

SPIDERWEBS and LACE

By Kayla Matters

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author MICHAEL LANGE writes: This brief chronicle of a girl's adolescence is frank, efficient, and captivating. Well-chosen physical details take center stage and draw us into episodic flashes of immediate experience. Most often, the facts – events and bodily sensations – are allowed to speak for themselves, which only renders more impactful (sometimes startlingly so) the explicit glimpses given into the narrator's mental life, the moments when we see not only what she lived and felt, but the conclusions she drew and the story she fashioned for herself even as it unfolded. The simplicity and consistency of sentence structure allow each statement to retain its stark declarative force, while the whole flows with all the naturalness of carefully considered speech. This cadence imparts to the literal, straightforward language an incantatory feel, a deep lyrical power that well suits the emotional subject matter and the personal-legendary mysticism of the coming-of-age experience. The end result is an account that one reads with the same sensation as of recalling a memory – the immediate content has all the naked force of undeniable reality but is wrapped in a dreamlike aura of mythical elevation. This judiciously modulated gravity imparted to the real and mundane is at the core of what makes this writing great. Quote: "He lives four hours away, and her mother will not take her to go see him, so she learns to fall in love with someone that she can't see. She grows accustomed to falling asleep with her cell phone pressed to her ear, hiding under the covers and whispering so her parents can't hear. Her mother starts turning off her Internet at midnight. She falls in love over airwaves and long voicemails. She knows that his favorite color is orange, that he snorts when he laughs, and that his hands are rough and callused, though she cannot feel them."*

Here is a girl at age ten, crying and telling her mother that she is fat. Her Gap jeans will not button over her stomach, exposing the thick white elastic of her Hanes underwear to the world. Her mother is angry, but soothes her while tying the laces of her sneakers for her and suggesting that today she wear sweatpants.

Here is the same girl at age twelve, discovering that she has just gotten her first period, a dark stain marring her purple polka dotted underwear. Her mother is out of town, and she has a birthday sleepover to attend that night. She tells her friends in the basement of Sydney's house in an excited whisper over the air hockey table. That night, she gets a pounding headache, and Sydney's mom gives her an Advil. She swallows her first pill. She soon learns that this headache will be the warning sign of her impending menstruation for years to come. She gets better at swallowing pills.

The girl is thirteen, and finds herself getting fitted for bras with her mother at Victoria's Secret. She feels a stinging sense of embarrassment as a woman with black and white hair wraps a tape measure around her chest. Models with long hair and sleepy eyes stare down at her from every angle, their bodies long and lean. She stills thinks that she is fat.

She is a straight A student, but for this, she is proud to get a D. She knows that this means that some part of her is desirable. She is not a part of the "itty bitty titty committee," like so many of her friends at school. She walks out of the store with a bag full of lacy things wrapped in pink tissue paper, and a reminder that she is pretty in some small way. Her older sister is jealous. She got a B.

She is 13 and has still not kissed a boy. Her friend Mariah kissed her boyfriend Arthur in her basement while they watched 13 Going on 30. She said he tasted like popcorn.

People start to call her a lesbian, a term she is familiar enough with to know that it has negative implications. The school counselor sits her down and asks her if she's ok, if she likes girls? She knows she does not, from the way her heart beats fast and her palms

sweat and her face burns a crimson red anytime Andrew Gardner even looks her way. She knows she likes boys from the way her words tumble and twist anytime she tries to speak to them, from the way their smiles always make her feel like they have just finished making fun of her, the way she always feels ugly in front of them. Andrew tells her that her sister is pretty.

Over the summer, she goes to sleep-away camp, where she meets a sixteen-year-old boy who holds her hand during movie nights and calls her beautiful. She has just turned fourteen, and when she excitedly tells her mother during her weekly phone call home that he has asked her to the dance, her mother says that he is too old. She is secretly pleased that her mother says this, feels a burning satisfaction knowing that she is breaking some rule, stepping over a line she never knew she had to toe. The word “beautiful” pierces her like the boy’s jade green eyes.

He tells her that his favorite movie is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and she watches it in her bottom bunk one rainy afternoon. When the floating red lips appear and start singing about the science fiction double feature, her skin tingles. When she gets back to school that fall and tells her friends that her new favorite movie is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, they are confused. But she is happy that she knows about the Time Warp. It means that she is different, that she is special.

She is in high school, and has still not kissed a boy. Her best friend starts dating a senior boy, and does things with him she swore she would never do until college. On the weekends, her friends gather in garages and basements, drinking cheap beers from cans and stolen vodka mixed with Gatorade. She is never invited to these “parties,” but she sees the evidence on Facebook the next day, bottles hastily edited out of photos. She gets

a hard lump in her throat when she sees these pictures of her friends, crop-topped and holding sweaty cans, eyes focused on some unseen object of affection.

At night, she lays awake in her twin bed and thinks of all the ways she could kill herself. She debates hanging herself with a belt versus overdosing on pills, as if she were mulling over tomorrow's grocery list. Eventually she decides against it, either way it would be painful, and what if it didn't work? She does however, decide that if a car were to come barreling towards her, she wouldn't move out of the way. When her therapist asks her if she has suicidal thoughts, she shakes her head no and swallows away that same hard lump in her throat.

She discovers stretch marks running down the side of her thighs, insidious and thin as spider webs, and realizes that she has never hated herself more.

She has just turned 15, and is back at summer camp. Somehow, she has caught the eye of a beautiful Italian boy. He is tan and tall, with shaggy hair that sweeps over his forehead. He has the longest eyelashes she's ever seen, and when he looks at her, her whole body goes tingly. He whispers things to her in Italian while they slow dance and he kisses her outside of her bunk. At the end of the summer he gives her the necklace that he has worn all summer. It is some foreign coin strung on a thin cord, and he tells her that it was his great grandfather's when he fought in the war, though he doesn't specify which war. He ties it around her and she shivers as his fingertips graze the nape of her neck.

That same summer, the girl meets the boy who will be her first love. His name is Danny, and he will declare over crackly phone lines at three am that he is falling in love with her, and on Valentines Day, he will write her a French love poem. This boy will teach her what real love feels like, how it makes her bones ache from missing him, and

her heart feel like it is ten sizes too big, in her stomach and her throat and her chest, everywhere at once. He lives four hours away, and her mother will not take her to go see him, so she learns to fall in love with someone that she can't see. She grows accustomed to falling asleep with her cell phone pressed to her ear, hiding under the covers and whispering so her parents can't hear. Her mother starts turning off her Internet at midnight. She falls in love over airwaves and long voicemails. She knows that his favorite color is orange, that he snorts when he laughs, and that his hands are rough and callused, though she cannot feel them.

That spring, she finds herself overcome with feelings of panic. These episodes come on suddenly, and make her arms and legs go numb. Everyday she is awakened with a racing heart, her shirt drenched in a cold sweat. She throws up every day, and she begins to survive on a diet of coffee-flavored yogurt and ginger ale. She starts sleeping on the floor of her parent's bedroom, and there she spends her days, blinds drawn and lights off, tangled in sheets and watching the same three episodes of *America's Got Talent*. She stops leaving her house and wears only sweat-soaked t-shirts and ratty pajama pants, her hair pulled back, greasy and unwashed. When she catches sight of herself in the mirror, she is taken aback. Here is a girl at age 15, pale and sick. She has dark circles under her eyes and her shirt is torn and stained. She weighs herself to see that she is ninety-eight pounds, and she is relieved. For once in her life, she doesn't think that she is fat.

That summer, for reasons she still doesn't understand, she kisses another boy. When he tells Danny, she cannot look in his eyes, instead staring down at the picnic table that they are sitting on, picking at the chipped paint and hating herself. He tells her that he loves her anyway. She realizes that she is a terrible person.

This other boy does not love her, but when he touches her, she feels like her skin is on fire. They will date for two months before he dumps her in his school parking lot after she traveled three hours to see him.

She is sixteen and still a virgin. She is the last of her friends to remain in this uncelebrated club, though secretly she is fine with it. When she was younger, she said that she was saving herself for marriage, as she got a little older, she amended that she would wait until college. It turns out she will wait until college, though this is due more to timing than to any premeditation on her part.

That spring, she meets a boy who is in the grade above her. They have mutual friends but she has never paid any particular attention to him until the day she decides that she thinks he is cute. He takes her out for sushi and then they make out in his basement. This becomes a twice, if not thrice weekly, occurrence. One day, in the middle of school, he takes her into a custodial closet and kisses her among mops and the powder that they use to clean up vomit. He goes out to dinner with her and her family and in the dark backseat of the car, holds her hand. This simple gesture makes her body pulse with thrill. She is in a play and he comes to every performance, bearing flowers and taking photos of her. She does not know if this means that he is her boyfriend, but she does know that no boy has ever been this kind to her. Once, he drives her forty minutes to go see her friend in a play and pays for both of their tickets. He holds her hand for the whole show and kisses her during intermission, just quickly and sweetly. Once, he calls her while he's driving just because he wants to hear her voice.

They do not have sex, but he touches her in places previously uncharted. When he does this, she feels nothing, and wonders if she is broken.

She loses her virginity at the end of her freshman year of college at three in the afternoon. This boy is 24, and he wears a leather jacket and smokes cigarettes. The first time he kissed her, he asked permission first.

She is 20 now, and understands that boys like her for her breasts, for all of the curves and sloping lines of her body. She gathers data like a scientist, learning that she has a nice butt, and that boys are attracted to her short hair because it is foreign and exciting.

She still calls them boys, not men, because she knows that at any moment, they could flash her one of those smiles that make her feel like they have just finished making fun of her. She knows that if any of them were to meet her sister, they wouldn't want her at all. She remembers how Elliot LaGuardia teased her about her combat boots.

Whenever she is with a boy, she remains painfully aware of the way her stomach juts out when she sits.

Two weeks ago a boy kissed her like it was essential to his survival. She let him into her bed, where he clung to her while they slept. He told her that he wasn't ready for a relationship.

This is a phrase commonly trotted out by the boys she lets into her bed, and one she has never fully understood. She does not know what constitutes "ready," only that none of them have ever been it. She imagines that they say this as a way to soften the blow, to avoid saying, "You're good enough for a fuck, but I'm not going to emotionally invest in you."

She daydreams about her wedding to some faceless man, who is tall and thin and wears glasses and is probably Jewish. When she shares these daydreams with her mother,

she always replies, “Now you just need to find someone to marry,” in a tone that leads her to believe that her mother does not think he exists.

Sometimes she resigns herself to the idea of being alone. She imagines her life as the fun aunt to her sister’s inevitable children. She sees her one bedroom apartment in Manhattan that she will share with her tabby cat, the books that will line the walls, and the aching emptiness that will permeate the space. She likes to be alone, but she hates feeling lonely.

She has never been on a real date, a date where you fret over getting ready and the boy picks you up and you make polite conversation over dinner and hope for a kiss goodnight. No one has ever thought to ask her, thought that she might enjoy anxiously picking out outfits and straining for conversation. She is not the type of girl that you ask on dates, she realizes, but rather, the kind of girl you invite to your dorm room and politely show the door after you have let out that short moan of release and cleaned yourself up.

She has been kissed in stairwells, in janitor closets, in dark basements, and in tool sheds, but she has never been kissed on a front stoop or in broad daylight. No one has ever kept a photo of her and them in their wallet, as their phone background, in a frame next to their bed. She does not have someone she calls first with good news, besides her mother. She is 20 years old and has never belonged to someone in the way that most people do.

Here is a girl at age 20, crying alone in her dorm room. The same lacy things from when she was 13 are in her drawer, along with the constant refrain “You are fat and ugly and untalented, no one will ever love you, it wouldn’t even matter if you disappeared

forever.” Some days, she is able to silence this voice, to muffle it with music or laughter or expensive clothes. But most days, it comes creeping back, insidious as the spider webs running down her thighs.

Here is a girl, sitting in a diner alone. She reads a weathered paperback book while she waits. A sign on the opposite wall catches her eye. It is drawing of a young boy, cherub-like, running through a field while the sun shines down on him. Below him, written in white curly letters, it says, “It’s not going to get any better when you grow up.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *‘Spiderwebs and Lace’ was written while I was in college, and in the middle of a rendezvous with a boy that felt dangerous and secret. He was in my creative writing class and we would hold hands or nudge knees in class sitting next to each other. This story is an exploration of my constant feeling of “not right,” like I was a jagged edge that didn’t fit. It is inspired by and dedicated to any young woman who has ever fiercely felt like she didn’t belong, and has stumbled forward anyway.*

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