the things I know he's worried about.

The cold keeps me from reaching up and kissing my lips against that cute line. Every time I open my mouth, the cold shrieks my teeth. We walk past the houses in my little subdivision. It's just a mile of road with homes stacked along the sides. That's what it's like in Eastbrook, subdivisions spaced out on miles of rural roads, blueberry barrens and forests scattered between. Every subdivision is far from one another, but the houses clump together. Everyone here knows everyone's business.

I imagine that Eddie Caron had turned away from his NASCAR reruns and watches us trot down the street. Or maybe Mrs. Darrow has pulled aside her curtain and shut off the light in her living room so that she can peer out and see if we kiss. Tomorrow they'll tell their friends and then by Monday everyone will know that Mrs. Darrow saw us kiss, that Eddie Caron saw us act moony beneath the stars.

That's just how Eastbrook is, everybody knows everybody and most of the time that makes me scream and want to hide in a city somewhere, but tonight it just makes me a little warmer in the cold, makes me feel like if Dylan and I fell down, frozen solid from the cold, someone would come and pick us up, call an ambulance, make things okay.

"It's freezing," I say to Dylan.

"Yeah."

"You think Eddie Caron's watching NASCAR?"

"Probably porn."

I laugh, but Dylan doesn't even smile. I make an attempt at humor. "*Bodylicious Babes in Big Trucks.*"

Dylan doesn't say anything. Normally, he'd come back with something like, *Nasty Housewives and their Vacuum Accessories*.

"Dylan, what's up?" I say. "It's cold out. Want to go back?"

He shakes his head. "Give me a second, Belle. Okay?"

Cranky. Cranky. I pull my body a step away from his. I march around the cracks on the road, made by last winter's frost, pushing up the tar, heaving things around. It's almost winter again and still the town hasn't fixed the road. I hop over the cracks to try to warm up.

In my pocket lumps the note Dylan wrote me in school Friday. I always keep his latest note in my pocket like a good luck charm or maybe proof that I have a boyfriend. In case I face the boyfriend inquisition, I can whip it out and say, "No. No. He exists. Really. Here. Here's a note."

Like everyone in Eastbrook doesn't already know that.

The note in my pocket heavies my hip.

"Belle Philbrick, I love you," he wrote, "and if I seem weird today it's 'cause the dark days are getting to me. I hate when the days get shorter."

Maybe that's what's wrong, I think. Maybe it's because it's getting so cold and so dark out. The wind swirls some dead leaves across the road. I shiver.

Dylan stops walking, runs his free hand through his blonde hair, then turns to face me. He takes my other hand in his, the way men do when they propose. In the dark light, I can't tell that his eyes are green. They are just shadows, sad shadows. I shiver again. I want to go inside.

"Belle," he says, voice serious, voice husky. This voice sounds nothing like his normal voice, all mellow and song-like. A cat screeches down the road and it makes us both jump. I laugh because of it but Dylan doesn't. He just stares and stares and starts again with that same serious voice. He sounds like a dad. "Belle, I want you to know that I'll never love another woman."

Not this again. I groan. Dylan is a skipping CD sometimes, stuck on the same track so I give him my normal response and think about how good it'll feel when all this is over and we can go snuggle on the nice warm couch in my nice warm house. "That's stupid. You'll love lots of other women."

He shakes his head.

"You will!" I say and repeat the lines I've been telling him all fall. "And that's

okay. That's what happens in relationships sometimes. Love isn't always an exclusive thing. We'll take a break from each other in college and you'll find girls who are way way prettier, and way smarter and way sexier than—"

He drops my hands and throws his own hand in the air. "Will you shut up for a second?"

"Hey . . ." My blood presses hot against my skin and I almost like it, because it isn't cold.

"I am trying to tell you that I will never love another woman." He accentuates every word. A dog barks. They sound the same.

"And I'm saying you will." I blow on my fingers to keep them from freezing.

"No, I won't! I won't! Alright?" He whips around, walks away two steps, and comes back.

A plane flies above us. Its lights blink. It's on its way to Europe probably. Sometimes when planes leave from Boston or New York they have emergency stops in the little airport nearby. It's the last stop before Europe, the last chance for planes and crews. It's a tiny airport but it's got the longest runway in the nation, just a big strip of asphalt with nowhere to go but up.

Ice cracks on a stream behind me and I jump at the bang, but Dylan's body stays still. His face though, turns hectic. He yanks in a breath. I wait for the explosion that always comes when his lips disappear and his fingers curl into themselves. I am not scared. I know him too well to be scared. He would never hurt me. The plane gets farther away.

Instead of an explosion, his voice is steady and strong, "I won't ever love another woman because I'm gay."

The world stops.

One century passes. Two. My mouth drops open. My legs bring me backwards, one step, another, and into the breakdown lane beside the road. My hand finds my mouth and covers it.

Dylan moves toward me, his hands outstretched. "I'm sorry, Belle. I had to tell you."

My head nods. My mouth stays open but no words come out. My body slumps into itself and I crumble down onto the cold ground at the side of the road. It's a praying position, on my knees, hands in front of me.

Dylan kneels too, and hugs me into him. "I love you, you know."  
I don't say anything. What can I say?

-----

It isn't every day that my high school boyfriend, Eastbrook High School's Harvest King, for God's sakes, tells me he's gay. It's not every day that the Harvest Queen is dumped in the middle of a road in my mother's silly subdivision with the stars watching the humiliation and the dogs barking because they want to come help tear my heart out and leave it on the cold, gray ground.

It isn't every day that my entire world falls apart.  
"It's okay," I tell him when I can finally talk again and the chill from the ground has sunk into my bones and my butt. "It's really okay."

"You're not mad at me?"

"No," I say, because I'm not. Stunned, yeah. Mad, not really. Somehow, mostly numb. I unfold my legs and try to stand, but I am slow, slow, slow from the cold.

"Good," Dylan starts whimpering. He sits down and I stop standing. Caught half up and half down, I wrap my arms around him. The dog barks again. Dylan's body shakes against mine. "Good."

I hug him tighter. He sniffs into my hair. His hands move across my back and I tingle, even though, even with what he just told me, I still tingle.

His tears turn to sobs. "I couldn't handle it if you hated me, Belle. I couldn't handle it."

"I know," I say. "I know. I don't hate you."

My words are dark breath clouds in the cold air. My hands pat his back, his hair. I hold on and hold on because I'm scared I'll never hug him again. I hold on and hold on but my heart is empty like the night sky. The plane is gone. It's flown away. Even the dog is quiet.

"We're always supposed to be in love," he says. "We're always supposed to be there for each other."

"Yeah," I say. "We are."

Car headlights swing into the road and I can tell that it's a Chevy pickup truck, which is pathetic, but that's what it's like in a small Maine town. I even can tell by the hitch in the engine that it's Eddie Caron, so I guess that's even more pathetic, but I'm glad he wasn't stuck home watching porn on a Saturday night.

He stops the truck near us and opens the door, but doesn't get out, just sticks his head and part of his body out. It's all black shadow and I can't make out the features that go with his bulk because the headlights are so bright.

"You guys okay?" he yells.

"Yeah," I yell back, which is a total lie.

"You aren't getting funky on the side of the road are you?"

I stand up. "No! Jesus, Eddie."

He laughs. "Just wanted to make sure you're okay, Belle."

"Thanks," I yell back.

Eddie shuts the door and drives to his house. I reach down to Dylan and help him up off the ground.

"We have to get inside," I say. "It's too cold out here."

Dylan doesn't use my hand. He pushes himself up, wipes dead leaf crumbs off his butt. "I hate Eddie Caron."

"It was nice. He just wanted to make sure we're okay," I say.

"Well, we're not. We're not okay, are we?"

He starts walking to my house, not waiting for my answer. It's an answer that would have to be, totally be, a no.

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It's the chorus in a song that he says over and over again. He wants to know why it happens. Why, he asks. Why?

I shake my head.

"I don't know," I tell him.

He leans back on my mother's stupid corduroy couch, looks away. With his index finger, he flicks a leaf from her tropical plant. He waits for me to talk.

What am I supposed to say?

I can't. I can't say anything.

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We sit on the couch for hours. My mom pokes her head in. She's wearing her turquoise bathrobe, with the little pink roses on it. Dylan is the only person other than me who has seen her in it. She pads over to the couch, yawning. "I've got to hit the sack," she says.

She kisses me on the top of my head, then she kisses Dylan. She squints her eyes



at both of us like she maybe knows that something's going on.

"Don't stay up too late, you two," she says and waddles out of the room, heading up the stairs.

"Your mom is so cute," Dylan says, leaning forward. He puts his head in his hands. His voice cracks. "I'm going to miss your mom."

I reach out my hand and touch him on the back. "We'll still be friends. You'll still see my mom."

He shrugs, but doesn't take his face out of his hands. I am stuck staring at the muscles of his back. "It's won't be the same."

"No," I say, wanting to take my hand away but too afraid that it would be insulting somehow, if I moved it. "No, it won't."

We sit like that for a long time. Minutes click away and still I am numb. With each second that passes, Dylan-and-Belle becomes a lost fairy tale, an old story, and I don't know where this new story is going.

Finally, Dylan sits up. His green eyes look like leaves blending all together. "We'll still sing together, right?" he asks me. "You'll still play Gabriel and we'll hang out. Right?"

I nod, but I know it isn't probably true so I say, "I don't know, Dylan. I don't know. It's like the songs we had, they're gone now. You know?"

He closes his eyes because this is the hardest truth of all.

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Dylan and I would come home after all our extracurriculars were done at school, and we'd always hang out in my bedroom. I'd strum Gabriel and we'd fool around, singing songs, making up chord progressions, fooling around with corny lyrics. Then we'd throw on some old-time crooner music that Dylan liked and we'd sing it.

The thing about my guitar, Gabriel, is that she's how I express myself. I'm not a brilliant writer, or an actress, and I don't spew out heartrending confessional poems. I just play my guitar and that's where all my emotions go.

I bring her to school every day, play her during the second part of lunch, because that's how you get good, you do things all the time, you keep on playing and working at it. I thought that was how relationships were too, but obviously I thought wrong. I didn't factor in the whole gay thing.

I'm not wrong about what playing Gabriel means though.

And when I played for Dylan, all those songs were about fun and silliness and love and that's gone now. It's all gone.

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Hours later, my mom snores in her bedroom. The clock tells me it's too late to call Emily, my other best friend. Dylan? Well, I can't exactly call him. He kissed me on the cheek before he drove off. My lips felt neglected, but they didn't pout. They trembled instead.

I pull his last note out of my pocket, read another line.

*I wish that people would just leave us alone. Leave everyone alone so they can all be themselves. But, of course, there's always a restraint on like a leash.*

I read another line.

*I just want to be free with you.*

Standing in my bedroom, with my flannel pajamas on, it hits me: I will always be lonely.

This stupid note isn't going to help me. I throw it on my dresser and it flutters down on top of my lip gloss, dead.

The stupid clock keeps making it later, too late to call anyone, or even text message.

Gabriel leans up against the wall by the window. She belonged to my dad. I named her Gabriel, which is a man's name, I know, but she's still a girl guitar. She's too pretty to be a boy, and Gabriel was an angel, right? And to me, angels are sort of sexless; they aren't about gender, they're just about soaring and flight, like music. So no matter how much Dylan used to tease me about it, I think it's a perfectly appropriate name for a guitar. I'd play her and Dylan would sing with me, old folk songs mostly. Bob Dylan. Greg Brown. John Gorka. I pick her up, but even arching my fingers over a simple G7-chord doesn't feel right, so I put her back down.

There's a big empty hole in the middle of an acoustic guitar. The sound echoes in there, but right now, that circle looks like an eye staring at me, waiting for me to make some noise, to fill up the empty, but I can't. I'm too empty myself.

Usually, when I'm not at school, or doing homework, or eating, I'm playing Gabriel. The tips of my fingers are hard because of all the strumming I do. Dylan used to call me Guitar Girl. Some people at school still do when we're just hanging

out and fooling around. What are people at school going to think? About me and about Dylan?

I touch Gabriel's neck with one of those hardened fingertips, but I can't pick her up. I can't play her.

I turn off my bedroom lamp. Through the window, past the mostly leafless trees and a good mile away on flat land, cars move on the Bayside Road. Their headlights make little lights, like tiny stars. I probably know everyone in those cars and they probably know me. It's probably Dr. Mahoney going in to Maine Coast Memorial Hospital to deliver a baby. It's probably Cindy Cote, Mimi Cote's mother, going in to work her shift at Denny's, our town's only restaurant that serves after 8:30. She works there and at the Riverside on Sundays.

And all those people know me too. *That's Little Belle Philbrick, they'll say, whose dad died in the first Gulf War when she was a baby. She dates that cute Dylan boy. What a good couple they are. They'll get married after college. You just can tell.*

In my town, everyone repeats your past and predicts your future every single time they see you, even though the people they tell it to already know. I wonder what they'll say about me now, what they'll say about Dylan.

I turn away from my window and tiptoe through the house without flicking on any lights. It doesn't take much to lose my way, even though I've lived here all my life. Everything is different in the dark. I bump into the coffee table. My shin bruises. My hip launches into the corner of the kitchen counter. The pain is sweet, like water after a long bike ride uphill.

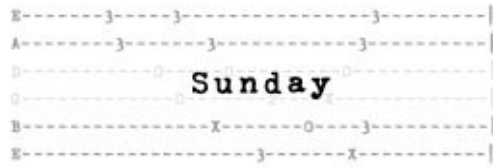
Night sounds skim against me. My mother's snore-breaths bound down the hall. Cars on faraway roads rev their engines. Mice rustle in the walls. Cats' paws pad along crackling leaves.

I lean against the counter.

"I'm lonely," I say to the sounds, the house, to nothing.

In the dark, dark kitchen my body slumps onto the counter, leaning, but my soul, it floats up by the ceiling, watching it all, wondering about this lonely girl with her feet planted on the wood floor, this girl who is me.

My mother snores in her bedroom. The clock tells me it's too late to call.



In the morning, after the gloom of a typical overcast day wakes up my mom, I leave the kitchen, where I've moved from the floor to the top of the counter.

"Good morning, sweetie. You're up early," she says in her sleep-heavy voice. She makes her way to the coffeemaker, eyes barely open and not really registering anything. She is not a morning person.

"Yep," I say.

I go in my room, ignore Gabriel, and turn on the stereo. It's Barbra Streisand, this super-crooner lady that Dylan loves. She's got this CD of show tunes that came out way back in the 1980s some time. Dylan and I sing to it together. He's a great singer, with one of those musical-classical choir voices. He's an all-state, all-New England baritone. I'm an alto and I'm more folk. When I sing you expect to hear a guitar with me.

But I don't turn on my music. I turn on his. This is ironic, of course, because he's just dumped me, and here I am in my room listening to his music. I can't help it. I turn it up louder and remember.

Sometimes Dylan would sing to me. Sometimes he would sing even if I didn't ask him to, like when I was nervous or we thought I might have a seizure. I'd rest my head on his stomach and his breathing would change, it would become deeper

and longer. The breaths flowed out music words that would soar around the room or outside and then flit gracefully into my ears. Even when he sang in chorus, I could always pick out his voice. It was the voice that cascaded into my head, down through my throat, and settled into the depths of me.

I put up the volume real loud because my mom's gone out to the grocery store.

Barbra's got this voice that goes loud and soft and spirals all over the place. I pluck up Muffin, scratch her kitty head, and stare out the window while Barbra sings.

Muffin puts her paw on the cold pane of glass. I close my eyes and hear Dylan's voice mixing with Barbra's.

We'd always come to my house after school and sing this with my stereo. We'd belt out old show tunes, the stuff Dylan really liked. We'd get overdramatic and laugh so hard we couldn't sing anymore. We'd flop on my bed and start kissing. That was our routine.

Dylan can sing everything—folk songs, opera, show tunes, rock. Although, he's not too good at rock. No offense to him. It's too brash for our music breathing. It's not Dylan.

Although, how can I know that? How can I know who he is anymore? And if I don't know who he is, how can I know who anyone is?

I open my mouth and try to sing but just a gulp comes out, like I'm gasping for air. Muffin puts her paw on my face, I breathe her in . . . cat fur, and outside smells like the forest. She purrs.

"Muffin," I whisper to her but I'm not sure if my voice makes it into the outside air or can be heard over Barbra. I close my eyes and lean my forehead against the window, remembering things that are not healthy to be remembering when it turns out that your boyfriend is gay. I do it anyways.

One time after Dylan and I sang this song, we made love and then took a bath. We folded our bodies into the tub and put in raspberry bubble stuff. We laughed and laughed and made bubble beards and bubble boobs and bubble hair and then the bubbles started popping. They just weren't there anymore and the water left the world of hot and journeyed into the world of lukewarm and Dylan kissed me a long, long kiss. Then we just sat there facing each other and everything in the whole bathroom seemed to glow—the tissue box that my mother made with plastic

rectangles and yarn, the peach-colored towels, the photo of a southern plantation above the toilet. But mostly it was Dylan. Dylan glowed.

We looked at each other and then this weird, good beam of golden light came out of my eyes and drifted toward Dylan. And at the same time this good, weird beam of golden light shifted out of Dylan's eyes and touched my beam of light. They just stayed there, mingling for a minute. They just stayed there and with them came peace and comfort and all those Hallmarky cheese ball things.

In the water, we sat. In the water, we were silent. In the water, we waited and waited until it was cold. Then we pulled ourselves up and out. The only noise was the water dripping off our bodies and rejoining the water in the tub. Dylan gave me his hand and we toweled each other off with good rubs.

"I love you, you know," Dylan said, pulling on his jeans. He had to tug them up, because I hadn't dried off his thighs well enough.

"Good," I laughed, reaching around my back to snap my bra. My shoulders stretched. I was still thinking about the light thing, and whether it was just some freak weird hallucination/illusion, or whether it was real. I didn't want to mention it though, because what if he didn't see it? I needed it to be real.

Dylan turned me so my back was against him. His body felt warm. "I'll do that for you."

His fingers snapped my bra closed. He kissed my neck. I shivered. He gently pulled out my ponytail holder and said, "You love me too, right?"

"Yeah." I raked my fingers through my wet hair and turned around to face him.

He tilted his head like a dog does when it's trying to figure something out. "How much do you love me?"

"With all my soul," I said. I believe it too. I believe that's how I love Dylan, even though it's corny. And I believe that afternoon, in my bathtub, we saw our souls. It was the only time in my life anything remotely magical happened. And I was going to keep believing it. No matter what.

How can you not believe you're meant to be with a guy when that happens? How does anything make sense anymore, when that happens and then he turns out to like boys?

“He is not!”

“I swear it,” I say. I would hold up my hand and do the Boy Scout honor pledge but I am too sad, too tired.

Emily, my best friend that isn't Dylan, has lost the ability to close her mouth. It hangs there and hangs there. Finally, I reach over and gently shut it for her. She blushes, flops onto my bed, and covers her face with her hands.

“I'm sorry,” she says. “It's just . . .”

“Unbelievable,” I say. “Bizarre? Horrifying? Ridiculous? Ludicrous? Humiliating?”

“Yeah,” she says and moves her hands away from her face. “Yeah. But, you know, it kind of makes sense.”

Anger wells up inside of me. I push it down to my piggy toes. It does not stay there. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Well, he does sing show tunes, and he dresses really nicely.”

“All men who sing and dress well are not gay!” I yell at her. “That is a stereotype.”

She sits back up. “I know. I know. Oh, you poor baby.”

She scooches next to me and hugs me sideways.

“I thought he loved me,” I sniffle.

She nods.

“I can't believe he doesn't love me.”

“He still loves you, honey, just not that way,” she says and gives me a little squeeze.

I groan. "Yeah, right."

She thinks for a second and says, "Who's going to help him with his economics homework?"

I shrug.

"And who's going to help him study for English?" she asks.

"I don't know! Maybe me. Maybe we'll still be friends."

We sit there for awhile and then I say, "It must be awful hard for him."

"What?"

"Being gay."

Emily nods. My cat, Muffin, jumps on the bed and rubs her head against our backs. Emily picks her up and kisses her nose. "Oh, who's the pretty kitty. Yes. You are. Yes, you are." She settles Muffin in her lap. "At least he doesn't have some weird cat fetish or something."

"True," I say. "But what if he gets a boyfriend? What if he starts dating someone and then everyone realizes that my quote-unquote One True Love likes boys?"

"That would suck," Emily says. "Definitely. But this is Eastbrook, everyone's going to figure it out eventually."

She picks up Muffin and kisses her kitty belly. Muffin puts her paws on the top of Em's hair but doesn't scratch it. Em moves the cat away and says, "Eddie Caron will be happy."

"Oh, great. My life's goal is to make Eddie Caron happy," I say.

Em shrugs. "It'll make Tom Tanner happy."

"Give me a break. Tom is a shallow, shallow boy who went out with Mimi Cote and obviously is not my type. He calls me Commie."

"He's liked you forever," she says, settling Muffin back on her lap. "Remember in fourth grade when he gave you that I LOVE YOU ring for Valentine's Day and how jealous Dylan got?"

"That was fourth grade. I'm not really looking for another boyfriend right now." I flop down on the bed, squeeze my eyes tight so I don't cry.

My mother's voice careens down from the living room. Now that she's done with the groceries, she's dusting and singing, which would be embarrassing if it was anyone other than Em here. Em is used to my mother. She's even used to the way



my mom sings the wrong lyrics to songs all the time.

“Live like Yoda’s crying,” my mom sing-yells.

Em starts laughing. “Oh my God, is she screwing up the words to ‘*Live Like You Were Dying?*’”

“Yep,” I say.

“That’s so funny,” Em snorts. “Does she really think those are the words?”

“She’s always stunned when I tell her she’s singing things wrong,” I say and fortunately for all of us my mom turns on the vacuum and we can’t hear her singing anymore. I try to relax onto my bed. “I feel selfish for thinking about myself. I should be worrying about him, you know, all he has to deal with.”

“No way. That’s his job. You worry about you. That’s okay. As long as you only do it for a week.”

Muffin pounces on my stomach and knocks the air out of me. “A week?”

“Yeah, any longer and you become annoying, self-obsessed, like a Mallory.”

A Mallory is a girl who only thinks about, talks about, knows about herself and how herself reacts/responds/is involved with boys, makeup, clothes, parents, herself.

“I will never be a Mallory!” I yell and sit up straight again, holding Muffin against my belly so she won’t run off. She squirms.

“That’s right. You are a good Maine girl who gets on with her life,” Emily says, raising her hand and putting her fingers in the form of the Boy Scout pledge. “Swear it with me. On my honor, I swear, under God, blah, blah, blah to never be a Mallory.”

I raise my hand. I swear. I raise Muffin’s paw, make her swear too. Emily grimaces, checks her nails, shakes her head, and says, “You’re losing it. That poor cat.”

She grabs Muffin, who climbs onto her shoulder and settles there. They both seem to purr. She pulls out her digital camera and snaps a picture of me, even though my nose is red from crying and my hair is a mess. She’s always taking pictures ever since her dad died. She’s afraid of losing people, afraid she’ll forget things about them, if she doesn’t snap what they look like happy, sad, angry, bloated from eating too many buffalo wings. She says she can’t remember how her dad looked except for how he looked smiling. So, I let her take her pictures and think of how brave she is, how brave I should be.

“A week?” I ask Emily.

She nods, checks out the photo but doesn't show me. She snaps another one of my lonely Gabriel guitar, leaning against the wall. Em throws her sexy brown supermodel hair behind her cat-free shoulder. “A week.”

After Em leaves, I yell to my mom that I'm going out on my bike.

She looks up from her computer. She's paying bills and her hair's flopped out of her weekend ponytail, looking all scraggly in her face. “It's cold out.”

“Yeah.”

She has worry stuck behind her eyes the way she always does when I go out alone, but she's a good mom, she knows that I hardly have seizures, that they don't run my life and she wants me to have a life. “You have your cell phone?”

“Yep.”

I kiss her on the top of her head and she wraps her arms around my trunk. “You bundle up, okay?”

I pull away. “I promise.”

She smiles and something shifts behind her eyes. It turns out it's a memory. “Do you remember when you were little and you and Mimi Cote rode bikes all the way out to the Washington Junction Road and you both got flats and that guy, Pete, from R.F. Jordan picked you up and put your bikes in the back of the dump truck?”

I clench my teeth. I hate thinking about Mimi Cote. We used to be good friends when we were little and then kind of friends in middle school, but then she

went out with Tom Tanner and everything changed. “Yeah.”

“You ever talk to Mimi?” my mom asks, but she’s already turning back to her computer screen filled with check numbers and deposit statements.

I don’t even think she hears me when I say, “No.”

I take my bike out and ride until my mind is like the blueberry barrens—this nothing field full of rocks, scrappy bushes, and dried-out fruit. Old footprints in the sand. Abandoned blue jay feathers. A worker’s gray t-shirt soaked with sweat.

I know that beyond the barrens is a world of forest with sloping trees, limbs reaching toward the sky, birds flittering from nest to home, to nest. I know that beyond the barrens is a world with nice subdivision houses full of wagging-tail dogs and happy kids, comfy beds, family photos on walls featuring smiles and laughs and hugs, magical stories of love and hope, and refrigerators full of chocolate milk and good leftovers waiting to be rewarmed.

I know, I know that it is all out there, beyond the barrens, beyond my mind and when I ride my bike up and down the Maine hills and around the potholes, over the frost heaves, all I can do is think about wanting, wanting, wanting.

Each want puffs out with my cold breath, making a cloud in the frigid air. Each want stomps itself into my heart as I pedal harder and faster.

I want a life that I can trust. I want a life where there are four stable walls and the people I love are who I expect them to be. Is that too much to ask? I want no one to know about Dylan and me. I want it not to be true.

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Before Emily or Dylan could drive, we all used to walk home from school to Dylan’s house, because he lived the closest, only a mile or so away. Dylan would laugh at Emily and how girly she could be sometimes, quoting from *Cosmopolitan* or *Vogue*. We would all crash in Dylan’s kitchen and scarf up all the food in the house, usually bagels. We always ate bagels and tea.

Dylan always made my tea perfect, the way I can never make it. It would come out tasting like apples and cinnamon, not too strong, not too wussy weak like I make it. He’d put the perfect amount of honey in it, stirring the spoon around and around in the mug, without ever clanging the edges. Now, there’s no one to make me tea anymore.

Now, he’ll be making some handsome boy tea, and they’ll kiss each other the

way we used to kiss each other, soft and then hard, aching and then fulfilled.

My heart throbs and my feet stop pedaling, because my lips will no longer be the kissed lips. My feet stop pedaling because really where do I have to go? I am in the middle of a road that winds through a blueberry barren.

I was wrong. It is my heart that is the barren, not my head. My head is a river rushing, rushing, rushing and not knowing where it's going. My head is a river rushing, rushing, rushing and looking for the home, looking for the ocean.

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There is nothing to do except go home and hide in my room, stare at Gabriel the guitar leaning against the wall, try not to think about music, try not to think about him.

My mom knocks on my door.

My arms hug my yearbook to my chest and I close my eyes, hoping she won't come in. Hoping never works. The door squeaks open and her voice squeaks after it.

"Honey?" she asks. "You okay?"

I nod, but do not open my eyes.

She says again, "You okay?"

I nod but the nod is a lie and I do not want to be one of the liars so I make my tongue put air out of my mouth. The air forms a word. The word is no.

She rushes in, because that is the kind of mom she wants to be. She rushes in and launches herself onto my bed. Her arms wrap up me and the yearbook in a hug.

"Oh, honey? What is it? Do you want to tell me?"

I shake my head.

She smooths down my hair with gentle hands. "You sure?"

The volume of Barbra Streisand's voice gets lower. My mom must have turned it down. Dylan's song voice slips further and further away.

I shrug. The thing is, I am really mad at Dylan. I am really mad at him but it's not because he's gay, it's because he pretended not to be. How can I tell my mom that? How can I tell her that the boy she thought I'd marry never liked me that way at all?

She hugs me and rocks me back and forth. "I'm here for you, you know. I'm

right here.”

“Yep,” I say. “Thanks.”

I lean away from her. She moves the hair out of my face. It’s wet from my tears. Her voice comes out a murmur, “Oh, baby. I am so sorry you are so sad.”

I sniff in. “Yeah, me too.”

“Okay. I’ll give you some space, but you know if you need me . . .”

“You’ll be right here,” I finish for her.

“I haven’t heard you play today,” she motions toward Gabriel. “Maybe that would make you feel better.”

I shake my head.

I don’t think so.

“My fingers are too cold,” I tell her. “Maine is too cold.”

When you sit alone in your room, hugging your pillow to your chest and listening to pretty cheesy music because the love of your life has turned out to be gay, some pretty simple questions bounce around in your brain over and over again.

Questions like:

*How long did he know?*

*How many times did he kiss me and wish I were a boy?*

*How many times did he groan inside when I kissed him?*

*How could I not notice?*

It is a completely Mallory thing to hug your pillow to your chest and let your cat crawl all over you while you obsess about things, but I do it anyways and I start

to remember one time last week. He came to my house after school. He held my hand walking up the steps and he had such sad eyes. He took my backpack off my back and said, "It's too heavy for you."

I laughed and said, "It's a heavy, heavy burden."

And he said, "We all carry heavy burdens."

I didn't know if he said that because of my seizures, which I hate thinking about, ever. Since I rarely have them, but then I thought maybe he was talking about himself, Dylan.

His eyes were sad but I made it all jokey, because I couldn't stand to see him looking sad, not my golden boy, not my Dylan. I wanted to press myself into him and take all his sadness away, but I also wanted to be inside of him somehow and be that sadness in his eyes, to be tall like him and golden like him, able to sing out those music breaths forever. All of a sudden, I was scared of being me and Dylan being Dylan and I just wanted, just wanted for us to be together, mingled souls like in the bathtub. Or else I just wanted to be a tiny, tiny girl who could disappear into his hugs and not have to see his sad eyes, not have to see them looking at me but not telling me anything.

Tom Tanner drove by and honked his horn. There was a bunch of soccer players in his truck. He waved. I waved back. Dylan's eyes narrowed. He's never liked Tom, since freshman year, although they were best friends in grade school, then Tom went out with Mimi Cote and everything got all weird.

Mrs. Darrow yelled to us from the front door of her house, "I've got cookies if you two want some."

"Thanks, Mrs. Darrow," I yelled back.

We ran over and took a plate of cookies. Mrs. Darrow makes the best cookies. She asked Dylan about his parents and his brothers. She thanked us for raking up her leaves, which we always do, every year, but she always spends the rest of the winter thanking us.

When we walked away, Dylan said, "You ever feel like everything you do, everybody knows about?"

"There are no secrets in Eastbrook," I said and added a hideous movie ghoulish laugh and reached my hands out like a zombie's. Dylan's mouth twitched but he didn't quite smile.

He walked behind me into the house like he was protecting me from the whole world outside, a knight in shining armor. He shut the door behind us and locked it.

“Did you take the key out?” he asked me because I am forever leaving keys in the doors. Dylan always tells me it’s because I’m so brilliant, because my mind is thinking about so many big things it forgets to focus on the little ones.

I don’t feel brilliant now, crying on my bed with my headphones on. I feel stupid and blind and empty, an unused guitar. I feel like someone who has no idea who anybody is.

I wish I still had some of Mrs. Darrow’s cookies. What would she think? She always said, “Such a beautiful couple.”

Then she would pinch both our cheeks.

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“You look sad,” I said to Dylan that day, when we walked into my house with Mrs. Darrow’s cookies and the memory of Tom’s truck horn vibrating in our heads.

He shrugged. “We all have burdens.”

I held him against me and he held me against him and he smelled. He smelled like pine trees and Christmas. He smelled like green earth ready to farm on. He smelled like the wind.

We made love that day. We made love most days and then I’d help him with his homework. But I remember that day best because afterwards he kissed me on the nose, like I was his baby and he traced my collarbone with his finger and said in his husky voice, “I will always love you, you know. Always.”

“Me too,” I murmured.

He grabbed my hand and held it tightly in his. “I mean it.”

“Me too.”

*I will, Dylan. I am so mad at you for being a liar, but I will. I will always love you. I am mad at me for that, too.*

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He was just a boy and I was just a girl and that’s how it was for a long time. He was just a boy and I was just a girl and he would write me notes when he was bored in class and I would read them and carry them around in my pocket. Then I would write him back. And he would write, “Can I come over this afternoon?”

And we both knew what that meant. It meant, “Let’s sing silly songs, play a

little guitar, and make love at your house on your bed while your mom's at work." It meant, "Let's lie on the front yard and stare up at the sky and imagine things." It meant, "I love you and I want you and I love you."

I didn't know it was a lie. How could it have been a lie?

I decide to take a more practical approach and open up my laptop and begin a list on what to do and what NOT to do.

Muffin glances up at me. She jumps onto my desk and knocks over this elephant figurine Dylan bought me once at a yard sale. It's supposed to be good luck if you point the trunk at the door. I point the trunk at the door, give Muffin a couple of strokes, and start typing.

### Tips on Having a Gay (ex) Boyfriend

1. Do not tell anyone.
2. Do not call yourself a fag hag, as this is a derogatory term that conjures up Paris Hilton impersonators, Liza Minnelli, and far too much blue eye shadow plastered on a face that has been dried out from one too many highballs.
3. Do not whine for over a week, but during that week explain profusely that a mere seven days is not a sufficient amount of time to overcome the reality that your whole entire identity has been stolen, that your faith in the world has shattered.
4. Wonder why being a girlfriend was your identity. Listen to kick-ass rocker girls who don't give a shit about anything.
5. Think about being a lesbian.
6. Reject the whole lesbian idea when even the concept of kissing super-beautiful Angelina Jolie doesn't make you hot.
7. Wonder how you could have had such good sex so many times with a gay seventeen-year-old guy.
8. Cry.
9. Cry more.
10. Hug your cat. Resist calling him. Resist telling your mother. Resist the whole idea. Resist. Resist. Resist!!!!
11. Decide you must be punked. Look around for Ashton Kutcher, that guy who does the practical joke show, then remember you are not famous and therefore not worthy of being punked.



12. Remember how he looked at that guy selling pretzels at the Bangor Mall. That was not a straight-guy look. Straight guys do not let their eyes linger on other guy's bottoms, unless there is a KICK ME sign plastered there. There was no KICK ME sign.
13. Think about taping a KICK ME sign to your own bottom.
14. Cry.
15. Make a stupid list that does not make you feel better, but gives some semblance of non-hysteria and complete control.
16. Rip list up.
17. Do homework with radio blasting.
18. Give up and go ride bike out to the country. Again.
19. Write him notes. Rip them up, too. Rip everything up so that everything is like your heart, shredded.

I print out my list, because I always print them out. If they're good enough, or important, I thumbtack them onto my corkboard. I call Em again.

"Getting dumped on a Saturday sucks," I say. I print out my tips.

"Uh-huh," she says.

I continue over her, "Because when you get dumped on a Saturday you have all day Sunday to obsess over it and then you have to worry about telling everyone at school on Monday about it. And you know, I'll have to tell people over and over again and everyone will be all shocked that we're broken up."

I pause for breath, pick up my printed-out sheets, and glance at them.

Em inhales so sharply I can hear it on the phone. "Belle, you can't tell people about it."

"Oh God, I can't, can I?" The papers in my hand shake. "Dylan has to tell people."

"Yeah."

I close my eyes. Muffin rubs against my face, moving the phone in my hand. I steady it.

"Why does he have to be gay?" I say. Em doesn't answer because there is no answer. I know that. I know that, but I am acting stupid. "People will notice though. They'll notice when we're not kissing each other all the time, and when we're not together."

"True. And all that butt-groping stuff he used to do."

“My butt is going to be lonely.”

“Your butt will be just fine. If anyone asks just tell them that you broke up. Don’t give out details,” Em’s voice is calm, smooth.

“Everyone always wants details,” I say.

“It doesn’t matter. This isn’t about everyone. This is about you and Dylan. Okay?”

I drop my list, pull Muffin onto my lap. “Okay.”

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