

ALLISON GRACE MYERS

Foreign

Alyssa and Esther are friends only by default. They are always together, alone, so everyone assumes they are close.

At their table at the back of the lunchroom, Alyssa watches Esther open her plastic lunchbox with unnecessary care, like it's a legal briefcase. She removes a saran-wrapped sandwich with equal solemn delicacy, places a paper napkin on her lap, and smoothes out the wrinkles before taking her first bite.

"How was your weekend?" Alyssa asks.

"Pretty good."

"Do anything cool?"

"Not really. My mom took me shopping."

Alyssa finds Esther profoundly boring, but at least she is quiet, and moderately intelligent. They don't have anything in common, though—besides their unwillingness to make other friends. Esther likes to read novels about dragons, which have small textured bubbles decorating their jacket-covers like braille. She has never read Jane Austen, and has no sense of irony. That might be an Asian thing, but Alyssa tries not to generalize, since Esther is the only Asian she's ever known.

Esther's polite Korean family—with their strict curfews and soft careful way of saying nothing at all—is also the opposite of Alyssa's.

Once, trying to talk the way friends talk, Alyssa told Esther a story about the night her mother's boyfriend (the boyfriend before the current one) crashed his motorcycle into the side of their house. It was a funny story, kind of, and honest the way stories that friends tell each other are supposed to be. But Esther didn't laugh. She peered at Alyssa through her thick-rimmed glasses, as if she were an exotic creature at the zoo, and said politely, "I'm sorry."

At least Esther is preferable to the other girls at school, all uniformly obnoxious. Giggling at their overcrowded lunch-tables, their bony bodies contort like muscle spasms. Their iron-straightened hair swings dangerously close to their food. These girls don't worry about looking sloppy or undignified; they flaunt their carelessness as proof that they can afford to be unselfconscious. It doesn't matter if their laughs sound like chainsaws, because they're the ones in on the joke.

Alyssa is too sophisticated for anyone at this school. She always has been, and is especially now. These girls have never left the country—they've probably never even left Texas, and see no reason to. They go to football games with rowdy, immature boyfriends, but have never

done anything with a man. They drink kegs in their parents' living rooms and giggle endlessly.

The change in her, since summer, feels so visible that Alyssa is shocked people can't see it. But the giggling girls look at her and past her just as they always have. If they knew—if she were to tell them—they would see her differently. They would be surprised by her, and impressed. Not that she gives a shit about impressing them.

"What are you studying?"

Esther's head is bowed, her black hair covering her face, reading a textbook spread across her lap.

"Spanish. For the test tomorrow."

Alyssa twists a strand of her frizzy red hair between her fingers. "You know, the correct term is Castilian."

Esther doesn't look up from her book.

"Because, you know, there are different kinds of Spanish. In Barcelona, everyone speaks Catalán. Well, some people, anyway."

"I know," says Esther. "You've told me."

"But here, they only teach Castilian. As if that's the only language Spanish people speak! In Barcelona, you could probably get shot or something for calling it just plain Spanish. It's offensive."

Esther never seems interested in her Barcelona stories, but Alyssa keeps telling them anyway. She needs to tell someone—she needs someone to see the difference—and Esther is the one at her table.

Last spring, when Alyssa received the letter in the mail, she knew things were about to change.

Up to that point, her life had plodded forward without much happening at all. She knew she was the type of person who could rise above profound challenges, achieve greatness despite daunting obstacles, but she hadn't really been tested yet, hadn't been given much opportunity to prove herself. She'd always sensed that she was special among her peers—knew that she was not built for the narrow confines of her small town—but she had no way to substantiate her claims, not even to herself.

When she opened the letter in her mother's boyfriend's kitchen, she was certain that she would look back on this moment as the tearing of the curtain, the distinct separation between her old self and the new. *Congratulations, Alyssa! You have been chosen for the Young Explorers Scholarship. You will be spending an exciting, once-in-a-lifetime summer in Spain, studying the language, soaking up the culture . . .* It was a very enthusiastic letter.

No one she knew had ever studied abroad. One girl had done an exchange program in New York City, but that wasn't the same. Spain was romantic, ancient, extremely far away from Luling, Texas. Once news got around—and news always got around—people would treat her differently, she was sure of it.

Her mother was only mildly impressed. "Why fly all that way across the ocean, when you could spend the summer here? Relaxing. And make some extra cash at the store."

"They're giving me money. It's a *scholarship*."

Her mother shrugged, and turned back to the

sink of dirty dishes. “I don’t know. Going off to a foreign country all by yourself, not knowing a soul. Seems crazy to me. And it sure seems like a far ways to go to learn a little Spanish. But if it’s what you really want.”

“Of course it’s what she wants!” her mother’s boyfriend, Ray, yelled from the couch where he was watching TV. “If you got a free ride to Europe, wouldn’t you take it?”

“Nope,” she said proudly. “Not at her age.”

“Well, I sure as hell would.”

Her mother sighed. “You’re sure they pay for everything? The plane ride, and everything?”

“I told you, everything’s paid for by the scholarship. That’s the point. And I still have some money saved up, for going out to eat and stuff.”

“Listen to you: ‘going out to eat.’ Already so fancy.”

“Give the kid a break,” Ray said. “Alyssa, you gonna find yourself a hot European guy?”

Alyssa blushed. Ray was often asking her about the boys at school, giving her needless dating advice. It was always embarrassing to talk about that stuff, but especially around her mother, who had her first kiss in the 2nd grade, her first real boyfriend in the 5th grade, and was pregnant by the age of seventeen. Not that Alyssa wanted to be anything like her mother, but it was embarrassing that she was so far behind. She was already fifteen and hadn’t been kissed yet, or even had a real crush.

“I’ll bet you find yourself a love over there,” Ray continued, grinning. “What about Antonio

Banderas—you like him? I bet all the guys in Spain look like him. Just be careful, you know those Europeans—make sure to check beforehand that he’s not a fag.”

He winked, and Alyssa rolled her eyes at his ignorance. She disliked Ray, but not as much as some of the others. Even with his small-minded opinions and obnoxious jokes, he was generally a decent guy, and often took her side in arguments. He might even be her favorite of her mom’s boyfriends so far.

At school Alyssa tried to drop hints. She asked girls that she’d hardly ever spoken to what their summer plans were, just so she could answer in return. “Working at a summer camp, hm? That’s cool. I’m studying abroad in Barcelona. That’s a city in Spain.” Usually the girls nodded politely, half-listening, offered congratulations without enthusiasm. Half the time they probably didn’t believe her.

Esther smiled kindly at the news. “That sounds like fun,” she said.

“I’ll be gone the whole summer.” Alyssa hoped to detect some envy, or at least disappointment, in her friend’s face, but Esther didn’t seem to mind the thought of a summer without her.

“I’m doing math camp again,” she said, and Alyssa said, “That’ll be fun, too.”

Barcelona was hotter than she had expected. The other girls in her program wore tiny skirts and spaghetti-strap tops, but Alyssa had packed only jeans. During orientation, while the other students chatted and laughed as if they had been

friends since birth, Alyssa sat silently, increasingly aware of the sweat patches on her shirt and the stickiness of her face.

She had imagined that in Spain she would instantly fit in—that as soon as she stepped off the plane she would slip into the rhythm of this beautiful, sophisticated country, and immediately feel as if she had returned to her true home. She thought it would be obvious, to herself and everyone else, that the problem all along had not been her frizzy hair or nervous personality or disaster of a family, but simply that she'd been born on the wrong continent.

Unfortunately, the other Young Explorers in her program—tenth graders mainly excited about exploring the lenient alcohol laws—were just as ambivalent towards her as her schoolmates back home. Most of them hailed from private schools in New England, and spoke with funny accents, and had already visited Europe before (usually France or London) with their families. Alyssa stood out among them like a foreigner.

Her new roommate, a blonde Jersey girl wearing makeup too dark for her face, greeted her with an improbable grin. “Hey, I’m Lauren!” she said. “Where are you from?” Alyssa knew instantly that they would never be friends. After a few minutes of small talk, Lauren wandered out of the room to visit someone down the hall. It was not suggested that Alyssa come along. I didn’t come all this way to spend time with Americans anyway, she reassured herself.

Alyssa spent her first free Saturday, after a week of classes, wandering the city alone.

She tried to lose herself in the soaring, chaotic architecture, the way the sunlight curved and folded into the cobblestone streets—a light that looked completely different than the harsh, sheet-metal sunshine of Texas—the rumble of so many tourists’ languages all converging into one white noise. She wasn’t sure if she liked Barcelona itself—so modern and loud and not as idyllic as she’d imagined—but she liked the novelty of it, the thrill of not recognizing street names and the feeling of being lost.

For lunch, she chose the sidewalk café that seemed the most authentically Spanish. She ordered a coffee and a ham sandwich, and pulled out a book. During the summers in Texas, when she had little else to do, she used to spend five or six hours a day reading in her bedroom, trying to block out the sounds of the TV in the living room, the rattling air-conditioner, the dog barking at every sighted squirrel. Reading a book alone in a Barcelona café, though, made her feel like a new person. The loneliness was different, more magical, even if the activity was the same.

As she sipped her coffee, conditioning herself to the bitter taste because it seemed more adult than soda, she sensed a pair of eyes on her. The man at the next table—probably in his late-thirties, with thick black hair curved over his head like a helmet—was smiling at her.

“Que tál, guapa?” he said.

“Hola,” she said. It sounded false to her ears, even such a simple, obvious word.

“You are American, no?”

She nodded, ashamed.

"You are very beautiful."

Blushing and laughing awkwardly, too loudly, Alyssa looked down at the table. She moved a frizzy strand of red hair out of her face with her fingers. "Gracias," she managed to say.

"Where are you from?"

"Estoy—I mean, soy de, um . . ."

The man chuckled. "You don't need to speak Spanish. I speak English. Very well, no?"

"Yes. Very well." She was disappointed that she wouldn't get to practice. "I'm from Texas."

"Texas. You like Bush, then."

"No. But most people in Texas do."

He smiled, and it made her heart race. Not because it was a particularly attractive smile—his teeth were very crooked and very small—but because he was smiling at her.

"What book do you read?"

She showed him the cover of *The First Forty-Nine Stories*.

"Ah, yes. All the Americans, they read the Ernest Hemingway when they come here. They think he's Spanish, almost, like he will help understand Spain."

"That's not why I'm reading it," Alyssa said quickly. "I don't even like Hemingway that much."

They talked for perhaps twenty minutes. The man's name, unfortunately, was Alex, but besides that, he was exactly what Alyssa had imagined Spanish men to be: charming, sophisticated, and good-naturedly anti-American. His eyelashes were long and feminine, curling around his small green eyes. Alyssa wasn't accustomed to

attracting male attention. This was the first man, besides her creepy Uncle Jerry, to ever tell her she was beautiful.

"Have you seen the Cathedral yet?" Alex asked.

She decided to tell people at home that his name was Santiago.

"The one by Gaudi, with all the construction still going on? I've walked by it, but haven't taken the tour yet. It's fascinating. Definitely not like any cathedral I've ever seen, or imagined!"

"No, guapa, the *old* Cathedral."

"Oh."

"I can take you, if you like."

She hesitated at first, muttering half-hearted excuses. Then she laughed self-consciously and agreed.

They left Las Ramblas and wandered through a maze of small, quaint streets with cobblestone sidewalks and doors painted blue. This part of the city felt more European to her than the other more modern neighborhoods she had been exploring. She made a note on her pocket-sized map to return.

"Here it is," Alex said, pointing.

The Cathedral was not up on a hill, or introduced by an important garden. It was nestled like a secret on an otherwise nondescript block. Its grey spires reached up from obscurity to the sky, praying to be noticed.

Alyssa tried to express to Alex how much she liked this sense of subtlety, and he laughed at her. "This is only the side," he said.

The front entrance was more conspicuous,

more obviously impressive. There was a staircase leading up to the church, and a plaza bustling with tourists and jewelry vendors. The gothic designs on the façade, like thousands of little miniature steeples carved into the stone, were geometrically perfect, dancing with one another.

Alyssa thought of the Baptist church near her house: bland and square and white. It had a single, stout steeple, which quite possibly was made of plastic. Alyssa, who officially declared herself an atheist in 5th grade, had always pitied the pious churchgoers in her Texas town for their silly, clichéd beliefs, for their narrow world-views and their lack of imagination. Now she pitied them for their blind aesthetic naiveté, in addition to their blind faith. Didn't they know what a church was supposed to look like? Didn't they know a church was supposed to look like *this*?

"It's beautiful," she said, wishing she had the courage to say it in Spanish.

"Should we enter?"

"I'm not religious."

She hoped this would atone for her sin of reading Hemingway in Spain, and convince Alex of her sophistication.

He grinned. "Good. But you don't need religion to enter."

"It's beautiful," she said again.

"Como tú," said Alex.

He purchased two sets of headphones for the Cathedral's self-guided tour. Alyssa couldn't figure out how to program her audio to English, and she felt silly asking for help, so she listened

to the tour in Spanish, understanding perhaps every third word. She wouldn't have been able to concentrate on the tour-guide's descriptions, anyway.

They wandered the church together in silence, pausing to gaze at the ancient paintings and the ornate chapels. Alyssa was overwhelmed by the soaring beauty of every careful detail, overwhelmed by how much she didn't know about the world. Alex placed his hand lightly on her back when they were examining a large golden crucifix, and again when they were looking into the crypt.

Afterwards, Alex asked her to join him for wine; his apartment was only a few blocks away. Alyssa wondered if he had any idea of her age, if he could tell that she had never had wine or alcohol at all. She wondered if he found her frizzy red hair attractive, or if he liked her despite the hair.

Alex opened a bottle of red wine and placed a bowl of olives on the coffee-table. Alyssa sat at one end of the couch, and Alex sat very close to her. He poured, handed her a glass.

"Careful, don't hold it like this. This way." He took her hand and fixed it more correctly around the stem. "Salúd," he said, "Cheers."

She took a sip. It was bitter on her tongue, in a different way than the coffee, and scratchy on her throat, but after she swallowed there mingled with the bitterness a taste of berries that was a little sweet. After a few more sips, she decided she didn't completely hate it.

Alex's apartment was small and clean, with

abstract paintings on the walls but no photographs on the shelves or the mantle. In the corner of the living room was a birdcage with a yellow parakeet inside. Every time it squawked, Alyssa would jump and Alex would say, very politely, like the bird was someone else's small child who was too sensitive to be disciplined, "Romeo, quiet please."

"So. You study in Barcelona?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, it's an exchange program."

"What do you study?"

"Spanish, mostly."

"And in Texas? What is your favorite area of study?"

"English," Alyssa said.

Alex laughed. "Why do you study English? You already know the language."

"Literature, I mean. English means literature."

"You like literature?"

"I do."

"Hemingway."

"Sometimes. I don't like him *that* much, I was just reading that book because . . ."

"What is your favorite story by Ernest Hemingway?" Alex asked. "I have read some."

There were very few subjects that Alyssa felt confident discussing, and she was glad they were on the topic of books. If Alex had wanted to discuss the wine or Spanish art, she would have felt like an idiot.

"Probably my favorite's called 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Something'—I don't remember the name exactly. It's about hunting in Africa."

"Have you ever been hunting?"

"No."

"Why do you like the story of hunting?"

"It's not just about hunting. It's about this guy who's a coward, Francis Somebody, who suddenly gets courage at the very end of his life. Like, it took him a long time to grow up from a boy into a man, but he finally does, late in life. And the hunting trip in Africa is kind of a symbol of that. And then his wife kills him."

"Hm. Are there any love stories in that book?"

"Some are love stories, I guess."

"But those you don't like?"

Alyssa shrugged. "I don't know if any of them are really love stories."

"You prefer hunting stories."

He poured himself more wine, and more into her glass too, even though hers was still half-full. She felt young. She couldn't decide if she wanted to impress Alex or if she wanted to leave.

"Is this okay?" he asked, putting his arm around her shoulder. She didn't respond. "Do you have a boyfriend?" She shook her head. "Why not?"

"The boys in my town are all stupid."

What a silly thing to say. She had finished the wine in her glass and was having trouble saying exactly what she meant.

"I mean, I guess I'm not attracted to anyone in school. They are all very immature."

"You are very mature," said Alex. "Interested in older men."

"Maybe," Alyssa said. It's true, that is what she had always assumed. She had never been interested in any boys from home, and she'd

told herself, and told her mother and Esther, that it was because she was more sophisticated. She figured that she needed a man like this—someone mature, cosmopolitan, with books on his shelf and a string of broken love affairs in his past—if she were ever to fall in love.

But now she wasn't so sure. She wanted to *want* to kiss Alex. She was disappointed to discover she didn't—not all that much. But when he leaned in, she didn't protest. Her desire to have the experience itself—to reach a milestone, and have the story to tell afterwards—was stronger than her desire to ask him to stop.

The next hour was hazy, both while it was happening and especially afterwards. She remembered things that occurred but not the process as a whole, a slideshow with flashes and gaps.

His couch was scratchy, like the wine. The music on the stereo was romantic and Spanish, but too loud, so loud that Alex didn't seem to hear most of the things she said. When he removed his shirt, which took her by surprise, his stomach was thin and white and hairy, and so were his arms and his legs. Every part of him moved in fast jerky motions, and when she asked him to slow down, he couldn't hear her over the stereo.

At some point, she stopped trying to say anything, just focused on the music and the sound of Romeo, the squawking bird. She tried to remind herself how important this was, how jealous people would be.

At one point she was alone on the couch, barely

crying, and at one point she was imagining Alex as Jane Austen's John Willoughby. Most of the time she was imagining that he wasn't there at all.

Later that night, she was dressed and showered and outside on the sidewalk. The sun was setting behind the Cathedral, crowning the spires with blurry, orange haloes. Alex's phone number was scribbled on her hand, and a book of Spanish poetry he had given her was tucked under her arm.

She wanted to go back into the Cathedral, but she didn't. Instead, she walked the cobblestone streets aimlessly for a while, then returned to her dorm where her roommate was having a party. Alyssa crawled into bed in the middle of their drinking game. She pulled the covers over her head and closed her eyes.

Back in Texas, people don't ask many questions about her time in Spain. Most people, like her mother and Esther, are jealous. That's to be expected in a town like this.

The only person who has seemed interested in hearing about her adventures is Ray, her mother's boyfriend. The night she got back, her mom was working the late-shift, so Ray picked her up from the airport. An open can of Shiner was rattling in the cup-holder of his truck. Alyssa was jet-lagged, and surprised by her twinge of nostalgia for home.

"So, tell me all about your trip," he said, genuinely excited. "Barcelona, right? Was it a big city like New York, or smaller than that?"

“Big like New York, I guess. Maybe a little smaller.”

“What was it like? Did you love it?”

“Barcelona’s beautiful,” she said, too exhausted to sound as passionate as she would have liked. “There are all these buildings by this architect named Gaudí, who builds kind of crazy designs with weird colors and curves.”

“Sounds cool.”

“It was.”

“And they eat something called *tapas*, right?”

“Yeah, they’re small dishes – like little breads with meats and cheeses or interesting spreads on them. Or really anything small, instead of a big meal. The food was great.” Actually, her free meal-plan at school had been at a cafeteria serving all-American fare, so she rarely got a chance to go out for *tapas*. But on the occasions that she did, she *had* really enjoyed them.

“Maybe I’ll get to go to Spain sometime,” Ray said. “Think I’d like it?”

“Definitely,” she lied.

When they got home, he offered her a beer for the first time. “Just don’t tell your mom,” he said with a grin. It was like he could sense her new adulthood and was trying to help her celebrate it. The beer tasted horrible. She poured most of it down the sink while he was watching TV.

Alyssa watches Esther chew her sandwich in silence. She’s been back in school now for a week, and she feels just as out of place as ever. All across the lunchroom, girls at other tables cackle endlessly at their own private jokes, speaking a

language that Alyssa can’t understand.

It’s time to tell Esther about Alex, she decides. She needs to tell someone, and Esther is her default friend.

Alyssa launches into the story unexpectedly, and it doesn’t go very well. She has already forgotten a lot of the flirtatious details, and mentions the bird a few too many times, perhaps. She hopes she gets better with practice.

When she is finished, Esther nods politely. “He sounds kind of creepy,” is all she says.

“He wasn’t creepy. He was very mature.”

Esther shrugs, and looks back down at her textbook.

“Why’s his name Alex? That doesn’t sound very Spanish.”

Alyssa hates Esther. Everyone at this school has too small of a life to understand; none of them would be able to appreciate the way the sunlight folded around the buildings in Barcelona, or the way the Gaudí architecture seemed to fly away from where it stood. She still wants to tell them, though—that’s the worst part. She hates how desperately she wants them to know.

As she looks around the lunchroom, she fantasizes about telling her story to the giggling girls at the popular tables. In answer to a routine question about her summer vacation, she would answer, casually, “Well, I met an older man—an older Spanish man. In Spain.”

“How sexy,” they would say, half-kidding, with side-glances at each other, because they wouldn’t believe her at first.

“Yes, he was. Very sexy.”

They would only start to believe her as she added in the details. “We met at a little café, drinking coffee. He showed me around the city, took me inside an amazing cathedral. Then, we went back to his apartment, had a little wine . . .”

She would tell them about the romantic music, the green eyes, the book of poetry—which she ended up leaving in Spain, actually,

but she remembers the title. The girls would try to disguise their admiration.

She would change his name to Santiago, for the benefit of the story. She had meant to change the name for Esther, but forgot. She would leave out the bird and, of course, the part where she cried. That part, and other parts too, she doesn’t even tell herself. 