

US AND THEM

**MARIA
D'ALESSANDRO**

When we awoke our necks and shoulders were sore and it felt as though we had been sleeping for a lifetime. Years had come and gone, yet the same night played on repeat in our minds, like the lyrics of a song we were trying to recall. We knew Mary was gone before we opened our eyes. The rest of us lay in a heap of bedding on the floor.

Fog settled over the sleepy dorms, the forest and the bay. We braced ourselves on the concrete wall and the starlike vines, and skulked away from the dorms. We were covered in dust and hitchhikers. Our legs cramped and our feet blistered. Suddenly we felt old, tired. We wanted somebody to scoop us up, carry us home, and tuck us into our beds.

The pavement was wet and grainy under our feet, the street lamps still glowing and reflecting in the puddles. We walked on blacktop until we came to the woods and the path leading to the bay. We followed the muddy trail for some time, until we were walking alongside North Tivoli bay. The tide was out and the water chestnuts poked their thorny heads out of the mud, pressing hollow shells into the balls of our feet.

The water chestnuts were invasive; they multiplied by the thousands until they had formed a dense population over the water, no longer allowing the sun to penetrate beyond their fleshy, tangled masses. Without light or oxygen everything below the surface perished.

Markers in the form of neon ribbons were tied haphazardly around birch and maple saplings, leading the way along an overgrown dirt road toward

the party. Multi-flora rose snagged our blouses, and the phragmites made a sound like scratching as we passed. Our feet sunk into the mud, and the tall reeds closed behind us.

"Stay together, no matter what," Emily warned.

This had always been the plan.

The marshy forest opened into a flattened meadow, filled with warm bodies and smoke. A clown, balanced on stilts, waved his arms and danced in a halting box step. He wore a vintage, polka dotted dress that came to his thighs and bells hanging from his arms. We moved through the masses slowly. The wind blew smoke into our eyes and mouths. A goat elbowed past, dark eyes glaring out from behind her mask, which was covered in human hair. A cigarette dangled from the edge of her hairy gray mouth.

A lion jostled us and grunted. His mane was comprised of red toupees. His eyes were urgent, probing. He handed us raffle tickets, which read: *Beware the future.*

Our laughter sounded like choking. Drums beat through us, and we might have been dreaming. In this dream we were running so fast that our feet no longer touched the ground. We had the sensation of running, we were out of breath and giddy, though in reality we were barely moving forward at all. Others were pushing now, and the heat was drawing nearer and nearer. We were thirsty for the fire.

Finally, we could see flames. The crowd formed a circle around the blaze and began dancing. Our movements were languid. Others were chanting and we joined them. The multitude of voices sounded like the wind in the reeds and the lapping of water against rocks.

The drumbeat accelerated. Boys grasped us by the arms and hips and pulled us apart to dance. We twirled and leaped to the beating. The boys stamping their feet and lifting us higher, higher, to see above the heads of the others, and into the blaze and the smoke labored sky. They held us that way with our knees around their hips, rubbing against their chests. Then they let us glide, down along the length of their slippery bodies.

"Let me taste that," a boy said. The kissing tasted sour and smoky.

We closed our eyes and opened our mouths to accept deep wet kisses and frantic embraces. With closed eyes the sounds blended into

static. There was no more lovely singing; the drums were now too fast to keep up with. We couldn't reach out and touch one another. We shrieked into the boys' ears and scratched at their fleshy flesh until they let us go and we found each other once again.

There was an opening in the crowd and a red girl emerged. Bodies filled the gap from where she had appeared. Except for the red and gold feathers adorning her limbs and around her torso, Liza was naked. The tuft of hair between her legs painted neon red. We couldn't take our eyes away from her sex. She danced, long sweeping motions that felt like the song of sirens to watch. Her red hair was teased to stand up in plumes around her face. It was impossible to look away. Before we knew it we were swaying and moaning in a way that we couldn't control. She gave us her self-satisfied, all-knowing smile and we fell back into the stream we had become. We backed away from the fire, away from her.

We lounged, crisscrossed bodies on an abandoned sofa on a hill in the pine forest overlooking the bay. The moon was absent, but our eyes had adjusted to the darkness so we could see each other clearly. We had bushwhacked to get here; the only way to find it was to follow the creek past the sewage treatment plant and the marsh. When the stream began winding downhill towards the south bay, a deer path broke away from the stream and led to "the fort." The boys had brought us here and built a hobo fire to get high and make out. We had been more interested in each other and the fire than the boys, and too content to get up when they moved on.

Not long after the boys left, Liza approached us. She was a mythical creature, with red and gold paint and feathers over her breasts, her neck and even her face. She was small and flexible and she squeezed in between our bodies. It was as if she had already died and was still lingering around, trying to be one of us.

"Do you really want to party?" she said, and produced a handful of colorfully wrapped chocolates.

"How much?" Emily said.

"What is it?" Mary asked.

Liza shook her head as if to say, *It's nothing.*

The chocolate tasted earthy and milky, melting warm and smooth over our tongues.

It was hot, and one by one we took off our shirts, until we were all topless, except Mary.

"Come on, don't be shy," Anaya said.

"I'm not wearing a bra," Mary said.

"I want to see." Anaya tried to lift Mary's shirt, but Mary held her arms down firmly.

"It's okay," Liza said. "We're all friends."

Mary and Liza locked eyes.

"What's the big deal anyway?" Mary asked. She stood up and folded her arms across her stomach.

We waited for something to happen.

"You're the one who's turning this into a big deal."

"Why are you so ashamed of your body?"

"You can be such a prude."

"You don't have anything to hide," Liza said. "Just take off your shirt."

Finally, Mary gave in and removed her t-shirt.

Liza tilted her head, examining Mary. "Magnificent," she said.

We wanted to laugh, but we knew exactly what she meant. Mary was backlit from the fire. Her skin was the color of honey, but translucent in the firelight, with shadows around her biceps and in the line between her breasts. Her breasts were fuller than we'd imagined, perfectly plump with nipples the color and texture of peeled grapes. She had round, upright shoulders and a long flat torso and an innie belly button, like a dark perfect wound at her center.

She held her arms stiffly at her sides. "There, are you happy now?"

"Lift your arms," Liza said.

"You're sick."

Liza smiled. "I want to see it again."

We rose to our knees.

"Don't you see what she's trying to do to us?" Mary asked, directing her attention toward us.

"What does Liza know about you that we don't?" Anaya asked.

"Show us."

Mary lifted her right arm stiffly. On the underside of her arm, reaching from her armpit to the side of her right breast, there was a scar.

Anaya sucked in her breath and it made a whistling sound.

"How'd you get that?" Emily asked.

Mary brought her arm back down. "It's just a cut."

"That looks like it really hurt," Arlo said, reaching out to touch Mary's side.

Mary swatted her arm away, hitting Arlo, not in an intentional way, but a slap nonetheless. "What do you want from me? *Everything?* You won't be happy until you have me inside out."

Something about the way she said, *have me inside out* made us double over laughing. "This is making me have to pee," Emily said. "I'm going to pee right here, I can't get up." Suddenly everything seemed so incredibly funny, we couldn't stand upright.

"We all have wounds. See," Liza said, turning her leg out. A series of cuts formed crosses in the flesh of her inner thigh. She placed her hand between her legs and pressed it there, and when she took it out it was deep red. Then she spread the red substance over her scars. "Now you see it, now you don't."

We stretched out like plants, spreading our roots every which way across the tired sofa with Liza's words looping, porous and toxic in our minds. We didn't notice for some time that Mary was gone.

"Don't panic," Emily said, easing herself up.

"Mary?" we called.

Liza led the way, then Anaya, Emily, and Arlo. We walked in each other's foot prints, so that if someone were to follow us it would seem as if we were only one girl. The ground was thick and sloppy with mud. The sound of rushing water became louder and louder. We descended quickly toward the stream.

In the dark, approaching the saddest hour of night, the stream sounded more like a river. Smaller streams opened up in our path, tributaries all rushing to the main flow. Eventually the streams all met at the bay, and then further along to the river called Mukennetahk.

Liza was treading quickly, surefooted, as though she were walking in her sleep. Soon, we reached the bank of the stream. It was steep and slippery and we stopped just short of the edge. Arlo stepped on the back of Emily's heel, tripping Emily, who landed in a heap of mud at Arlo's feet. The laughing started again, but Liza hushed us.

"There she is."

A fallen tree crossed the stream at its widest point and stood about three feet from the water. At its center Mary straddled the log. The water rushed below, dark and deep, over crooked stones and chasms.

"Mary!" we called. The current swallowed our voices.

Liza continued without us. She stepped out onto the log, staring ahead. Water swirled around a large boulder beneath her and slapped against moss-covered rocks. With every step the red body paint faded from our vision, revealing more of Liza. She proceeded, one foot in front of the other, until she reached Mary. She lowered her now blank, glowing body down beside Mary.

Mary was shaking and breathing in loud gasps. Liza reached out cautiously and wrapped her arms around Mary, enclosing her from behind.

We couldn't hear the things she said, the mumbled apologies, or secret oaths she may have taken. We were frozen at the bank of the stream, black and rushing fiercely, as the two girls embraced. After awhile the sobbing ceased, and there was nothing more to see. We retreated into the forest, away from them.

We were at a house party and the music was thumping. Manic. Everyone moving to keep up with it. We weaved in and out of rooms, out from behind furniture, and puzzled through masses of arms and legs. We searched for Mary but she was drifting, chatting with strangers, kissing boys, bubbling over with lies. She appeared at our sides in one instant and vanished the next. She could have been many girls.

A crowd had formed around the band playing in the basement. There we spotted Liza, glowing white skin with red and gold paint marking her joints, covering her breasts and her sex. She hovered beside Mary, touching her and smiling like she knew we were watching.

We met Gabe at the bar. Gabe was a guy we sometimes fucked, who lived next door to Mary. He liked to hang around us, lighting our cigarettes and telling us stories about places he'd travelled: Cuba, Morocco, Italy. Always laughing, laughing, shifting from foot to foot. Always in motion, with a cigarette between his fingers, gesturing loudly. At first we had been mad about him. We would hike up our skirts and let him in from behind, dancing while his long cock slipped in and out. But he wanted too much. Wanted to kiss our lips, light all our cigarettes, touch Mary's scar.

"What's with the red girl, is she a friend of yours?" he said.

"Why, do you like her?"

Liza and Mary were dancing now, Liza's mouth inches from Mary's ear, her neck. Their arms and hips flowed to the same beat, breathing, perspiring, wet lips sparkling in unison, so that we could barely tell where Liza ended and Mary began.

"She's kind of like Mary, isn't she?" Gabe said.

"Get rid of her."

We walked Mary back to her room. Heels clicking in the dark. Placed two mattresses on the floor and lay them horizontally, then we piled on top with our arms and legs collapsing into one another and fell asleep.

After we had been sleeping for awhile, we heard Mary crying out. Her voice was muffled, distant. We tried to get up, to open our eyes, but we couldn't. We couldn't move our legs. At first we panicked, struggled to rise, but it was like there was someone pressing us back down again and again. Finally we let go and our muscles relaxed. We nestled deeper into the covers, trying to find warmth in the layers of mismatched arms and legs tangled beneath the sheets, but the more we tried to get warm, the colder and damper we became.

When we opened our eyes, Liza appeared wrapped in Mary's plaid comforter and shivering. She was wet, dripping, covered in sea grasses, and so cold.

"That was a mean trick," she said. Her face was bloated and water trickled from the corners of her eyes, nostrils and even out of her mouth as she spoke.

"What are you doing here?"

"This is your memory, not mine." She picked a water chestnut out of her hair and set it between us.

"Where's Mary?"

"Every time we come to this point in the story, Mary thinks, I wish it were me. This time she got her wish."

"Her wish?"

"To be free of you. Cast out." Now Mary was shrieking.

"You can't change history."

"Maybe not, but memories change all the time," Liza said. The sound of Mary's voice was fading now, being swallowed up by the more immediate sound of water dripping.

Liza rung out her hair and then shook it free. The spray smelled of long lying sediment, and left flecks of dirt on our otherwise clean faces.

"What happened to your face?"

"I drowned, remember?" She laughed.

"I'm a fish now," she said. "Have been for awhile."