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Girls Like Me

by Teresa Burns Murphy

I knew my mother had been watching me, but until she spoke I didn't realize she was searching for just the right words to prepare me for what an evening with the Lebrayasons might be like.

"You going out with Jeremy tonight?"

I looked up and saw her leaning against the doorway that led into my room. The gold chain she wore around her neck glimmered in the afternoon sun, and I noticed that today a unicorn pendant had replaced her signature rose.

"Yeah. We're going to have supper with his parents."

My mother walked over to the bed and looked at the sleeveless black dress I'd laid out.

"That what you're going to wear?"

I looked down at the dress and said, "Yeah. They're real classy people, Mom. I thought this would be right."

"You know, honey, it's just a few weeks until you graduate. And then you'll be going off to college. You'll make new friends. It'll be like a fresh start."

I kept my eyes on the dress. I knew what my mother was thinking. I'd dated other boys from so-called good families before, and it had always turned out the same. I didn't inherit my mother's shapely figure, but I had gotten her breasts, which looked misplaced on my otherwise slender body. My breasts always got me in trouble with the boys I dated, most recently Rodney Grayson. He had wanted to touch them, caress them, claim them. When I refused, he pulled away from me.

"Jeremy's different, Mom. His parents aren't even from Arkansas. They're not like other people. His mom's an artist."

The familiar smell of my mother's honeysuckle perfume saturated the air.

"I think that dress is real nice, honey. You have a good time. I'll be over at Troy's if you need anything."

When I heard the storm door slam, I looked out my bedroom window. I watched my mother back out of the driveway, already wishing the conversation we'd just had could have been different and wondering what someone like me would have to say to the Lebrayasons.

"Secular parents," Jeremy had called them one afternoon when we were studying for one of Ms. Neill's killer English tests. He described them as loose, but I knew Jeremy wasn't talking about the kind of loose my mother was. Tom and Melissa Lebrayason were free-spirited. Accepting.

I slipped into my dress, then laced my ears with sparkling studs and shiny rings.

For the bottom holes, I chose a pair of dangly silver earrings that jangled when I moved my head ever so slightly. Picking up my tiny black purse, I mulled over my choice of shoes. For a second I considered going barefoot. None of my shoes seemed right for an evening with the Lebrayasons. Instead, I put on last year's black sandals even though the right sole was worn all the way through. I'd keep my feet on the floor, hoping they wouldn't notice my shoes.

Jeremy picked me up at 6:15. Supper, or dinner, as Jeremy called it would be at 7:00. He drove an orange Kharmann Ghia that had been his mother's car when she was in high school. On the outside, the car was as shiny as a licked lollipop, but inside, the upholstery was worn and the clear scent of Jeremy seemed to intensify the odor of cigarettes smoked a long time ago. As we pulled out of the driveway, I avoided looking at my house. The air conditioner was jutting from our living room window, still braced for winter in its visquine wrapper. No arty wind chimes graced the front porch, only a couple of aluminum lawn chairs with thread-bare backs.

I'd seen Jeremy's house on the days I left school at 2:00 and walked downtown to my job as a wait-



ress at the Moonflower Cafe. It was an old stucco house that had been fixed up and painted a light teal. A screened-in front porch stretched all the way across it. One day, as I was passing by, I caught a glimpse of Mrs. Lebrayason sitting on the porch in a wicker rocking chair with her face turned toward an easel.

I looked over at Jeremy. His eyes were fixed on the street ahead, and he gripped the steering wheel as if he were afraid of letting go.

I said, "Have you thought about what you're going to do this summer?"

"I guess I'll read as many of the books as I can on that reading list Ms. Neill gave us. And I'll go with my parents up to Connecticut to see my grandmother Lebrayason and to Rhode Island to see my mom's parents. Brown's orientation is in mid-July, so I'll probably just stay on for that and then fly back down to Arkansas when it's over. How about you?"

"I'll probably work as much as I can. And read."

We both laughed. How much we read had become a standing joke and was what brought us together. We both wanted to major in English and eventually become college professors, but Jeremy was going to Brown University, a school I'd never heard of until I met him. After he told me about it, I looked it up in the encyclopedia. It took me a long time to tell him I was going to Arkansas State.

When we got to Jeremy's house, Mrs. Lebrayason was in the front yard cutting flowers and putting them in a basket. She was wearing pearl gray sandals and a backless dress the color and texture of weathered clothespins. As we approached her, she stood up and turned toward us. It's funny how before you meet someone, you fashion them in your mind to look a certain way. I'd thought about Mrs. Lebrayason for weeks, and she was nothing like my vision of her. Her face, framed with blunt cut hair, looked as if someone had pushed hard on her cheeks and skull, leaving too little space for her eyes. After Jeremy introduced us, she held out a slender-fingered white hand to

me. I knew from last year's stay at Governor's School that sophisticated women shook hands with each other, so I eased my damp hand in her direction.

She gripped my hand and said, "Nice to meet you." She had a northern accent, but it wasn't the nasal variety I had often heard on TV sitcoms. It came from her chest, almost soothing, except that her eyes seemed to constrict when she spoke to me.

"Nice to meet you too," I said.

Mrs. Lebrayason released my hand, then picked up the basket she was using to collect her flowers. "Let's go around and see if we can find Tom. I think I have enough flowers for a decent arrangement."

Jeremy and I followed her down a stone walkway. I tried hard to catch his eye, but he was looking away from me. As soon as we got inside the gate, I saw Jeremy's father standing beside a fancy fish pool. He was holding an empty wine glass.

"Ah, you're here," he called, beginning to walk in our direction.

"Tom Lebrayason," he said, extending his hand to me. "You must be Danita. Jeremy has told us so much about you."

I shook hands with Mr. Lebrayason and said, "Nice to meet you."

Mrs. Lebrayason brushed past her husband and said, "I'll be getting things set up." She took off toward a picnic table draped with a pale yellow cloth. We watched as she set down her basket of flowers and began snipping off their stems.

Mr. Lebrayason shoved his hands in the pockets of his loose-fitting shorts and shifted his eyes from Mrs. Lebrayason to me. His head was bald to a shine, and he wore what hair remained in a pig-



Photo (detail) by Alanna Bradley



tail. A tiny diamond stud was stuck in the lobe of his right ear and a gold ring dangled from his left. I couldn't help thinking that with a little more make-up, Mrs. Lebrayason could have passed for one of the unconventional country club set, but Mr. Lebrayason looked like he belonged elsewhere.

Mr. Lebrayason cleared his throat and said in a voice that seemed to startle him, "Are you guys about ready to eat? I think we just about have everything set."

"Sure."

"Great."

Jeremy's voice collided with mine, and Mr. Lebrayason looked at us for a second as if he were trying to decide who said what.

"I'll just run inside and get the entree."

Jeremy and I walked over to the picnic table. It was spread with wooden bowls, iron stone platters, china plates, and silver utensils.

"I hope you like eating alfresco," Mrs. Lebrayason said.

"Yes, I love it," I said, trying not to reveal my uncertainty as to what exactly it was that I was going to eat.

About that time Mr. Lebrayason came back out of the house carrying a large platter of pasta covered with vegetables in a sauce and topped off with something bright green.

Jeremy said, "I also hope you like vegetables. Mel and Tom are vegetarians."

I smiled and said something about vegetables being great. The colorful salad nestled in a shiny wooden bowl and the platter Mr. Lebrayason was passing to me made me think how different these vegetables looked from the fried okra and purple hull peas swimming in salt pork grease my mother fixed.

"Eggplant Fettuccine Marsala. My specialty," Mr. Lebrayason announced as I took the platter from his hands.

"Looks delicious," I said, spooning some of the vegetables onto my plate and praying that nobody had noticed that I hadn't taken any of the pasta.

"Jeremy tells us you're planning to major in English," Mr. Lebrayason said.

"Yes. I really enjoy reading. I'm trying to read all the books on the list Ms. Neill gave us before school starts this fall."

Mrs. Lebrayason lifted her fork and held it posed while she said, "You must have found a list like that invaluable in your preparation for college."

"Oh yes. Ms. Neill has really helped me a lot." Then I noticed that both Jeremy and Mr. Lebrayason were looking at each other, their eyes locked as if to protect some family secret.

"Oh, Jeremy," Mrs. Lebrayason said, "Did I tell you Sylvia Brennick's daughter, Julianna, is working in admissions at Brown now?"

"No." Jeremy said, returning his attention to the food he was eating.

"Maybe you two can get together this summer during orientation." Not waiting for Jeremy to respond, Mrs. Lebrayason turned to me and said, "And where are you going to school this fall, Danita?"

I'd just taken a bite of bread, and while I was chewing it, Jeremy said, "She's going to school here in Arkansas, Mel."

"Oh," said Mrs. Lebrayason, "Your parents must be very proud."

Before I could say anything, Jeremy asked me what I was reading right now. When I said *Jude the Obscure*, Jeremy and Mr. Lebrayason seemed to compete with each other to see who could ask the most questions about it. I tried to sprinkle my answers with details I thought the Lebrayasons would find impressive. But everything I said seemed phony and unimportant.

After dessert, Mr. Lebrayason said, "Jeremy, why don't you take Danita up and show her the art studio. Let her see some of the things you've been working on. Mel and I didn't make too much of a mess in the kitchen, so it shouldn't take us long to clean up."

Already getting up from her seat, Mrs. Lebrayason looked at her husband and said, "I'll go with them. I didn't realize Danita was inter-



ested in art.”

“I don’t know that much about it, but I’d love to see yours and Jeremy’s work.”

“Mom’s really good,” Jeremy said, and I caught a trace of my own unease in his voice.

I thanked Mr. Lebrayason for the meal, then folded my napkin and laid it on the bench where I’d been sitting, just as the etiquette book I’d checked out of the library said was proper. I followed Jeremy and his mother up some wooden steps and inside a door that led us into a small sitting room enclosed in glass all the way across the back. I looked around at the fat slip-covered chairs and couch. There were shelves filled with books on one wall, and magazines and books were spread out across the marble-top tables that were next to the chairs and couch. The walls were painted a light chocolate and handhooked rugs were scattered across the hardwood floors.

We passed from this room into a well-lit kitchen cluttered with mixing bowls and pots and fragrant with olive oil and garlic. A dimly lit hallway led to a flight of steep stairs carpeted with a plum-colored stair runner. When we got to the top of the stairs, there were more shelves filled with books and another hallway with three possible doors. Mrs. Lebrayason led us to a room that looked out over the front lawn. There were four long windows across one wall and two more windows on each side so that even though it was almost dusk, light streamed into the room.

Mrs. Lebrayason pointed to a series of canvases lined up against the wall. Painted on each of them was a small-breasted, wide-hipped woman with straight black hair reclining on a couch. “I’ve been working on nudes for the last six months, but I decided to paint a portrait of Jeremy this spring, sort of as a graduation present to Tom and me. So we don’t forget what he looks like when he goes off to college.”

Jeremy laughed nervously and glanced at me as if to apologize for the pictures spread out along the wall. I felt sure Mrs. Lebrayason was purposefully drawing attention to the paintings in an at-

tempt to embarrass me, and I smiled hard, trying not to give her that satisfaction.

“Here it is,” Mrs. Lebrayason said, and I realized she was inviting me to look at the painting.

I stepped around to take a look, feeling relieved when I saw that Jeremy was fully clothed. He was dressed in a white shirt I’d never seen him wear, and I noticed that Mrs. Lebrayason had brushed away Jeremy’s acne and tamed his curly black hair. Nice things to do, but I didn’t like the painting.

I said, “Oh, this is so good.”

“Thank you. We’re thinking of hanging it in the living room over the fireplace.”

Jeremy showed me some of the things he’d painted. Most were black and white sketches that reminded me of designs I’d seen in art appreciation class on pictures of Egyptian urns. I complimented them, and we were about to go back downstairs when I saw a painting of an angel with brilliant yellow hair and rainbow-colored wings arched gracefully over her milky robe.

“I really like this one.”

Before Jeremy could respond, his mother said, “I think Jeremy has talent if he’d just give it a chance to blossom.”

“Thanks,” Jeremy said, “I don’t think I’m that good really. I just mainly use painting as a catharsis.”

“Well,” Mrs. Lebrayason said, “I guess I’d better go down and see if I can help Tom.”

“Okay,” Jeremy said, sounding as relieved as I felt. “I thought we’d go down and listen to some music.”

We followed Mrs. Lebrayason back down the stairs. She disappeared into the kitchen, and we went into a part of the house I had not yet seen. As we walked through a doorway, Jeremy switched on a light revealing a long room filled with shelves that reached from the floor to the ceiling, packed with albums. There were dozens of boxes, crates, and baskets filled with CDs and tapes scattered around the room.

“Wow! You weren’t kidding when you said your dad was into music.”



"Yeah. He has a really huge collection. So, what do you feel like listening to?"

"It's so overwhelming." I flipped through a basket of CDs before picking one up. "How about this? I love The Grateful Dead, especially that song "A Touch of Gray." Isn't it on this CD?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'll put it on. My dad's really into the Dead. I didn't think he was going to survive Jerry Garcia's death. Have a seat."

I sank down into an overstuffed loveseat. If I were lucky, all I would have to do is say something nice to the Lebrayasons when I left. Jeremy slid the CD into the player, then sat down beside me.

When the music began, Jeremy moved a little closer to me. He slid his arm around my shoulder, and his hand brushed against my breast. I wanted to believe that Jeremy hadn't meant to do this, but I couldn't keep my heart from beating so fast or my hands from trembling.

"Is there a restroom nearby? I just need to freshen up a little."

"Sure. Second door on the left."

I walked out into the narrow hallway, still feeling nervous about what had just happened with Jeremy. For a second, I wasn't sure where I was. The Lebrayason's house was rambling and there were lots of doors that were closed. Then I located the bathroom. It was pretty close to the kitchen, and I could hear Jeremy's parents banging pots and pans and talking. I wasn't really trying to hear what they were saying, but just as I was about to put my hand on the door knob, I heard Mrs. Lebrayason say, "Well, what do you think of Danita?" Her voice went high-pitched with a mock Spanish inflection when she said *Danita*.

"I like her. She seems like a nice girl."

"Do you really?"

"Yeah."

"You don't think Jeremy really likes her, do you?"

"I don't know."

"Did I ever tell you what Janne Grayson said about her when she was dating Rodney?"

"Oh come on, Mel."

"I don't know, Tom. You know how innocent Jeremy is. Rodney told his mother some pretty unflattering things about Danita. In fact, it finally got so bad that he had to break up with her. And I don't doubt it when you look at Danita's mother. I've never actually seen her, but everybody talks about her. Even people who have always lived here don't really know who Danita's father is. She seems nice enough, but girls like her can be trouble for boys like Jeremy."

I didn't wait to hear what Mr. Lebrayason was going to say. Tears burned the rims of my eyes and I was afraid I would sob out loud. I opened the bathroom door and stepped inside. When I could stand it, I turned on the light. The first thing I saw was a more finished painting of the nude woman from upstairs, obviously Mrs. Lebrayason's work. The painting was leaning against the wall as if it had been completed recently. I looked at the woman in the painting, observing the long dark hair, the small breasts, the wide hips. Her eyes were wistful as if she were looking at an object she could not reach.

Turning away from the painting, I caught a glimpse of myself in the full-length mirror that hung on the opposite wall. I pushed my frizzy blond bangs away from my eyes and took a long look. Then piece by piece, I imagined removing my clothes until I could see myself standing in front of the mirror naked. I glanced back at the nude woman, realizing how different we looked. The only likeness we seemed to possess was an expression of sadness.

I dropped to the floor, unsure of what I was going to do. As I lay there, I wished for my mother to brush my hair from my face and tell me that everything would work out. I even envisioned getting up and going into the kitchen to confront Mrs. Lebrayason. "You have no right to talk about my mother like that," I'd say. "She has problems. Just like everybody else." But how could I explain something I didn't fully understand myself? How could I explain my grandmother who lived just a



few miles away from me but had never even acknowledged that I had been born? How could I explain to Mrs. Lebrayason in one evening all the things it had taken me years to sort out? Things I was just beginning to put together about how my mother had come to be the person she was. I knew my mother reached out to men as a sort of self-preservation born out of a lifetime of receiving too little love.

When I finally stopped crying, I stood up and looked at my face in the mirror. I took my compact out of my purse and covered the red blotches on my face with powder, then pulled out a tube of maroon lipstick and spread color over my lips. As I reached for the light switch, I turned for one last look at the woman in the painting. A desire to touch her in some comforting way came over me. I walked over to the painting, leaned down and kissed her lips, widening them and changing their color from lavender to scarlet. The impulse to blot the imprint away was so strong, I hurried from the room and joined Jeremy.

He was playing another CD, music I was unfamiliar with. Before he could say anything, I told him I felt a little sick and needed to go home.

"What's wrong?" Jeremy asked.

"My stomach is just a little upset. I'll be okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I just need to go home and lie down for a while."

"Okay. Let me go tell Mel and Tom we're going."

In my mind, I formed the words I would say to the Lebrayasons, "Thank you so much for the wonderful evening."

I followed Jeremy into the room where his parents were. Mrs. Lebrayason was sitting in a chair with her feet pulled underneath her, and Mr. Lebrayason was stretched out on the couch. As soon as he became aware of our presence, he sat up.

"Danita's not feeling well. I'm just going to

run her home."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Lebrayason said. "I hope it wasn't the food."

"No," I said. "The food was good."

Mrs. Lebrayason marked her place in the book she was reading and said, "I hope you feel better, Danita. We're glad you came for dinner."

I felt as if I were going to start crying again before I could get out of the house. Then a tear trickled down my cheek. I guess I was narrowing my eyes, preparing myself for what I needed to say to Mrs. Lebrayason if I could just get the words to come.

"I heard what you said about my mother, Mrs. Lebrayason. You can say anything you want about me. I don't care. Oh, I came here caring, but not anymore. You may not think much of my mother, but deep down, she's a good person. At least she's not a hypocrite."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize you could hear what I said. I shouldn't have said it. I'm sorry."

Mr. Lebrayason stood up and said, "I'm sure it was all a misunderstanding."

"I just need to go home now," I said and started walking, not even noticing that Jeremy was behind me until we got outside.

"I'm sorry, Danita. My mother just says things without thinking."

Jeremy wanted to drive me home, but he seemed to understand when I told him I needed to walk.

When my house came in view, I saw that the light in my mother's bedroom was on. I knew she would be inside waiting up for me.

As soon as she heard the door open, my mother called to me, "In here, sweetheart."

Moving toward the sound of her voice, I wasn't worrying about Jeremy or even about what Mrs. Lebrayason might say when she saw what I'd done to her painting. I was wondering how I was going to tell my mother all the things I needed to say.

