

Nothing Like You



Lauren Strasnick

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When Holly loses her virginity to Paul, a guy she barely knows, she assumes their encounter is a one-night stand. After all, Paul is too popular to even be speaking to Holly and he happens to have a long-term girlfriend, Saskia. But ever since Holly's mom died six months ago, Holly has been numb to the world, and she's getting desperate to feel something, anything—so when Paul keeps pursuing her, Holly relents. Paul's kisses are a welcome diversion and it's nice to feel like the kind of girl that a guy like Paul would choose. But things aren't so simple with Saskia around. Paul's real girlfriend is willowy and perfect and nothing like Holly. To make matters worse, she and Holly are becoming friends. Suddenly the consequences of Holly's choices are all too real, and Holly stands to lose more than she ever realized she had.

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1.

We were parked at Point Dume, Paul and I, the two of us tangled together, half dressed, half not. Paul's car smelled like sea air and stale smoke, and from his rearview hung a yellow and pink plastic lanyard that swayed with the breeze drifting in through the open car window. I hung on to Paul, thinking, *I like your face, I love your hands, let's do this, let's do this, let's do this*, one arm locked around the back of his head, the other wedged between two scratched-up leather seat cushions, bracing myself against the pain while wondering, idly, if this feels any different when you love the person or when you do it lying down on a bed.

This was the same beach where I'd spent millions of mornings with my mother, wading around at low tide searching for sea anemone and orange and purple starfish. It had cliffs and crashing waves and seemed like the appropriate place to do something utterly unoriginal, like lose my virginity in the backseat of some guy's dinged-up, bright red BMW.

I didn't really know Paul but that didn't really matter. There we were, making sappy, sandy memories on the Malibu Shore, fifteen miles from home. It was nine p.m. on a school night. I needed to be back by ten.

"That was nice," he said, dragging a hand down the back of my head through my hair.

"Mm," I nodded, not really sure what to say back. I hadn't realized the moment was over, but there it was—our unceremonious end. "It's getting late, right?" I dragged my jeans over my lap. "Maybe you should take me home?"

“Yeah, absolutely,” Paul shimmied backwards, buttoning his pants. “I’ll get you home.” He wrinkled his nose, smiled, then swung his legs over the armrest and into the driver’s side seat.

“Thanks,” I said, trying my best to seem casual and upbeat, hiking my underwear and jeans back on, then creeping forward so we were seated side by side.

“You ready?” he asked, pinching an unlit cigarette between his bottom and top teeth.

“Sure thing.” I buckled my seat belt and watched Paul run the head of a Zippo against the side seam on his pants, igniting a tiny flame. I turned my head toward the window and pressed my nose against the glass. There, in the not-so-far-off distance, an orange glow lit the sky, gleaming bright. *Brushfire*, I thought. *Perfect*.

“Remind me, again?” He jangled his car keys.

“Hillside. Off Topanga Canyon.”

“Right, sorry.” He lit his cigarette and turned the ignition. “I’m shit with directions.”

2.

Topanga was burning.

Helicopters swarmed overhead dumping water and red glop all over fiery shrubs and mulch. The air tasted sour and chalky and my eyes and throat burned from the blaze. Flaming hills, thick smoke—this used to seriously freak me out. Now, though, I sort of liked it. My whole town tinted orange and smelling like barbecue and burnt pine needles.

I was standing in my driveway, Harry's leash wrapped twice around my wrist. We watched the smoke rise and billow behind my house and I thought: *This is what nuclear war must look like. Mushroom clouds and raining ash.* I bent down, kissed Harry's dry nose, and scratched hard behind his ears. "One quick walk," I said. "Just down the hill and back."

He barked.

We sped through the canyon. Past tree swings and chopped wood and old RVs parked on lawns. Past the plank bridge that crosses the dried-out ravine, the Topanga Christian Fellowship with its peeling blue and white sign, the Christian Science Church, the Topanga Equestrian Center with the horses on the hill and the fancy veggie restaurant down below in their shadow. That day, the horses were indoors, shielded from the muddy, smoky air. Harry and I U-turned at the little hippie gift shop attached to the fancy veggie restaurant, and started back up the hill to my house.

Barely anyone was out on the road. It was dusky out, almost dark, so we ran the rest of the way home. I let Harry off his leash once we'd reached my driveway, then followed him around back to The Shack.

“Knock, knock,” I said, rattling the flimsy tin door and pushing my way in. Nils was lying on his side reading an old issue of *National Geographic*. I kicked off my sneakers and dropped Harry’s leash on the ground, flinging myself down next to Nils and onto the open futon.

“Anything good?” I asked, grabbing the magazine from between his fingertips.

“Fruit bats,” he said, grabbing it back.

I shivered and rolled sideways, butting my head against his back.

“You cold?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Just a chill...”

He rolled over and looked at me. My eyes settled on his nose: long and straight and reassuring. “You freaked about the fire?” he asked.

I shrugged.

“They’ve got it all pretty much contained, you know. ’Least last time I checked.”

I grabbed a pillow off the floor and used it to prop up my head. Harry was sniffing around at my toes, licking and nibbling at my pinkie nail. I laughed.

“What?” said Nils. “What’s so funny?”

“Just Harry.” I shook my head.

“No, come on, what?”

I grabbed his magazine back. “Fruit bats,” I squealed, holding open the page with the fuzzy flying rodents. “I want one, okay? This year, for my birthday.”

“Sure thing, princess.” He moved closer to me, curling his legs to his chest. “Anything you say.”

Nils is my oldest friend. My next-door neighbor. This shack has been ours since we were ten. It was my dad's toolshed for about forty-five minutes—before Nils and I met, and took over. The Shack is its new name, given a ways back on my sixteenth birthday. Years ten through fifteen, we called it Clubhouse. Nils thought The Shack sounded much more grown up. I agree. The Shack has edge.

“Have you done all your reading for Kiminski's quiz tomorrow?”

“No” I said, flipping the page.

“Where were you last night, anyway? I came by but Jeff said you were out.”

Jeff is my dad, FYI. “I just went down to the beach for a bit.”

“Alone?” Nils asked.

“Yeah, alone,” I lied, dropping Nils's magazine and flipping onto my side.

Nils didn't need to know about Paul Bennett or any other boy in my life. Nils had, at that point, roughly five new girlfriends each week. I'd stopped asking questions.

“Hols, should we study?”

“Put on Jethro Tull for two secs. We can study in a bit.” The weeks prior to this Nils and I had spent sorting through my mother's entire music collection, organizing all her old records, tapes, and CDs into categories on a shelf Jeff had built for The Shack.

“This song sucks,” shouted Nils over the first few bars of “Aqualung.” I raised one hand high in the air, rocking along while scanning her collection for other tapes we might like.

“Hols?”

“Yeah?”

“Your mom had shit taste in music.”

I squinted. “You *so* know you love it. Admit it. You *love* Jethro Tull.”

“I do. I love Jethro Tull.” He was looking at me. His eyes looked kind of misty. *Don't say it, Nils, please don't say it*, I thought. “I miss your mom.” He said it.

I sat up. “Buck up, little boy. She’s watching us from a happy little cloud in the sky, okay?”

He tugged at my hair. “How come you never get sad, Holly? I think it’s weird you don’t ever get sad.”

“I *do* get sad,” I said, standing up. Dusting some dirt off my butt. “Just because you don’t see it doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”

3.

School.

7:44 a.m. and I was rushing down the hall toward World History with my coffee sloshing everywhere and one lock of sopping wet hair whipping me in the face. I got one “Hey,” and two or three half-smiles from passersby right before sliding into my seat just as the bell went *ding ding ding*.

Ms. Stein was set to go with her number two pencil, counting heads, “. . . sixteen, seventeen . . . who’s missing? Saskia? You here? Has anyone seen Saskia?” As if on cue, Saskia Van Wyck came racing through the door, *clickity-clack* in her shiny black flats, plopping down in the empty seat to my left. “I’m here, sorry! I’m right here,” she said, dragging the back of her hand dramatically across her brow. *Adorable*. I slurped my coffee.

“Take out your books, people. Let’s read until eight fifteen, then we’ll discuss chapters nine and ten. ’Kay?”

I pulled my book from my bag and glanced to my left.

Saskia Van Wyck. Paul Bennett’s girlfriend-slash-ex-girlfriend. I barely knew her. I only knew that she was skinny, pretty, marginally popular, and lived in this old adobe house just off the PCH, wedged right in between my favorite Del Taco and the old crappy gas station on Valley View Drive. I’d been there once, in sixth grade, for a birthday party, where no more than four kids showed up, but I remembered things: her turquoise blue bedroom walls. An avocado tree. A naked Barbie and a stuffed brown bear she kept hidden under her twin wrought-iron bed.

Saskia leaned toward me. “Do you have a highlighter or a pen or something I could borrow?”

“Yeah, okay.” I reached into the front pocket of my backpack and pulled out a mechanical pencil. “How’s this?” Suddenly I had a flash of that chart they show you in tenth grade Sex Ed—How STDs Spread: *Billy sleeps with Kim who sleeps with Bobby who does it to Saskia who really gives it to Paul who sleeps with Holly, which makes Holly a big whore-y ho-bag who’s slept with the entire school.*

“That’s great,” said Saskia, smiling. “Thanks.”

I nodded back.