

First Place – Young Adult Fiction

Julia Kraus

Lord Byron's

Across the street from my middle school and next to the coffee house where I did my homework was the oldest and gayest bookstore in the city—Lord Byron Books. It sat at the intersection of Cherry Street and Reading, just at the edge of the two square miles of city where I reigned free. Mom worked late on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, so at 3:00 p.m. I would cross Cherry Street's afternoon traffic and enter the dim orange light of the coffee house. The balance of my weekly allowance let me choose between a cookie and an Italian soda each day, and unless the triple chocolate chip cookies were fresh enough to really stink up the place, it was Italian soda all the way.

That particular Wednesday was the sixth of May, two weeks before the last day of my eighth-grade year. I sat outside the coffee house on its street-side sun porch sipping a coconut Italian soda with whipped cream on top from a to-go cup. I wouldn't have sat outside, except that today I'd found a seat upwind of the regular who smoked a funny wooden pipe while typing furiously on a portable Royal typewriter for hours on end. My attention was fixed on the fluttering rainbow flag mounted by the entrance of the building next door. Fishing the last traces of whipped cream from the ice left in my drink, I got up and trashed the cup. This was my day to confront the unknown, less than a hundred feet from the Art Deco, church-school compound where I was baptized and which I still attended six days a week. I untucked my shirt.

It was a two-story brick building with a gold "Lord Byron" sign that hung between white-framed windows filled with books. Taking the three steps up to the door, I pulled it open with a clammy hand and stepped into the narrow corridor of books. The door jingled when I entered, and a bald older man in a pink collared shirt looked up from his magazine at a desk in the back.

"Welcome!" he said, a broad smile peeking out from under a manicured cowboy mustache, "Can I help you find anything?" My face got hot; I had not thought this plan through.

"Oh, I'm just looking," I replied. *Nice save.*

With my best impression of nonchalance, I turned to the books. They were stacked in all colors, mostly in paperback. Two women held hands on one. Another featured a lady's butt in very, *very* tight leather pants, and a third was some kind of gay encyclopedia—I moved on to the special bookcase dedicated solely to buttons. A mess of Pride and Clinton-Gore pins divided into baskets and boxes lined the shelves, with slips of paper tucked in marking one or two dollars each. My favorite was the bright purple "AVENGE OSCAR WILDE" in a fancy font, but—*damn*—I only had fifty cents left after the drink.

"Um, is there anything I can get for this?" I asked, holding up the two quarters. The mustachioed man smiled again.

"Well, you could buy a couple of these," he said, pointing at a bowl of matchbooks on his desk. While I paid for them, I noticed his name badge read "Dave." However, I didn't introduce myself because I, Katie Anderson, was deathly afraid of prolonged human interaction. The matchbooks read "Lord Byron" in the same gold script as the sign outside. As soon as I was down the front steps, I zipped them into the innermost pocket of my backpack. *Nothing to see here.*

The next time I touched the matchbooks was one week later. The unofficial smoking hole of St. Sebastian's School was across the street and behind the coffee house—the far side that faced Lord Byron's. The wall provided both shade and a cool backdrop in the form of a mural of the Madonna carrying a fruit basket like a baby. After school Wednesday, I walked over with

Jessica and Robin from our last hour biology class. They had asked me to join them this afternoon. While my childhood history of asthma kept me from actually smoking, I was willing to sacrifice a bit of my long-term lung health in exchange for hanging out with the popular girls.

Jessica rummaged through her purse to find a lighter, and Robin fidgeted with a slightly smooshed pack of cigarettes. Jessica had her blonde hair pulled back into a high ponytail with a scrunchy in the school plaid. She was the kind of generally nice girl who seemed so anxious to get things right—she brushed her teeth after lunch and matched her butterfly clips to her bracelets—that it made you wonder whether she'd have more personality if you could get her on her own. Robin, on the other hand, should have by all legal standards been defined as a nerd, but somehow her unprecedented kindness raised her into the popular kid camp. Her Academic Bowl specialty was world history, while mine was math, and the closest she ever got to gloating when we kicked another team's butt was a smile and a flick of her ever-present brown fishtail braid. This was the first time we'd seen each other outside of school stuff.

Jessica finally huffed, signaling defeat with her big hazel eyes.

"Wait! No! Duh!" I muttered, fearing my company would leave early. I shrugged off my backpack and pulled out one of the matchbooks, handing it to Robin.

"Thanks, sweet," she said. She handed the pack off to Jessica, lit up, and coughed on the smoke as she breathed it in. She coughed and coughed and finally I put a hand on her arm and asked whether she was alright.

"Yeah, just shattering my air of coolness," she said once she was done. Her eyes were watering, but she was also smiling so wide I could see the blue rubber bands on her braces. Something about that response broke the awkward tension that can hang around when people

who know each other in one context meet in another, and Robin and I started laughing hysterically. Jessica looked up from her attempts to work the matchbook, and around minute two of our unceasing laughter, even she had to join in. The three of us sat on the ground there, backs pressed up against the Fruit Madonna, for the duration of their cigarettes.

On Friday, Robin caught me on the way out of last-hour biology and tried to pass the matchbox off to me really casually, like a spy. I was too embarrassed to tell her that when she walked off with it, I'd meant for her to keep it.

Before we parted ways outside the school, she turned to me and said, "I noticed, but um... Have you been inside that Lord Byron place? Because, I've been curious about it but I never, um, got onto the inside of it."

The garbled rush of her words was both endearing and reassuring.

"Yeah, I've been there. It's a cute little bookshop, and the guy at the front desk is super nice." Okay, I had achieved worldly and suave, now all I had to do was go for it.

"Would you like to show me around it sometime next week?"

Wait! No! I was supposed to ask *her* to go, and there was hardly even any "next week." Wednesday was the last day of the whole of eighth grade.

"Does Monday work?"

On Monday, May 18th, 1992, the last Monday of the school year, Robin and I left biology together and crossed Cherry Street almost solemnly. I fiddled with the change in my skirt pocket—from today on I would tell the world to "AVENGE OSCAR WILDE" from the smaller, front-most pocket of my backpack. When we walked past the Fruit Madonna I stopped in my tracks.

"Robin, blessed is the fruit of her womb!" I said, gesturing wildly toward the portrait, "blessed is the *fruit* of her womb!"

For two fourteen-year-olds who had attended all-school rosaries every educated month of our lives, this was the height of comedy.

We entered Lord Byron Books with a little cascade of giggles. I used dramatic show(wo)man arms to direct Robin around the store, pointing out the lovely ladies holding hands, the mustachioed cashier, even the leather-clad ass. We settled on the buttons. I immediately grabbed one of the Oscar Wilde pins, but Robin put more deliberation into the task. She fidgeted with different pins of the same kind as though weighing one apple against another, and occasionally shook whole boxes like they might communicate their value through their jingle. Finally, she selected a white pin that announced in bold red letters "LESBIANS UNITE IN ARMED SNUGGLE." She shot me a tiny grin.

I went first at the register, made a short pile of two dollars in quarters, and pushed it to Dave while attempting to give a look of affable recognition. Averting my gaze, I dropped the rest of my change in the "Broadway Cares" jar at the corner of his desk. Robin went next, introducing herself and paying in bills. She waved off Dave's offer of a little paper bag for her pin and attached it directly to her oxford shirt like a brooch.

Before we left, Dave held out a flyer advertising a march on the first weekend of June.

"Pride's coming up soon, and it starts right out front of this store," he said. "You girls could wear those buttons, and it's our tenth anniversary, so you might learn a thing or two."

"Count me considering!" Robin replied, taking it. As they spoke, I utilized this welcome opportunity to avoid all social interactions by scouring the outside of my backpack for the

perfect location for a pin. I'm not sure how many moments later it was, but I felt a soft hand on my shoulder alert me that we were leaving. I hurriedly attached it to the top-right side of the smaller front pocket on my bag and followed her out.

"Katie," she said, once we'd leaned against the mural. "I'm pretty sure there was this 17th-century French opera singer who was known for slicing men up in duels and burning down a convent to break her girlfriend out."

"Whoa, that's very badass of her," I said.

"What I mean is, wouldn't it be cool if the world had more pretty ladies with swords?"

"Oh my god, Robin!" I spread my fingers wide at arm-length in front of us. "You're a genius!"

"Thanks," she said, pressing the smallest kiss against my cheek. "I'd never had anyone to say that to."

When Mom picked me up, I clasped my backpack against my chest and zoned out thinking in my seat. It wasn't until I was home that I noticed the paper sticking out of the bag's unused water bottle sleeve. I unfolded it and found it was Dave's flyer, now with "Saturday, June 6th" circled, and a seven-digit number scrawled underneath. The Fruit Madonna must've been smiling on me.

It's been years since we grew out of that gay sanctuary, but not everything's different at the intersection of Cherry Street and Reading. St. Sebastian's is still there, and the coffee house is still open, though the new owners repainted the Fruit Madonna with a cartoonish cityscape and dubbed the place the Cherry Street Bean. Sometimes Elaine and I take the boys there as a reward for withstanding a long afternoon of clothes shopping, I order them both an Italian soda with

whipped cream. And as she wrangles them into seats on the breezy sun porch, I gaze over at the cute little boutique where Lord Byron's used to be.