

NAKED

By Elizabeth Kilani

WHY WE LIKE IT: *If it's true you can love something without completely understanding it, then we love 'Naked' and Elizabeth's Kilani's radical roof-raising approach to fiction. There is so much going on here it's like finding yourself in a Fun House room swamped by a sea of balloons that reach to the ceiling. But it's also a house of mirrors and maybe even a little bit House of Usher. There is honest to goodness heart inside the art here and powerful fuck you moments that are just well...spellbinding. Enraging, engrossing and written in outsider prose that's third degree burn. More, please.*

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'Don't threaten me with love,' by Billy Holiday, 'let's just go walking in the rain.'
:'I'm like a bird, I wanna fly away, I don't know where my soul is. I don't know where my home is. But baby all I need for you to know is...)- Nelly Furtado

Everybody calls it the eight year itch or is it six or seven, but it's not like I have an issue with commitment or anything. If I did I wouldn't have had a fiancée at 23. I fell in love and it was perfect! But maybe it's like Nelly Furtado sings, 'why do all good things come to an end?' So..... while some serial daters note the tone of the relationship and are ready and waiting for them and break up at

the poignantly sad moments before they have a chance to get dumped. Mutual, irreconcilable differences they call it of course which is more concealing than revealing and is rather political. A nice legal jargon to seal a less than abrupt end of circumstances mitigated by life and two people who were supposed to love each other forever when they made their covenant vows. I was ready for it. I loved him. I would never marry anybody that I didn't love.

I come back from the cemetery and the security guard catches me. He gives me his knowing look: Three times this month, it is not yet his anniversary. Trouble in Eros paradise? They always know. Every time that I am about to break up with someone I come at least three times. They say bad things come in threes and by 4 it is irreparable. I give him a suppressed smile and he gives me a look of penetration. I don't even know why they need a security guard on the grounds, the place is already locked, do they think that there are some necrophilics or witch doctors willing to trade sums for pieces of body parts like kidneys, or amateur doctors who want to do experiments with the bodies? When we lowered his coffin it was about six feet under. He wasn't the kind of person to get a full make up ceremony for his funeral but he still looked so young and alive as if he always was. That is how I remember him in my mind. The boy who didn't need a touch up even when dead to be buried. He would always be forever young, fresh like spring in my eyes.

He passes my polite smile with a look of sympathy. But this man keeps in company with the dead, which I suppose I do also. If I keep commemorating all my dead relationships, I am cementing them here. But he is not a shrine. He is my altar. The place I lay to rest every dead relationship at. I walk out to the glass union which is the short code we call for our online magazine, but we never let our editor get a peep of the word. 'You have that look again,' my colleague passes me one arm of coffee. She takes a sip of her own thoughtfully.

'I don't have time for your amateur psychology.' 'Oh, I boast of no such ambitions. But your next boyfriend is liberating the phone with noises, with sounds and shrieks that I know not what. I swear I always know when it's him. It's like he is crying out through the cords.' I shake my head. It was a bad idea to not give him my work number but let him know where I was working. I may

as well have just stamped a love note exclaiming ‘call me!’ This one has been really hard, because it’s already lasted 8 months. And I can only keep the strain for seven. So I have had three weeks to kick off a bad habit and one week concession. And I still haven’t done the deed.

The editor runs into our cabinets by the open workspace facing me. Right off the onset I feel nervous. She breaks into a smile. ‘Good job. Good job Amy. We’ve got a merger and contract online. The major publisher in Abidjan Cote d’Ivoire wants to sign us up!’ ‘And we’re not even French!’ My colleague feels the need to add. ‘It’s called a global village and cosmopolitan international identity.’ ‘Just as long as it’s not brokerage for global citizenship or anything. What does this guy want with us anyway. Weren’t they the ones profiled by the European French Alliance.’ ‘Yes. And this is our foot in. Finally, we’re not just an underground, non-mainstream visionary.’ ‘If it seems too good to be true then it probably is.’ I nod looking at our editor apprehensively. ‘I don’t care if you are making a deal with the devil, I want you to get that contract.’

‘Me? What do I have to with this?’ ‘Smokey, cloud eyed girl. We have three employees and two secretaries running a limited magazine in this dump. If this man wants to meet you for dinner to sign the contract you will help additionally polishing his shoes with your saliva.’ I sense the concerns in our worker’s eyes. And looking at our editor I see her desperation. I follow her on cue to our office. She is punching sheets and stapling them in a mesmerized possessed frenzy like she is a medium following the rituals while lost in abstract apprehensions. ‘Sit.’

‘Amy. You’re young. So I guess you never have to think about finances or bills as you watch your kids grow older and life pass you by.’ What? ‘But this magazine is all I have. It’s my dream. I have invested everything into it to the point where I neglect my own partner. And it’s just wonderful that he is angelic and forbearing. I sleep, wake up, dream and eat for this business. And it’s not for some arbitrary ambition but because I really believe in this place. Last month I asked my partner to borrow me some money to pay the rent three months due for this seedy dive. Next month will probably be the same if we can keep this place afloat. I wanted to die! I feel like those NGO’s who are every

accumulating more expenses. And heavy gloss is not cheap, you know, even if that's what the paper needs. With this we have the funds for print and publication material and the publicity and awareness to go digital.'

'I don't even know this guy.' 'You're not going to marry him and have his babies. You're just going for dinner. And then give him the contract.' 'I feel like a prostitute when you put it like that. Debbie's writing is good. Jenny's even better. Why is he specifically targeting me? This doesn't seem like a good idea. It's not going to work.' 'It's only a bad idea if it doesn't work.' 'None of my ideas work.' 'Then you've got a lot of bad ideas, 'the kind only a very intelligent person could believe in and invest in.' ' 'What does that even mean?' She stops stamping. 'It means that it is going to work so it is a good idea.' 'I don't feel good about this.' She looks at me then I see tears in her eyes. 'We're going to go under. 6 months at best. This is all we have.' 'It's just cultural pollution,' I stall, 'we'll get there.' 'We don't have time to get there. The lease and the creditors can't wait.' I look at her and she notes my consent.

'Please wear something formal!' she calls to my retreating back. 'And stop wearing ties. You look like a Julia Roberts wannabe hooker in the nineties. It is dead already, let the fashion phase die! Stop torturing it with a slow, long protruding death!' I get home and now have to add to the task of breaking it off with for short we will call him Guy, I then have to attend a meeting with a formidable merger giant. I pick up the phone and eye my wallpaper silently. Four rings. 'I know you were waiting ____ (guy)' 'What happened Amy, what happened to us?' 'You were fine. It's all me. You're the longest relationship I've ever had since.....' 'Why fix what's not broken then?'

Because it's too easy Chad. And I know you are not the one. Because every time I want to suppress the grief you are a convenient excuse. Because I don't want to make you an accessory to my repressions and self-manipulations. Because I am not in love with you. And by eight months I should know that I don't have feelings for someone. But all I say is, 'I'm sorry, Chad.' He drops the phone. Another goodbye. And the worst part is this liberated feeling, like I've escaped the gas chambers. This is so wrong.

I dress in a haze, half appraising of my appearance but more pessimistic in absent mindedness. This is not insight, back burner or abstract thinking, this is hell. I meet him in the hallway and I only know immediately because we are the only ones for the evening and we booked early. Good, the faster this is to get done, the better. ‘You’re the Amy. I’ve read a lot of your work.’ I consent with a nod and look at my plate. The place is beautiful and the atmosphere lovely but I cannot enjoy it. I feel a stillness in the air and atmosphere and I feel a little stiff.

‘Let me make this easy for you. Ease your apprehensions. Here he is the contract. Signed, sealed delivered. I only want the pleasure of your company.’ I look at him, knowing that I am still compelled to stay, even when he has released me. But he has kind wise eyes, which make him very sensible and I know that he is respectable. He is a gentleman, graceful. ‘I uhhmm, I’m just struggling to understand why you wanted me here so badly in the first place.’

‘You know, it’s funny. I built this company on instincts. Just a stupid detail. And it created an empire. Well,’ he smiles ruefully, ‘at least the marketing and advertising side of it.’ I smile for the first time in the evening. ‘It was the philosophy volume, I think that did it. On your editions and series of Social constructs.’ ‘You are a little late, that was three years ago.’ ‘But the part about flattery and praise I was hooked. I went reading laughing mildly to myself thinking that I knew all of the mistakes you could make. And you made none of them. I took a mirror and transport to your world that day.’ ‘It’s in the cloud zone. Like your digital collections.’

And still he carefully constructs phases to goad me into talking. Or maybe I just have this hypnotized effect from the one glass of silly wine but I can’t stop talking for too long. His eyes are silently appraising me but bearing no scrutiny. ‘Northanger Abbey? Was that Jane Austen.’ ‘Yes, but I know it very ill.’ Great I am too happy if I am talking like this. I look at the wine glass accusingly and suspiciously, my thoughts clouded. ‘Hangman.’ ‘What?’ ‘We used to play that.’ ‘I know what hangman is- just give me the schema trail.’ ‘I thought the best part was clicking in the last word.’ He sighs. ‘Seeing you here today reminded me that it’s not.’

‘It’s getting late. I think that I should go.’ ‘No. Wait. There’s a reggae evening here, I thought you’d like it.’ I feel like Cinderella getting ready to slip off to her soiled clothes. I quicken my goodbyes, just so I can float by without the clock striking twelve. And the next morning I force myself to wake early to google his name on the internet and social media. Checklist. Not married. Not gay. No fetishes (as of obvious presence). Really into community. He’s joining in with the CBD program- to plough! To plough! Soft spot for animals. Educated- and not even the mainstream kind, he is really aware! He has such presence. And he is an A list guy- what could be wrong with this man.

After the shower, I get ready to be a couch potato. So I wear a thin flaky robe that is a veiled gown. It is so hot and I am sweating and much more comfortable wearing the sheer garment over my underwear. I hear a knocking, gentle thud, only to see him outside the door through the window. I curse and run to the bedroom. And change into a tank top and jeans desperately frantically quickly. I open the door.

He looks at me seriously with penetrating eyes. Then smiles with knowing eyes. ‘Your top is on the wrong side.’ ‘OOOhhh, uhm.’ I try. ‘Is this an official business visit?’ ‘Well, you left something.’ He hands me my scarf. ‘Goodbye Cinderella.’ ‘Wait....so the merger is complete. Why?’ ‘Sorry, I don’t understand your question.’ ‘Why is such a big company taking on us?’ ‘Maybe you are not as small as you claim to be. At least, not to me.’ He looks back at me. ‘I will see you again,’ as in a very definitive sense.

For the next few weeks I start singing songs like, ‘You make me feel like a natural woman,’ and, ‘If I love again, I could lose again. but it’s a chance that I’d rather take. I need to do this for me. If I love then I could lose completely.’ Not that I need to sing to get him in and out of my thoughts. I just feel, yes, the world is a little obsessed. he is one of the most penetrating men I have ever known. I feel like I am sinking into his gravity.

Then the sinking feels like quicksand. We start communicating through correspondence and every time that he is in town. Which is a lot more than I could have supposed, you may read your own meaning. And before I know it it is

a year like this and I am running scared. I have doubled up on my resistance to dating for two years, and now it is a whole annual period. I start getting listless and pangs of pain. my mother said that I never grieved properly for my lost fiancée but in that stage and phase of bereavement if I ad cried anymore I would have drowned in tears and an ocean of depression. We each make regularities and entropy with our brain.

And then it gets bad when my mind tries to freeze me into an ultimatum. Him or Bryan, which death would I have preferred to heal better from? It crumples me inside because I feel deadlocked and grid locked. My brain suspends in a state of perpetual emergency and crisis. And the worst part is, it makes my writing more edgy. My editor drops my article into my desk. Her script in a calligraphy like writing states. 'Perfect, requiring little editing. Whatever you are doing, keep doing it.'

One evening I feel lost in a trance. Now even writing as betrayed me as my thoughts have. I have reached the perfect balance of chaos trying to juggle death and life and reconciling it to myself. And I hear him knock on the door. And I know it is him. I know his tentative knocks. I rise up, feeling like I am going to the graveyard all over again. he looks at me immediately sensing something. 'What's wrong,' he says gently.

'I'm sorry. This cannot in no way work out.' I shouldn't have let this happen.' I fell in love, Bryan. He looks at me seeing my mind going back to those dark places, me burying my heart right next to Bryan's grave. 'Amy,' he says, struggling. I feel my consciousness slipping to the moment of hearing Bryan's gone and seeing his dead body. I see myself churning over to a lock of hades were I can be beside death and grief can no longer hurt me. I feel my emotions raising in affect arousal and heightened alarms like a bell rising sharper and sharper.

'Amy, listen to me,' he says urgently. 'Don't go back to that world. I'm here. I'm life. I am your love. Don't make me watch you die. Please Amy, come back to me.' I feel my eyes wavering, trying to separate Bryan and death from everything. And then I bury him again, and close the shades. Goodbye Bryan. I will always love you. And it takes all the faith I have and courage I have to look

I was twelve years old when I read Sweet Valley and Friends for the whole day finishing it in a row. I was in love as a child from the beginning with concepts and constructs. I thought every theory was golden and could be operationalized. My English teachers beefed me with books like 'Lord of the Flies' and 'the Catcher's rye' and 'The diary of Anne Frank,' and it was combustion- I was inspired.

But still.....these things simmer for me. I watched my first mini-series of the 6 parts of BBC's Pride and Prejudice when I was in my final high school senior year- and I was hooked to Jane Austen. Her wit- many times dry, her affective flirtatious almost, satirical almost, intellectual mode that still works 3 centuries later in contemporary life scopes. And Oscar Wilde's collective works- alluring, cryptic, critical, challenging, aiding a sort of magnifying glass to look at the world. I would fight antagonistic forces relentlessly with cinematography and films like 'The Counte of Monte Cristo and the movie about the serial killer in the film Seven.

It may have seen as though I was a train wreck of drama prostitution but it was not so.....I studied pathology and criminology to reconcile health psychology and social ecology working for functional developed societies. I cruised through Criminology only because I was sweeping notes and codes of Law and Order. I ate the abnormal psychology textbook because every moment it was feeding me to a culture of learning what sane and functioning meant – the way that my high school teacher Miss Robb used to preach, 'Up is not down, big is not small, dark is not light' etcetera. It was a whirlwind and through artists like Jeffery Deaver, Catherine Ryan Hyde, Fiona Gibson, Katherine Applegate, Emma McLaughlin, Atthol Fugard, Chinua Achebe- it was all like intellectual food for the soul.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Finished high school senior at a public school located near Rhema Bible Church. Dabbled in Sunday School teaching, prayer meetings, home fellowship gatherings for only 5 leap years since becoming a Christian which will be her 20th year 'phase' as was cited by roommates in dorm boarding. It was in this Christian gatherings she gained valuable lessons on love, intimacy, sharing and bonding and it was the perfect fraternization for an inexperienced solvent introvert.

Was a very late bloomer in romance and ironically got married at 23. She was always visiting orphanages and homes and enjoyed Christmases with the church handicapped recipients of homes and clinics noting the curious link and bonding with a marginalized society so much like hers. and every place

cemented the love and bond with the woman she loved most in the world. Her beloved grandmother passed away in the most dignified, stately composed and mild course and the trial weathered a mosaic blue pill of experiences- it was literally like learning and starting to live again from the grave.

In special victims unit and support groups she was blessed by a wonderful circle of the most supportive, kind, empathetic and sensitive soft and delicately patient friends who were like her caretakers and I treasured them.

As a single mother she is blessed with a very exicatory, dramatic child who aggravates her dynamically in his most ambitious level- and his fierce argumentation has challenged her as much as the divide and negotiations with a mother who would have either created an abnormally neurotic child or a hysterical writer.

She got her main degree in UNISA for Communications after studying Public Relations in media studies in community College and BA Journalism (of which she did not get on at all, as a PR liaison or Journalist) and was happily settled in Contract Research after her second major in BA modules of Applied Psychology. She worked for the head branch coordinator of a system overseeing NGO's, NPO's and CBO's and PBO's in some government judiciaries capacitations in social development, community development data mining for infrastructure and a hybrid of resources and bridging networks. Notable mostly youth development, income generation, education and employment objectives in a strictly research and data analyst capacity. A most blessed 8 years of fielding after her first branch as intern using research methodology and questionnaire data design for the community services to measure impact of service delivery of NGO literacy, awareness campaigns and integration in community. The feedback for recommendations and improvement were not so heavily invested or extended.

But everytime I think about writing and the people who inspired me, there is a tribe and village and community. Still, it is always for my grandmother, my first love, my last love, my baby, the Jadene brunette sweetheart I tenderly regard as a twin sharing my birthday- whom I was tempted and obliged to think of as the most beautiful, feminine, softest girl in the world second only to Kaka, the women at my support group outpatients and inpatients unit , and the children in the orphanage who prayed like angels every morning and lived like perfect creatures all teaching me the sober method of being marginalized from society and bearing it with grace and dignity. A lesson I am still trying to learn.

She celebrates her 38th year birthday in August 25th

I hope this is sufficient.