

CRAZY

Amy
Reed

SIMON PULSE

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For Brian



No pleasure without the taste of ashes.

—*Pablo Picasso*



From: condorboy

To: yikeslizzy

Date: Tuesday, August 31—10:42 AM

Subject: Hello stranger

Dear Isabel,

Sometimes my dog looks like Robert De Niro. She's got a mole on her cheek right about where he does, and she gets this serious look like "Are you talking to me? *Are you talking to me?*" with her forehead all wrinkly and her eyebrows raised and a defiant glint in her eyes. I don't really know what this means, except that I probably spend way too much time with my dog. Her name is Señor Cuddlebones, by the way. Señor for short. I think I told you about her already. And I'm pretty sure it was boring then, too.

Speaking of boring, that has been the definition of my sad little life since I got home. What about you? I'm sure you probably have all kinds of exciting things to do, living in the big city with your boyfriend who's in a band and your fake ID and everything. Me, I'm stuck on this quaint little island, where the most exciting thing happening before school starts is the wooden boat festival, when everybody hangs around the docks and—you guessed it—looks at wooden boats. We do it every

year. If I'm lucky, I'll get an organic, free-range, no-sulfite hot dog out of it. This is exactly the kind of small-progressive-town activity my mom loves. She practically had a seizure about the heirloom vegetable seed fair a few days ago.

So what are you doing? It's weird to think about you existing outside of camp. You were this larger-than-life presence for me in those couple of months. It's funny, but I think I spent more time with you than I've ever really spent with anyone. In a row, I mean. Except for maybe my mom when I was a baby. But I'm pretty sure I was sleeping most of that time. And now you're just gone, just like that—poof—out of my life. I know you're only really just a ferry boat ride away, but it seems like a huge distance.

I guess I'm just having a hard time adjusting back to real life. Part of me doesn't want to admit everything has to go back to normal and I have to start school next week. I'm just so bored, you know? It's like I've been hearing this rumor my whole life that there's this big, exciting world out there somewhere, but that's all it is and all it'll ever be—only a rumor. I've never actually seen it. Maybe I caught a glimpse this summer, but now that's gone. All I have are memories, and they're already fading fast. I know I'm being sappy, but that's part of my charm, right? Didn't you say you loved how earnest I am? Sometimes I feel like I'm an old man trapped in a seventeen-year old's body, like I should be wear-

ing a top hat and suspenders and have wrinkles instead of zits, and hobble around with a cane and call Facebook "FaceSpace" or "MyFace." Instead I'm this little stringy mess of nerves and hormones with all these big ideas and no one to tell them to except a fascinating girl I met this summer who exists only via email.

Is it okay that I called you fascinating? My kindergarten teacher once sent a note home complaining that I was too affectionate with the girls in my class. My mom says I'm just open about my emotions, which is apparently a good thing in her world. I did grow rather attached to you over the summer, which I hope you don't find reason to send your man-friend across Puget Sound to kick my ass. He should know I pose absolutely no threat to his masculinity. He'd get here and look at me and be like, "What, this shrimp? Are you kidding?" then get on his skateboard or whatever and fly back to you in Seattle and wrap you in his big, manly, tattooed arms.

I'm not in love with you, if that's what you're thinking. We already went over this. I'm just weird and bored and trapped on this little island, and I'm dying for some excitement, and you're the most exciting thing that's happened to me in a long time.

Love,
Connor

From: yikes!izzy

To: condorboy

Date: Wednesday, September 1-4:38 PM

Subject: Re: Hello stranger

Dear Connor, you adorable little freak,

Yes, yes, I miss you too, blah blah blah. You are so funny. Why do you have to be so serious? Do you expect Trevor to challenge you to a duel or something? Do you think he's threatened by my having male friends? What kind of world do you live in? I thought you said Bainbridge Island was a "nuclear-free zone topped with eco-friendly buildings and a bunch of Crocs-wearing, overeducated liberals." That's a direct quote, by the way. Did I mention I have a photographic memory? Just one more thing to add to the long list of Amazing Things About Isabel. Ha! That, and I'm double-jointed. Wow, huh?

I'm bored too, so don't think your boredom is anything special. I think that's the natural state of teenagers, you know—to be bored and yearning and pissed off at everything. I don't know if it's any better for me, living in the city. I guess there's

more to do, but you're lucky because you can walk off into the woods or on the beach and just lose yourself. I'd love to be able to do that, just wander off and get lost and have everything just quiet down for a while. Here, there's always somebody watching, some car honking at you, some man whistling, somebody rushing somewhere and deciding you're in their way. We should trade places for a while. You can be a city kid and I'll go ride horses or catch frogs or whatever it is you do in your free time.

Things have been weird since I got home. My mom's been running around frantic because of some Very Important Client, and my dad's been hiding in the basement watching his sports and eating his Cheese Doodles and drinking his non-diet soda even though my mom finds the time in her busy schedule to remind him how fat he's been getting since he's been unemployed. I'm not quite sure that qualifies as domestic abuse, but I wouldn't be surprised if my dad could benefit from a trip to some kind of halfway house for battered husbands. It's just that everything she does has to be so damn IMPORTANT, like nothing he could ever possibly do could even

come close. And me, well I don't even factor into the equation because I'm just a kid and have no monetary value. Maybe I should start stripping or something to make some income—then I'd be worth something in this family. Instead, I'm just a drain on the resources of the all-powerful matriarch, my face nothing but a reminder that they once spent enough time naked in each other's company for their genes to mingle.

Teen angst is so boring, isn't it? I try so hard not to be a cliché, but it's like it's written into my DNA to hate my parents and be totally unsatisfied with everything. I wonder if there's anybody our age who actually likes their life. Maybe those purity-ring girls who are too drunk on Jesus to know any better. Maybe I should be a drug addict and run away from everything like my brother.

Let's run away together, Connor. Just you and me and our unmarketable skills. You can write haikus and do video installations, and I'll make collages and construct life-sized urinals symbolizing the plight of modern teenagers. Trevor might want to come along, though. I hope you don't mind. He's not that bad of a guy, and he's really good in bed.

Ha! I wrote that just for you. I am picturing you flopping around trying to regain your composure. You're such a prude, Connor, and I mean that in the most loving way possible. You'd think with such an "enlightened" mother, you'd be a little less uptight. But I guess that's part of your charm.

What about your girlfriend? You didn't even mention her.

You want to hear something lame? Since I got home, whenever I get pissed off (which is often) I pretend I'm back at camp and it's just after the Craft Shack closes for the day and all the kids and other counselors are in their cabins getting ready for dinner, and it's just you and me and the kitchen staff and other random, kidless employees left to roam the deserted property, and everything's so quiet, and the sun is glistening off the water in just that way, and the San Juan Islands are all green and fuzzy in the distance, and the breeze, and the smell, and everything feels perfect. I close my eyes and pretend I'm there, that my life is as simple as teaching crafts to a bunch of kids all day, that I have all this leftover time to myself and I can just do nothing if I want. The strange

thing is, sometimes you're here with me, in my fantasy, being your adorable, serious self and not demanding anything from me. And it makes me calm. I bet you never thought you were that important to me, did you? I bet you're blushing again.

Well, I guess it's time to go now. Trevor's picking me up in half an hour and I need to shave my pubes. Ha! Making you blush, even if it's just over email, will never get old.

Like,
Isabel

From: condorboy

To: yikeslizzy

Date: Thursday, September 2—7:12 PM

Subject: Re: Hello stranger

Dear Isabel,

Try to shock me all you want, I'm not going anywhere. For your information, I'm not the prude you think I am. Trust me, I have plenty of dark thoughts late at night, alone in bed with only myself with whom to communicate. So there. Who's blushing now?

Since you asked, Alice and I are still an item, although she's been more distant of late. She says she's "figuring some things out" and I've barely seen her since I got back. I'm trying to think what she could be figuring out and why it involves not talking to me, but I'm at a loss. Her parrot, Gerard, died over the summer, so that might have something to do with it. They grew up together and, honestly, theirs was probably Alice's closest relationship. And what does that make me? Less than a bird? Oh, the plight of the horny, marooned poet.

Since you mentioned the "S word," I must mention that I'm dying, perhaps just figuratively speaking, but if it were possible to expire from sexual frustration, I'd most definitely be a goner. Alice was kind enough to bless me with some oral compassion

on my return from camp, but then rescinded her kindness at the last minute, just moments before my—shall I say it?—ultimate Thank-You. I was left there in the back of her mom's Prius, writhing in unreleased tension, and she just dabbed at the sides of her mouth with a Kleenex and informed me that oral strikes her as inherently misogynist because the girl receives nothing in return and is effectively silenced in the process. I said I was more than happy to return the favor, or perhaps find a configuration more conducive to tandem pleasure, but she would have none of it.

Honestly, I don't know what I did wrong. I can't imagine a more attentive and sensitive boyfriend than me. My sensitivity to the feminine condition borders on pathology. So why does it sometimes feel like she considers me a kind of danger to her? Was she traumatized in some past life? Does she see me as nothing more than a stand-in for a former abuser? Or is she just a cold fish? Isabel, help me figure her out. You're my only hope.

Hypothermic from cold showers,

Connor

From: yikes!izzy

To: condorboy

Date: Friday, September 3-4:47 PM

Subject: Re: Hello stranger

Connor,

What kind of disturbed woman doesn't like oral?! On what planet does a wet tongue lapping at one's girlie parts feel like anything less than God's breath? What is wrong with this Alice of yours? I suggest you trade her in for a newer model. She is defective, my friend.

I don't know how to help you, except to remind you that the most important sexual organ for the woman is in fact the mind. Guys can get turned on by a cantaloupe, but girls need a little more inspiration. At least, this is what I hear. I, on the other hand, seem to be more like a guy in this respect. Not that I get turned on by cantaloupes, but bananas or zucchinis, sure. Ha! I think I must have more testosterone than most girls or something. It's like I'm on edge and anxious and I just need my body to feel something else, something different, and sex is the only thing strong

enough that works to relieve it. I guess I could cut myself or something, but I'm already enough of a cliché. I don't want to go down that road.

I told Trevor about it once because, all kidding aside, it kind of worries me, this feeling I get sometimes. I'm full of all this energy, way more than is supposed to fit in one person, you know? And I poured my heart out to Trevor about it and it's like he didn't even hear me. He was just all sexy face and saying how lucky he is to have a girlfriend who wants it so much, hubba, hubba. But I was being serious, and it kind of pissed me off. I know most of the time I'm kidding, so maybe it's hard to tell when I'm not, but it'd be nice if someone took me seriously once in a while. That's what I like about you. As much as I kid you about it, it's nice that you take everything I do so seriously. You're the only one who really does.

Your favorite sex fiend,

Isabel

From: condorboy

To: yikes!lizzy

Date: Saturday, September 4—1:33 PM

Subject: Popsicle sticks

Dear Isabel,

Remember that rainstorm when everyone crammed into the Craft Shack during free time because it was too wet to do anything outside? It was just you and me and about sixty soggy, hyperactive kids trying to stab each other with scissors. And I was all trying to hand out construction paper and popsicle sticks and asking everyone to please calm down, but it was like I wasn't even there and they didn't even see me. Then you climbed on top of the table in the middle of the room and started tap dancing and singing about surrealism and Dalí and Magritte, and everybody shut up and sat down. This room full of little kids just watched you, transfixed, like you were telling them the secret to life, like you were revealing something really important. Remember? You said, "I dare you to make me a picture of your dreams," and they all got to work, just like that, like you were the president and just told them their drawings would save the country from certain annihilation. You inspired them, Isabel. They listened to you when nothing else would shut them up. They took you seriously. They actually listened to you lecture

about art history, and they were like, nine years old. Apparently they knew something your beloved Trevor hasn't figured out. And, by the way, I know it too.

Your biggest fan,
Connor

From: yikes!izzy

To: condorboy

Date: Saturday, September 4-11:28 PM

Subject: Re: Popsicle sticks

Dear Connor,

I don't know how to react to Nice. It makes me uncomfortable. Remember how I'd always pretend-strangle you this summer every time you complimented my drawings or told me my hair looked nice? Well, I kind of want to punch you in the face right now.

In response, I'd like to point out that it doesn't take a whole lot to impress little kids. I mean, why do you think they're always wandering off with molesters? All I had to do was wave my arms around and try to be more interesting than stabbing a kid with scissors. It's not rocket science.

But thank you, I guess. Is that what I'm supposed to say to a compliment? I wouldn't know, since I receive them so infrequently. Not that I'm fishing right now. I'm not, so don't try any of your little tricks to boost my self-confidence. You have an unfair advantage, being raised by a therapist. You

know all these secret ways to get people to tell you things and bare their souls. Me, I learned nothing of substance from my Neanderthal father and Executive mother. But I guess my family's not completely useless—I did learn how to argue from my sister and how to lie from my brother. I should probably send them thank-you cards.

Trevor's band is playing at Chop Suey tonight, so I must be off to make myself beautiful. It's hard work being such a jet-setter. My dear sister, Gennifer-with-a-G, the self-proclaimed Queen of the Aging Lesbian Hipsters, always tells me our generation is doing it all wrong, that we're all about manufactured style and lack any real originality or substance, like she's automatically superior because she was old enough to remember the day Kurt Cobain killed himself. So I say, "What, like it's cool to still be driving Mom's old hand-me-down Volvo and shopping at thrift stores when you're almost forty?" Then she's like, "I'm thirty-six!" and I have to remind her that's twice as old as me, and then she stomps away with her shitty nonprofit job and two useless masters degrees to go home and listen to her records and

read her comic books and reminisce about the days when being poor and overeducated was cool. Except she's not poor anymore, because her wife, Karen, makes a ton of money and they live in a fancy condo downtown. So now I guess she's just a hypocrite like everyone else I know.

I should try to be nicer, shouldn't I?

Yours in eternal bitchitude,

Isabel

From: condorboy

To: yikes!izzy

Date: Sunday, September 5—9:43 PM

Subject: Death and dismemberment

Dear Isabel,

School starts tomorrow and I feel like I should feel something. But I don't. I feel nothing. I am dead inside. Do you want to know why?

BECAUSE ALICE BROKE UP WITH ME!

Do you want to know why she broke up with me?

BECAUSE SHE SAYS SHE'S A FUCKING LESBIAN!

Did you hear me? Do you need me to repeat myself?

MY GIRLFRIEND WAS A FUCKING LESBIAN!!!!!!!!!!

The whole time I was exhausting myself trying to perform acrobatics with my tongue, she was not only not interested, but DISGUSTED with my whole gender. Every time I clenched my teeth and forced myself to act like a gentleman, trusting that someday it would be all worth it, someday I would be rewarded for being so damn NICE and RESPECTFUL, someday God would shine on me and send a lightning bolt of passion surging through Alice, inspiring her to run toward me while tearing her clothes off, eyes wild and mouth foaming, rabid with her desire for me. I kept hoping that all those cramped, lackluster nights in the back

of her mom's car were just working toward the moment she'd finally break through to her hibernating nymphomaniac core and go wild. But it was all a lie. All that patience and frustration and talking and hand-holding was for nothing. Because the whole time I was trying to be the sensitive boyfriend I thought she wanted, the whole time I thought maybe I was someone she could love, the truth of the matter was that I was wasting my time. Do you have any idea how that feels? To realize you've been wasting your love on someone for whom it's mentally and physically and spiritually impossible to love you back?

She said I was her last hope. She had been suspecting she was gay for a long time, but she wanted to try dating me because—and I quote—“If I couldn't like you, I probably couldn't like any guy.” Do you know what that really means? It means I'm the closest thing to a girl she could find that still had a penis.

It's official: I'm the Last Chance for Lesbians.

What does this say about me?

Your tattered rag,

Connor

From: yikes!izzy

To: condorboy

Date: Sunday, September 5-11:48 PM

Subject: Re: Death and dismemberment

Dear Connor,

The good thing is, you don't really have to take it personally. She didn't reject *you*, she rejected your entire sex, which is something you don't have any control over. And really, if you look at it a different way, you could take this as the best compliment ever. What if this just means you're the very *best* of your gender? Did you ever think of that? Maybe you are such an amazing specimen of a man that if a woman doesn't want to throw herself at you and kiss your feet and have your babies, then no man will do. Because you're the best of the best, the cream of the crop, the greatest penis-endowed human this world has ever seen. Alice was putting a lot of confidence in you if she thought there was even a chance you could sway what she knew deep down in her woman-loving loins. Really, you should be proud of yourself.

I'm sorry if I can't spend more time strok-

ing your wounded ego, but I'm a little preoccupied at the moment. You should know by now that I am a very selfish friend, which probably explains why I don't have many. I blame it on the influence of my mother and her type-A personality. I keep trying to focus on you, but my own desires and obsessions keep crowding you out with flashing lights saying "Pay attention to me!" and I have no choice but to obey. I hope you're not offended.

What I'm thinking about is how tomorrow morning I, too, am going to wake up to the first day of senior year. I'm going to put on my clothes and get in my car and drive to that big old yellow mansion full of the rich and smart and superficially interesting. I've told you about my school, right? We're the black sheep of the private schools in Seattle, the indie-rock to their pop music. They're the machines pumping out the future robots of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale while we're the little organic garden sprouting the brains of Reed, Oberlin, and Sarah Lawrence. I know you love it when I complain, but to be honest, I really like my school. The kids in it aren't much to write home about, but at least they're pretending to be authentic, which

is more than I can say for the rest of the clueless assholes in our age bracket (present company excluded, of course).

We're located in the heart of the Capitol Hill district, down the street from a women's sex-toy shop and a Wiccan "magick" supply store. A couple blocks away is the community college and a few blocks beyond that is the art school, and everywhere in between are coffee shops and gay bars and ethnic restaurants and beautiful people with big sunglasses and small dogs and reusable canvas shopping bags, and everywhere you turn are these pretty brick apartment buildings full of the twenty-something hipsters that make this little ecosystem so vibrant. It's quite impressive, really, and I'd like to think I'm a part of it even though of course I'm only eighteen and technically not allowed to be cool yet, but I have my sister's old ID that usually works (I'm thirty-six!), and of course I have Trevor when he's in town.

So you'd think I'd be excited about starting school, but I'm not. I'm only telling you this because, well, you're you, and for some reason I always feel this compulsion to tell you things.

The truth is, I don't really have any friends, and that's a pretty sucky thing in a school where your whole class is only thirty-four people and everyone refers to each other as their "educational family." I know this must come as a huge surprise, and you're probably catatonic from the shock because you know me as such a charming and likeable person, but if you must know, I have a little bit of a problem getting close to people. It's not like I'm a total pariah. I mean, I'm friendly enough with people and they're civil with me. But while they're all planning their weekend activities and eating the school's homemade vegetarian lunch in the cozy cafeteria together, I'm wandering around Broadway Avenue or sitting in coffee shops by myself and reading. It's like everyone's part of this big happy family, and I'm the weird foster kid that everyone is very polite to, but the truth is no one really considers me a part of the family.

I'm pretty lonely, Connor. Trevor's in Portland and only comes to town a couple times a month. My sister hardly ever stops by anymore, and who knows where my brother is, and don't even get me started

on my parents. The only one I really have is you,
and you only live inside this computer and in my
Craft Shack memories.

Shit, where did that come from? This little
bout of pre-school depression is making me sappy.

I'm sorry about Alice. I really am. You deserve
someone as amazing as you are, and I know you will
find her. Some girl is going to love you like crazy.

Yours in lonely solidarity,
Isabel