

Me,
Penelope

Lisa Jahn-Clough

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Walter Lorraine  Books

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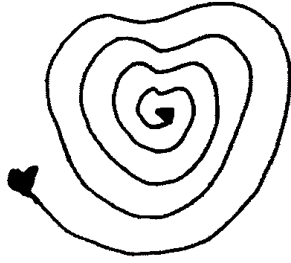
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Me,
Penelope



Me

My name is Penelope Yeager, Lopi for short. I appear normal—normal for a sixteen-year-old American girl, that is. I live with a single mother who is still young and beautiful, more beautiful than I will ever be. My father left when I was six, after the accident. He moved across the country and I haven't seen him since. Viv says he has a new wife and two new children. He's moved on with a new life. I can't say I blame him.

Viv, my mother, has moved on by filling her life with activity and people, covering the memory with various substances, both legal and illegal, forcing herself by any means to be happy. I think she is in denial.

I have not moved on.

I look like nothing special. Longish brown hair, a smattering of freckles, thin lips that I wish were fuller, breasts a little larger than I'd like, hips a little narrow, but in general an okay body. I'm nothing to write home about, but

I'm nothing freakish either. If I put my hair up in a ponytail I can pass for a lacrosse player, if I leave it stringy I can pass for a druggie, if I put it in pigtails and wear a baggy shirt I can pass for about twelve, and if I puff it up, wear a little makeup, and stick my chest out I can maybe pass for a college student. However, I am none of these things.

Anyway, it's not my looks or my body that dissatisfies me (most of the time)—it's my thinking. Mainly I can't stop thinking. Sometimes I want things so badly, all I can do is long for them until I get really, really sad.

I think that my mind must be different from others'. I don't know how people can be so together, so calm and happy all the time. I don't believe them. Take my mother, for instance. She appears happy, but how can she be, really? Her life has been full of tragedy. There are times when I am sitting there reading a book or studying for a math test, watching TV even, and my mind is off in a thousand places. Really what I am doing is trying not to think, but I can't help it. I think about the future, what I'd rather be doing, what could happen. I think about school and how things have shifted this year, how all I want to do is get out. I think about my friends and how I don't really have any anymore, except for Toad and that's changing—all we do is bicker like an old married couple, and we've never even been boyfriend and girlfriend.

Basically, I think about my life a lot, and sometimes to make my life better, I make things up. I think about how I want someone that I can talk to, really, really talk to. I'd like to see a shrink, but Viv says we can't afford one and that it's unnecessary for me, yet she sees one regularly. I

saw one once when I was eight, but now Viv thinks I am doing fine. I am good at pretending.

And then there's sex. A lot of what I think about these days is sex. How to get it, if I want it, who I want it with. They say teenage boys are obsessed, but I think I have them beat hands down. Ha. Hands down, get it? See how my mind works? I have fantasy scenes going on a good part of the time in my head. If I could just find someone to connect with—really deeply connect with, the rest wouldn't matter so much. If I could only be touched all the way down to my soul, now that would be something.



Things I Want

1. To get out of this town, get out of the prison they call high school, get away from my crazy mother.
2. To have sex before I leave home.
3. To love someone. Really, really love him. Be able to say “I love you” a thousand times a day if I want without worrying that I am too much in love. (I don’t know if number two and number three are simultaneously possible—somehow I doubt it. That’s okay. I think I’d be too embarrassed to tell the person I loved that I was inexperienced, even though ideally it shouldn’t matter. Ah, the hypocrisy of life.)
4. To get my driver’s license, and not freak out every time I get in the driver’s seat.

5. To stop thinking about what happened ten years ago. I was only six.
6. I want my mother to be happy. It may not seem like I want this, since sometimes I can't stand my mother, but if she were really, truly happy she might be more like the mother she used to be, and then maybe, just maybe, I could be happy too.



Escape from Prison

It is a warm, cloudless end-of-summer morning. I bike to the high school for my meeting. The meeting that will decide my future, my immediate future, anyway—who knows what effect it could have in the long run.

The idea is to get out of high school. High school is not for me. The rules, the structure, the grades. It's not that I am lazy or stupid. I don't want to sleep all day, like some kids I know. I happen to actually do better when I am in charge of my own time. I am a decent student; I just hate being in school. College has to be better. At least in college I can decide what I want to take and meet with teachers who actually care.

The cliques are what get to me in high school. There is a group for everyone: the jocks, the druggies, the nerds, the weirdos, the hippies, the intellectuals, the oversexed, the undersexed, the sexually confused, the band geeks, the art goths, the drama losers. There's even a group termed the nothings.

Sometime last year I figured I would either have to drop

out of school altogether or manage to escape a year early. If I have to stay in this prison any longer, who knows what I'd do. I'm not saying I'm one of those crazy, creepy kids who would blow up the school, but I can't say I haven't thought about it. I think every kid has that fantasy—or at least that the school will blow up spontaneously. There is a part of all teenagers that maybe, just maybe, understands that desire. Sometimes the only difference between good and evil is what we do with it. I figure the best thing is to get my sentence reduced.

Last year, I calculated that by the end of three years I'd have almost enough credits to graduate. The only class required all four years is English. If I took English over the summer I could take senior English this year.

~~I~~ I proposed this to the principal, Mrs. Miller, last spring. "It's possible," she'd said. "Take the summer class and come back before school starts and we'll see."

So I took Mrs. V.O.'s summer English class. It was mostly filled with students who had failed previously and needed to make it up, so she gave me a lot of outside assignments. It actually turned out to be great. I could read and write papers and work with her independently at my own pace. This is how I want learning to be. I don't want to sit in a class and listen to idiots.

It also gave me the perfect excuse not to have to hang out with Viv. Studying is the one excuse she will usually accept. She always wants me to do things with her, but then she ignores me. It's as if she needs me there so she isn't alone, but if someone better (i.e., a guy) comes along, she forgets me. I used to feel sorry for her so I hung out

with her no matter what. But now I want my own life and my own friends. I want her to be okay, but I want to be okay too.

There are five adults in the principal's office when I arrive. Mrs. Miller, Mr. Oswald, the vice principal, Ms. Stein, the guidance counselor, Mrs. V.O., and Mr. Koch, the PE teacher. I don't know why Mr. Koch is there. He is the only one not seated.

Mrs. Miller waves me in and points to an empty wooden chair. "Please, have a seat, Penelope."

I feel as if I am on trial. Mrs. V.O. reaches over and pats my leg reassuringly.

Mr. Oswald looks at some paperwork on the desk. "So you want to graduate this year, Penelope." It's not a question, but it's not an answer either.

"I took English this summer," I say. "With Mrs. Van Orton." Mrs. V.O. smiles again. I explain my plan, even though I already explained it all at the end of last year. "I'll have all the requirements and enough credits," I add.

"I understand you did quite well this summer. Wrote some strong papers. Do you want to go on to study in English?" This from the guidance counselor, Ms. Stein, who as far as I can tell is mostly concerned with getting kids to stay in school and not get pregnant.

"Maybe," I say. "I like reading."

"Why do you want to graduate early?"

I was expecting this question and I am prepared. "I think I am ready to go to college. I work well on my own. And if for some reason I don't get in or don't get enough financial aid, well, then I'd like to travel abroad and work for a

year to make enough money so I can go the next year and not be behind.”

They all nod, except Mr. Koch, who has not said a word. I am still not sure why he is here.

“That all sounds logical to me,” pipes Mrs. V.O. “Penelope is a very self-directed learner.”

“There is one detail, Penelope, I am not sure you realized.” This from Mrs. Miller. “You see, besides four years of English, we also require four years of physical education.”

Finally Mr. Koch speaks. “We can’t let you get away without taking all your PE credits.” So this is why he is here.

“I think considering Penelope’s academic record, her drive, her self-motivation, and her future plans, we could let the gym requirement slide.” Mrs. V.O. is clearly in my corner.

“Physical health is just as important as intellectual health. I would think you, Mrs. Van Orton, of all people would be aware of that.”

Mrs. V.O. is a big healthy living and sex education advocate. She runs the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Friends meetings (or LGBTQF). I don’t know why they don’t just call it the Everyone Club. Unfortunately LGBTQF is not a very popular organization in our school. This is a medium-size town, with only one high school of about 1,200 kids. No one wants to be outspoken, though I’m sure there are plenty of closeted LGBTQFs around. Our school follows the army’s don’t ask, don’t tell code. It’s okay if you are any of those things,

just don't go blabbing it. This is another thing I think will be better in college. More acceptance.

"I don't disagree, Mr. Koch," Mrs. V.O. says. "But these are extenuating circumstances. It hardly seems fair to make Penelope delay her plans of excelled study to take a year of PE. She's in good physical shape. Aren't you, Penelope?"

"I think so," I say. "I walk my dog. I ride my bike everywhere because I don't have my license."

"See? She incorporates physical health into her daily living. Just because it's not a competitive sport doesn't mean she's not in shape."

Mr. Koch is about to respond, but before he can speak Mrs. Miller says, "You were on the track team freshman year, weren't you, Penelope?" She checks the papers on her desk.

I nod. I was on the team for about a month. I went to two meets and hated standing around waiting to run, crowds gawking at us in the stands, and then having to race against someone else. I prefer my own pace and having Tessa with me, being outdoors, smelling the air in peace and quiet, with no gawkers.

I had not counted on the four-year gym requirement, however. This is a surprise to me. How had I overlooked this? I think fast.

"What if I agree to do some kind of exercise program, like running?" I propose. Mr. Koch's mouth turns downward. I continue. "It would be separate from gym. I'll document it too. Run every day, check my heart rate, do those

government physical aptitude tests four times this year instead of two.”

There is silence in the room as they ponder this.

Mrs. Miller responds first. “That sounds reasonable. Mr. Koch?”

All eyes turn to Mr. Koch. He knows he can’t argue against all four adults. “I will expect a weekly report of your activities. Distances, pace, heart rate. You’ll need some equipment, like a heart rate monitor, mileage counter. Can you provide those things?”

I say yes.

The rest of the group sighs with relief.

“You know you’ll have to have Mrs. Van Orton again for senior AP English. It’s the only one that fits in your schedule.” The guidance counselor moves on to scheduling business, another of her favorites.

“Sure,” I say. “That’s fine.”

Mrs. V.O. beams. I think I am one of the few students that actually like her. Others call her Mrs. B.O. because once she had pit stains under her arm. Kids can be so cruel.

“Okay, then, Penelope.” Mrs. Miller prepares to close the meeting. She ruffles her papers, moves the penholder on her desk, puts down the pen she’s been clicking the entire time. “We’ll let your other teachers know—but basically the only class that you’ll change is English. We’ll list you as a senior so that you get all the appropriate materials and information to graduate at the end of this academic year.”