

Allegra Hyde

IMAGINARY LOVERS

Desmonda will say she doesn't usually date girls, but for me she'll make an exception. This I will never understand—as far as I can tell, she doesn't date boys either—but I will love her despite these hiccups in logic. Or because of them.

Desmonda, who paints clenched little miniatures—sarcophagus tight—but hurricanes through her apartment—upending spider plants, untuned accordions, coagulating pitchers of ruby-red sangria—**Desmonda**, thick-thighed and bosomy, overbrimming in her overalls, with paint in her hair, paint in her teeth.

"I bet you're the kind of girl who tells people she likes sex but never gets off," **Desmonda** will say the first time we do it. I won't agree or disagree. Instead I'll go limp, our lovemaking more like an exorcism than anything. Love that empties me out, leaves me clearheaded and light—or perhaps, light for lack of certainty.

Pierre isn't French, but he wants to be. We always do it standing up, his beard frothing against my neck, the smell of Brie. *Mon amour, mon cher. Le poisson et le lapin visiter l'hôpital.* He has very soft hands, from moisturizing constantly. Maybe he works for NASA; maybe he plays Chopin, his fingers spidering across piano keys. Either way, it's easy to feel superior to him.

Once, I meet **Pierre's** mother. He and I will be in the tub when she walks in. He'll be upset, but I won't mind. I'll be seven years older than him, but he won't know that.

Max and I never touch. **Max** wears a big hooded sweatshirt and has close-cropped hair, and I'm not even sure if **Max** is a he or a she because **Max** never tells me and because it seems like a weird thing to ask, and really, in the end, I didn't care, because both of us sitting on **Max's** futon, staring the shit out of each other, breathing all over one another, Pink Floyd drooling in the background, that will seem like all I need. That will seem like enough.

Brad Pitt. Doesn't he belong on a list like this?

Ty & Cy are on vacation from their gymnastics troop. Actually, they aren't on vacation so much as playing hooky in my beachside bungalow—I'll have quit my job by then; I'll have inherited lots of money—and all three of us will spend our days building forts out of sofa cushions, or monkeying from ceiling fans, or balancing on top of one another to reach the back of my cupboard where, some years ago, a previous owner left a bottle of dark purple port. We'll drink it and smack our lips and leave purple kisses like leopard spots across each other's skin. Ty & Cy are compact, elastic people. They are also very understanding. They understand when I don't want to show them baby pictures, or talk about eighth grade—when I first started menstruating and bled through my gym shorts—or how I don't fear loneliness, but suffer from it, terribly. Instead we'll play the longest game of Twister ever, all of us knotting, gnarled and Gordian, our limbs bending skyward so that all ways are up.

Hillary Clinton.

Condoleezza Rice.

Joan of Arc.

Or maybe not Joan of Arc, but rather **Someone in Joan of Arc's Army**, turned spiritual by proxy. **Someone in Joan of Arc's Army** who began believing in the unseen, the invisible, and who might transfer that kind of faith to me.

In the backwoods of New Hampshire, **My Childhood Home**. A big-hipped farm house. White clapboards, black shutters. I'd start by saying, "Don't you remember me?" And then we'd both act like we remembered and no time had passed and it wasn't awkward at all. But then, once we got going, it would feel kind of incestuous. And the incestuousness wouldn't be as much of a turn-on as expected, either. Instead the whole thing would just be sort of clunky and dusty, full of giant spiders and dried juice spots and paper towels. We're both glad when it ends.

My Ethically Ambiguous Electrician—but not while he’s working.

Instead, after work, when he’s slumped on a couch, too stoned to speak, his hands thumbing a video-game console, his red eyes following *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*[®] as she cavorts across the screen.

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider[®], because she needs someone who can discuss archaeology without staring at her breasts. We’ll muse over Mayans; the stiff phalanxes of Quin Shi Huang’s Terracotta Army; an Inuit labyrinth dug under the snow. Both of us will wear crop tops and combat boots, our hair in sinewy braids. We’ll eat platters of bloody steak, snap fingers at our waiter until it sounds like a song. **Lara Croft: Tomb Raider**[®] will smile at me with pillowy lips. **Lara Croft: Tomb Raider**[®] will lean back in her chair, laughing at my jokes. (“Did you hear about the angry mummy? He flipped his lid.”) **Lara Croft: Tomb Raider**[®] will seem about to speak when—suddenly—a hatch will open in the ceiling, a ladder will come skidding down, dangling from a helicopter’s beastly cyclone roar, and I’ll wonder if this is one way people get taken to heaven.

Speaking of heaven: **F. Scott Fitzgerald**.

F. Scott Fitzgerald & Zelda Fitzgerald.

F. Scott Fitzgerald & Zelda Fitzgerald & Jay Gatsby & Daisy Buchanan & Tom Buchanan & Myrtle Wilson & Nick Carraway & Jordan Baker.

And then, **My Own Writing** (guiding my hand, knowing what’s best).

Also, **Someone Who Admires My Writing** (just to know what that’s like).

Or, maybe just **Someone Who Knows Me**. Knows things about me that I don’t know, and sometimes chooses to tell me those things, making both of us laugh.

Or cough awkwardly.

Or sigh with all the blustering force of memory.

Your car crawling through snow, ten yards back, white flakes coned by headlights, **That Time You Followed Me Home**. I wasn't sure if it was creepy or romantic. And because I wasn't sure, I drove extra slow, giving myself time to think, to savor that gnawing unknowing, the tight-breathed fusion of fear and delight, because, **That Time You Followed Me Home**, I felt the warm touch of your headlights—running like fingers along dark stands of trees, stroking the bare snowy road before rising to meet and mingle with my breath—that whole drive: one long tease.

Sappho—“be here, by me.”

Squanto, also known as “Tisquantum,” also known as “The Wrath of God,” if you actually translate his name, which was likely not his real name, at least not at first.

Mark Rothko, who was called “highly nervous, thin, restless,” by some friends. “A shaman” by others. Now “dead” by most people.

So perhaps instead: Rothko's **Orange, Red, Orange**, staring me down, staining my vision, soaking into every orifice—a blood transfusion of pigment, a fever blush—**Orange, Red, Orange**. Heat without temperature. Passion without sound.

Magenta, Black, Green, Orange.

Four Darks in Red.

Untitled (Black on Grey).

Your Shadow: flayed across a field of grass and buttercups. **Your Shadow**: a silhouette slenderized, monochromized, steamrolled. **Your Shadow**: curling tufts of hair, the hitch of cargo pants. I can curl up inside your chest, slither in your thigh. I can have you and not you—the best of both worlds—plus some buttercups.

IMAGINARY LOVERS

Existentialism is kinky but gracious. Lots of lights out—the whip crack of metaphysics—no pillow talk, just action. Lots of role-playing. Lots of days spent in the tub, choosing to let the water get cold. Choosing to stay, even when the phone rings—to prune pale and slimy—while Sartre, always, watches from the corner. Is this sex? “It’s sex if you think it’s sex,” someone once told me. A poet. Red-lipped and clumsy.

Is it love? I wonder now. Is it love if you think it’s love?

