

## The Green Room

### Eliot Sloan

Layla and I are 14. Her lipstick is a hard, red line. We sit on rock and watch the waves, and on the other side, New Jersey: lit signs and factories. If I close my eyes, our world is just this, signs on the horizon. But we dream that this is the ocean, and we can also, if we try, think pure thoughts of loving and family. We talk here in this place on the pier by the river with New Jersey on the other side.

"I am afraid I will not say goodbye to my father before he dies," she says.

"I am afraid that my father will get sick and won't tell me," I say.

The night breathes images, smiling fathers and lost fathers. I wonder if God will come down here tonight, if God knows this place. The night becomes colder, and we are tired. We would like to sit on this cold shore, sinking in sand, and watch the sun lift the sky in color. But here it is dark and shivering, and the colors of night change as we become very young just by looking, and we need each other and the right father to last.

My father left my mother for a man. She found love letters that he and another father sent back and forth for years while she was sending me off to school, cooking dinner, searching for his missing scarf or pen. She could not find for him what he was missing.

A freckled girl my age named Lizzie told me in the fourth grade. Her mother had been gossiping about my father, and Lizzie overheard. At 9 years old, my hair hung in two brown, lumpy braids, and I was beginning to need glasses to make out the dry sentences in science-class filmstrips. Her hot, sugary breath on my face as she pulled me behind some army-green lockers. "Your dad's gay," she said. Just like that, no introductions. "My mom said so." The word sounded ominous, foreign, exotic, and I'm sure neither of us knew its meaning. Then she smiled, and I studied her tiny rows of even teeth, how one attached so cleanly to the next.

Weeks of family meetings started, with my father giving all kinds of vague answers, saying life was "neither black nor white, Sweetheart - it's complicated" and my mother glaring at his fumbling speech from the sofa across the room.

My father told me when I turned 11 that he loved the taut, bronzed, male body, its rippled strengths and deepest voices. I imagined his dreaming of the powerful grip on his shoulder, the stubbled face at his height, leather jackets and big, white teeth. My father is in love with men, their voices and scents. He says he has always desired them but was too afraid. I had to repeat it over and over and over: My father is a gay man. My father is a gay man. He is also my father.

I met his men over breakfast. They were there to greet me when I woke up, eager to win me over with complicated eggs or a bike ride in the park. They were large and sometimes hairy, and I confused their names. My father was protective, calling me "Baby" and "Princess," stroking my hair.

It was an understanding we had, my father and I, that I would not tell my mother about the loud party he took me to, where I at 13 was the only female in a three-level house, or the stack of male magazines I found under the table near his bed. At my mother's house, my life was all about homework and dinner on time. I told her only of the way he'd learned to braid my hair almost as well as she did.

It is January, still hot here in Arizona, and I've just had my 28th birthday. An oversized prickly pear cactus crawls into my window, and the stars out here in the desert are fatter and more brilliant than any I've ever seen. I'm lying on my bed, looking out at them when the phone rings once, twice. It is Layla, crying, calling to say that she just found out that her dead father had been gay and died of AIDS, and she never knew. Back in 1985, the doctors had told her family he had meningitis. I remember he was quarantined so that she and her brother couldn't even touch him or share his food in his last months.

It's been six years since I've heard her, the breaths taken and those held, the memory of her enormous lips stretched into a smile after something I'd said. At 13 we lay up in her loft bed one night and talked about praying: how she asked God to save her dying father, how I squeezed my eyes shut and hoped that someone would come down to this tiny hole of an apartment and save her, Layla.

I came to sleep over that Saturday night wearing a knitted, purple vest my grandmother had given me, a knapsack under my arm. Her father was tall and edgy and didn't seem sick, fixing salad with a sesame dressing, tahini hidden inside. Her mother, a former ballerina and model, took a long bath, and clouds of steam spiraled from under her toweled, dark hair as she joined us at dinner. It all seemed so exotic to me - the father cooking, the mother a dancer, a loft, the talks of God.

Back in that deep night while we prayed, clutching each other, her small breasts were hard against my chest, our thin, pink nightgowns holding in loosely all that our bodies wanted to show. She smelled like garlic and cherries and something faint and other, a light coating on her skin of sweat, maybe fear, keeping me warm as we curled together. The patterns of her parents' muffled whispers in the next room seeped into my dreams that night, tangled voices.

That year, in eighth grade, I took a photography class, and she was my subject. I photographed her while she slept sometimes in the early weekend mornings, hoping I could take just a tiny bit of that beauty for myself. I looked at her legs, wrists, snapping away as sunlight slanted her body, the gray sheet cutting soft diagonals across her pale skin, birthmarks like tiny wounds. Snow on the hushed streets outside and the smell of coffee from the kitchen: I seemed always dark next to her, shadowed. Men looked at her on the street, even when she was 14. Women looked at her. I looked at her. She showed me everything, too much some days, so I had to tell her to stop. Laughing, I'd cover my eyes and peek through the fingers.

We walked across the small, frozen boat pond in Central Park at Christmas holding mittened hands, her breath curling into flower shapes, lights twinkling in the windows on the West Side and music in our heads, the same song. We sang at the top of our lungs, chasing each other across the ice, slipping, racing to the Alice in Wonderland statue to climb up her hair in the fading daylight while both of our mothers must have been at home lying alone curled up in a ball against the cold on those nights of longing.

I used to ask her over and over: Am I a woman or a man? I would feel fragile sometimes, unsure because I have a boy's name, and sometimes she'd pretend I was a boy when we'd practice kissing. She said she had to pretend in order to teach me. I told her I knew about women, what's inside them: a green room like the underneath part of a wave, walls of emerald velvet coiled against the chaos of air and light. If someone really looked and shone a light deeper, I whispered, her eyes so close I could see the blue specks around her pupils, they'd see that in my green room, I was really a man. A father of sorts. Something maybe evil.

I am 13. My father and I agonize because there is a school function next week, an auction and a parent-teacher meeting. He wants to bring his live-in boyfriend. I am horrified. "What is it?" he says to me softly as we put out cheese and crackers for his lover in the next room. "What about that time he took you to see a play last month? Don't you love me and the person I love?"

"You are unfair," I say under my breath. "Not like other dads," and we go back and forth like this until the cheese knife slips into my thumb, and I bleed onto the scratched Formica kitchen counter.

My dad's friend dies of AIDS. My father calls me in tears and tells me to put on a dress, to hurry up, we're going to his funeral in Queens. I have been studying the disease in biology class; and when the teacher asks what we know of it, I fiddle with my bracelet, busy myself drawing circles in the margin.

At home I am under the covers calling Gay Men's Health Crisis to see if I could have gotten it from the time his friend shared my fork last summer, and what about when he used the shower? I am terrified; we know nothing. My father tells me he is healthy, not to worry, but I don't believe.

The way it seems to me, all of my friends' fathers are out playing ball with them in the park on Sundays, hugging their moms in the video store on Lexington and 80th. I long for a different father, one who's normal and shares Cheerios instead of caviar, Muppet movies instead of tormented French films, love stories about girlfriends instead of boyfriends. I must be the only kid like me in the whole world, I think to myself. "I will never tell," I chant over and over like a mantra as I fall asleep.

But there is also this: It is dark already outside on a late Sunday afternoon as I wake up warm after a nap on the sofa with him, its wine-dark velvet pressing a pattern into my cheek. My father lights candles as we listen to opera. He wears a thick, white robe over his clothes so I can see the long, curled, dark and gray hair on his chest. It feels as if we are alone in this world, the water of the music spilling through my hair, my father grabbing my hand and stroking the fingers. He tells me how he can see the lines on his father's face at night in his dreams. I butter dark pumpnickel bread in fat slices for him, open his beer and take a sip, dream of a boy wanting to touch me, to run his hands over me, and I shiver to myself in the dim light. Boys' hands seem impossible; why would they want to touch me? I am scrawny still, all angles and sharp places.

My father tells me as we walk the dog one night that I am an extension of him, that we are hardly different at all. His decision to be with men makes me feel ugly, barren, rejected. I look into the mirror and pull the hair over my eyes until I can't see his face anymore.

His boyfriends fuss over me as if I'm a diva, buying me Hermès scarves though I'm only in eighth grade, teaching me how to make a martini. They share a part of my father that I will never touch, but I know that I have what they really want: I have his heart.

Afternoons in the gathering dusk I walk to the Met alone through pinkish snowlight swirling around my scarf and lashes. I look at the paintings by Van Gogh and dream of summer, the taste of raspberries and scratches on my arms from crawling through bushes. In contrast this city seems to me the place of the black, brittle, burned parts in the heart. But cities also hold some kind of anonymity. I can lose myself.

I wander home, and Dad and I eat together late. He drinks wine and talks to me about love. He tells me he believes in different kinds of love, that there is the "passionate" kind and the "settling" kind. He makes reference to some trip he took down the California coast with the top down and the ocean breezes whipping the cypress trees, the smell of eucalyptus in the air, a lover at his side. He won't tell me the name of this person. I do the math and know he was married to my mother at that time. My face turns hot, red. I ask him to tell me. He says, "When you're 18, maybe." Just like that. And he walks away, down the hall to his room. I try to swallow my tears like an awful, thick pill. I think of his friend whose funeral I attended, and I imagine that someday I could lose my father, our paper-reading breakfasts and running with him in the park, the pounding sounds of his breathing, racing him, my father, our legs after the other, one, two, Sunday light on the reservoir measuring our pace - "Come on, Honeybunch, slow down for your dad," he says - and I feel better and smile and turn around, running, running, around and around.

I have tried to understand how he felt. I have tried to write about my father.

On Saturday mornings - their only time together now - when he woke up and saw her next to him, he was instantly filled with that old mixture of familiarity, repulsion, regret and emptiness, all at once. Then immediately after, like clockwork, he'd think of their child in the next room. Weak sun angles would slant in the window in dusty streams pathetically trying to warm the unforgiving concrete on the quiet streets outside, an occasional snow flurry turning the streets a hushed gray. He shivered, thinking of having to move his car in an hour and yet the relief of leaving these thin walls of guilt, betrayal, her angry tears bitter as the tiny bowl of ever-present, overcooked greens on the table at Passover, the child's brown, liquid eyes - all these things made the short walk over icy patches, over the crunch of salted streets under his boots, even past the few panhandlers, blue and desperate on Park Avenue so early on a quiet morning shaking their cups, seem a relief. Maybe today he'd take the child, his child, bundle her up in her red, wool coat, her mittens that clipped on, her teeth chattering as she ran out the door of their apartment building holding his hand tightly, tripping, breathless, past the silent, stony doorman in his cheap, green coat with the number of their building emblazoned over his heart. Her hand in his so small and strong - every time it had the power to amaze him. Her total trust and loyalty. Was she able to look past what she saw in his face, the patches of truth and lies and the stinging, to forgive him, or did she just see and trust the outside layer? Hours on a therapist's leather couch still could not provide the answer only she could give.

He looked over at his wife asleep next to him. Incredible how she could sleep through anything at all, curled into a ball against his back, her fingers often in tiny fists. She could sleep through even this between them now, these battles and the imminent end, her blond hair spread like a yellow fan across the pillow covered in now-faded chintz sprinkled in an abstract, gold-and-green design. He dreaded the moment when she'd open her eyes and look at him. He dreaded their blue and that early crack in her voice as she asked for water or another blanket or his arms around her.

He sat up and stared out at the Christmas trees on Park Avenue. It must be early; their jewelry of tiny, white lights still formed a perfect line south toward the Pan Am Building. A light snow fell. As she'd sleep through the hours, he was used to staying quiet in the room like this, sometimes awake the whole night. Other times he'd pace and check on the child - her breathing - an old ritual now he couldn't let go of, though she could get herself to school alone now, and he knew how silly it was to worry about that perfect, simple in-out of her small chest, her violet-

veined lids thin as wings flickering slightly in the faint glow of the street lights from the window, her fingers clenched around her orange, patterned baby quilt that she refused to give up. He would stalk the shadows in the apartment, drink some wine to try to slow his thoughts.

He'd met his wife 17 years earlier at a big Midwestern university - both from Brooklyn and both fleeing their loud, abrasive, Jewish upbringings for a gentler, nasal accent; for an airplane trip too frightening for either of their neurotic mothers to venture; for a cold so intense, so raw and biting that it made you feel your real bones, your real edges, no padding to soften its blow. She was 17, too thin and blond, her lipstick on strong and her laughter ringing out over the lake from a boat the first time he saw her that lazy afternoon. He was fuzzy from a drink still in his hand as he walked down the lawn in back of his fraternity to watch the boats and the sky and the long strips of cloud beyond the trees. Living there then had made him notice things like trees and clouds, a line of Shakespeare, the smell of a storm. He'd forgotten how to do that now. The child seemed to have that, though, the ability to smell and see. He wanted to say to her, "It will hurt you; try to ignore it. Feeling too much will only sting." But he'd look at her tiny face and say nothing, hoping she'd understand on her own.

The first time he heard that laugh across the lake, it felt like a home. It made him remember drinking tall glasses of cold beer with his father on steamy, August nights and sharing a cigar. He thought of the smell of the Atlantic and the crash of the waves on Labor Day, his mother's long, salmon-pink, silk scarf she wore to parties to look dramatic and the faint notes of his favorite Mozart aria pattered in his brain. That laugh brought back the times before his father's coughing and slow death from cancer. "Too sensitive," his mother had always said to him in a nasty tone, "It'll hurt you in the long run if you don't toughen up."

Tough. That was the word his mother used, friends used, the word he was not and tried to be and the word that seemed to matter the most. She'd shriek it at him as he cut strawberries at the bakery after school, his head barely reaching the counter, slicing each blood-colored ruby into quarters, eighths, rounds, his mother's hair a web-like mass of blond and auburn - whatever the color of the season - her clothes garish and provocative, bright silks and satins even on an ordinary, November day, his father silent and smoking in his apron behind the bakery door, blanketed always in a light dusting of flour.

He'd been embarrassed by his father then, thought him uncultured, unsophisticated, common - and his mother glamorous and worldly, seductive - but now he saw her sharp edges and narrowing eyes. He could remember now how she'd slap his face after her second vodka of the evening, yelling out words that made no sense in a garbled stream of fury and frustration. She'd refuse to speak to him for days and play stormy sonatas on their baby grand. She gave birth to his sister when he was 9 and handed her over to him simply, a small bundle of red and pink and tears and needs, into his arms. His mother loved the opera, Proust, dancing, lavish trips to Cuba where men gave her corsages and carried her bags, her husband a dark shadow somewhere hovering behind her. But he knew his mother felt at least the thrill of a box seat on the snowy opening night of "La Boheme," the twinkle of champagne running down into her toes and the smell of fresh flowers in spring - she devoured the rich charge of headlines and news in the Sunday Times, understood his passion for politics, for power, for prestige. After a week of drinking and throwing shoes at him, she'd come home carrying three new, expensive, light-wool suits from Lord & Taylor, a silk tie to match, cufflinks shining in a velvet box. She knew he loved to look expensive, to feel smooth, new fabrics against his skin as he rode the subway to law school and dreamed of having lunch at the White House with JFK. She understood his love of travel, of good restaurants with linen cloths and hushed waiters. His father had seemed so tired, so pale, the last bastion of old Russia, his steps too slow, his accent too heavy, the flour caked under his nails humiliating.

Her laugh across the lake hit him instantly, and he had to meet her. She was even better than her laugh - tall, graceful, no trace of accent, her eyes a clear, turquoise blue. She looked like a shiksa, and he loved that. She looked like his future. So when law school arrived on time, and

he began plugging through it like wading through choppy water, the question of marriage came up so easily he didn't even remember proposing. He could already see them laughing over gin-and-tonics as the summer breeze hit them on the ferry to Nantucket; he could imagine them at Christmas parties once he became partner - her in some long, blue, velvet dress and smelling like Chanel and his tuxedo dark and crisp against her pale arm; he could see children in the best schools and camps and at home with a nanny before bed - and he knew that she too wanted all this. He loved to dance and needed that rhythm, that sway of damp bodies against his own and its pulse, but he figured she'd learn that in time. He'd felt so ignorant back then, so naive when he first met her. She'd had tons of boyfriends and moved faster than he did, making him feel awkward and too slow. Her passion frightened him - it still did - a raw lust emanating from her like light that he hadn't expected in such a refined, cool, sleek girl. She'd engulf him with total abandon, and he wouldn't know what to do, how to respond. Usually he felt a kind of tenderness but nothing else, only that vast wall with his mother's voice echoing through the cracks, telling him to be tougher, faster.

Amazing how he understood pain now in such a vaster, deeper way, as if he held it in his pores and muscles and bones. When they'd met at college, all they did was laugh and drink and go sledding and then laugh some more. No pain, no memory, no decisions or stress or practical worries that he sensed his young daughter already carried on her shoulders like a yoke. No, only impatience for when they could buy a cottage in Southampton, or difficulty deciding between the green or the pink dress in Palm Beach, which tie to wear to the dinner with the partners at the firm, which nursery school to send their daughter to, where the best club to learn tennis was. Laughter and banana daiquiris and her beautiful, long legs brown on the beach in July and fresh chicken on the grill with Long Island local corn for dinner. He loved the outside of things- the tinkling of wine glasses at sunset and their cocktail parties with disco on the radio, crowds of bronzed, thin couples dancing on the deck. He loved the way his hair was soft and dark against his tan skin and the new shape his muscles were taking on - he loved the lightness of it all. He'd loved his work, too, then, the rush of secretaries around him adhering to his every wish; he loved to dictate letters and to research a case for court and to win that case. It was satisfying, winning like that, logical. He loved the judge and the celebratory lunch after wearing a good suit and eating a good steak and salad at P.J.'s, the slaps on the back from impressed partners when he walked into a party with her at his side, radiant and golden and so beautiful he sometimes had to watch her while she slept, amazed it was real, her beauty.

But she was strong, not fragile as she looked, and practical, and he loved, too, their talks in the car with the windows down on summer Sunday nights, the child asleep across their laps still sprinkled with sand from the beach and their skin hot from the day in the sun. She'd give him advice about a case or how to deal with his mother at Thanksgiving or what they should do with the kitchen, and they'd stop for ice-cream cones just before Exit 70, and the cones would drip down their shirts, cars speeding by and their little girl still sleeping soundly in the front seat, her face pressed so hard against the leather that it left a pattern on her cheek he could trace with his thumb as he carried her later into their building and to her bed as she never stirred. The girl he met by the lake in the Midwest one September afternoon was still always there, ready to laugh, to carry, to cook for 10 people he happened to meet on the train, to smile into the camera, and he didn't think he'd ever told her that.

What he hated were those looks she'd give him at dinner sometimes, her eyes silently begging for time with him alone. He craved action: 10 hours of a long day at the office and then a hot game of tennis, dinner afterward with six or seven people drinking and dancing. He craved the mad crush in the mornings on West End Avenue of well-dressed people rushing to work, hurrying to hail a cab, the exotic, expensive texture in his nostrils of perfume in the elevator at the U.N., the buzzing of cars on Madison Avenue as he gazed at windows filled with French antiques, silk scarves patterned with zebras and tropical fruits, long, white robes and hand-carved, walnut cigarette holders, richly colored oriental rugs and brave new abstract watercolors from the south of France, from Tahiti, from those places that sounded so wonderful he wanted to go just to say he'd been there. He'd get lost in those windows on Sunday afternoons, wandering in and out of bookshops and Bloomingdale's, stopping to pick up a bag of fresh

apricots or a steaming rye bread from Zabar's. He would imagine her in the diamonds he saw in the windows as they left children with the nanny. He'd picture himself on the cover of Time, running for mayor. Whole afternoons passed this way. He liked to do it alone.

My hands trembling and cold, I hang up the phone after Layla's call. At 28 I am still floundering to escape the thickness of remembering that floods and captures me. I am my father; I am Layla; I am all the voices and wants and angers and stories and secrets. I keep rewinding the phone call, playing it over in my mind: Layla says to me again in her quiet way that her father died of AIDS. My breathing catches and twists. Her voice could make anyone love her. It is that gravelly, that soft, that full of princesses with long hair to climb up. It's been six years since we've spoken, and I don't know what to say. I finally tell her I have had dreams where Dad is dying alone, shivering in a surgical, metal-colored room, each beat of his heart the chiming of a bell.

Six years since I've heard her voice. I could almost kill something small, feel it crumble in my hands, when I think of how just before college she took the boy I thought was mine, the first I loved. Drunk in a cheap motel somewhere near Honfleur, France, she let him do things to her.

Here in Arizona I go back in my mind sometimes to those steeped evenings of snowy, violet twilight in New York when I was 13, as I'd climb the museum steps, waiting for her, waiting for my father to come home, waiting, freezing wind whipping a charcoal color around stark buildings, snow and rain slanting sideways. I'd imagine I was a girl in a book, a great dancer, a foreign spy, step after step.

I miss the moodiness of storms there, the way Layla and I stayed up so late some nights, talking and touching shoulders in constant rain, drifting off on each other to wake sleepily again, tangled, the endless drumming of rain pelting the windows.

Everyone's gay in my life, it seems. Layla and that boy both are now, and our fathers - hers and mine - and all that they know. I tried that, too, but it just didn't cut clean through me in the same way, that indigo slice that turns over inside the way a fish darts a perfect silver arc off the lake at dawn. The trees starting to turn color. That's what it feels like, a man's hands touching me softly that way, when it's real and we're there together.

Listening to her on the phone after six years is like breathing in sharp, salt air, like spinning around in circles until I'm dizzy and drunk. Her voice cuts through all the losses and years, brings back the hope for loving the way it should be, the way we prayed it would be as we sat on the pier looking out at New Jersey, the new morning always in the distance, no matter what.

I am 15 in the Hamptons with my dad, studying for a test, and he is scoping the beach of tanned, blond men in tight, black Speedos. We argue over the best-looking one. I insist that the Italian guy with glasses is my favorite, and he frowns and says, "Who raised you, anyway?" But we are also in the car on the way home, my head sleepily on his shoulder as he quizzes me on Latin vocabulary and worries that I will be tired in school tomorrow. "Remember," he says in his serious voice, "Agricola is a masculine word, though it's conjugated in the feminine." We are all of these things.

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