

Rewind by SK

Assigned seating in English is ruthless, making you fail the Bechdel test for the third time this week. It's like you're stuck in a time loop. Their squawking descends into a hush when you join the table. You open your pencil case, already feeling the cassette tape rewind, the spool spinning back into place. Maybe if you keep your eyes glued to the worksheet, they won't bother you. They'll lose themselves in deciphering a boy's monosyllabic texts, or comparing Timothee Chalamet's cheekbones over the years. The minutes will tick by, and you can walk away with no homework for the weekend. You scan your annotated copy of *The Great Gatsby*, halfway through the first question, when you feel her blue eyes on you. She mispronounces your name confidently, clicking her highlighter lid open and close. It's started again.

"What about you?" she says.

"What?"

She exchanges a look with the others. You turn your attention back to the worksheet, trying to catch your train of thought from the incomplete sentence. She tilts her head, twirling a strand of glossy hair. Her eyes have fingers, and you're suddenly conscious of your frizzy hair and chewed nails.

"What's been going on with you? Are you seeing anyone?"

"No."

"A crush then?"

You shift uncomfortably in your seat. "I guess not."

"Come on, that can't be true," chirps another. "We won't tell anyone."

They stare intently. The cassette tape is in full motion now. You glance around the room, wondering what excuse will suffice. The boys in the back are watching a live football match, the commentary blaring from an iPhone, while the substitute teacher cowers behind a stack of paperwork.

"Is he here? Like in the room," says the brunette beside you, trying to follow your gaze.

"Or she..." says the blue-eyed girl, leaning forward to rest her elbow on your worksheet. A smirk curls at the corner of her mouth.

"I don't like anyone right now." You try to keep your voice even, hoping they don't notice your hands fidgeting under the table.

"But there has to be someone."

You consider whose name would be the most harmless. Someone who you could later explain yourself to, say it was all a misunderstanding, a rumour even. A guy friend then, but what if he didn't believe you? Everything would become painfully awkward. A female friend could work but you think of whispers following you down hallways, girls inching away if you sat too close — no, a common crush in the class would be safer. Your answer would likely be forgotten by the end of the period.

“So?” She taps her painted nails on the edge of your jumper.

“It’s not a big deal,” adds the brunette.

You hesitate, trying to race through the different names and just pick one.

“What about a celebrity crush then?”

It’s an olive branch, an easy throw. But not for you, because you don’t really know what that means. You’ve never had one before. You’ve stood on the sidelines as your friends blushed at a brush of the hand, giggled over shared glances, and agonised after replaying a casual conversation.

“Keanu Reeves,” you blurt out, not quite sure why.

She arches an eyebrow. The brunette squeals.

“Who?” asks the third.

“John Wick!” sighs the brunette. It clicks, you had walked past his movie poster plastered on a bus stop this morning.

“The Matrix,” you reply.

“Speed.”

“Constantine.”

“Wait, isn’t he like 60?” interrupts the third, reading from her laptop.

“He’s in his fifties,” clarifies the brunette. “And he was young once.”

You try to hide your smile as they google pictures of Keanu Reeves in the 90s.

“Why him?” asks the blue-eyed girl.

You shrug. “I don’t know, he seems like a nice person.”

“The Internet’s boyfriend for a reason,” pips the brunette.

“And his hair,” you say, hoping it sounds convincing enough. Off they go, bickering over which hairstyle suits him the best, and you lean back in your chair in relief, pick up your pencil and scan the next question on your worksheet. They are still huddled around a laptop, giggling and chatting, as you work your way through the class exercises. You have said enough for today. The bell rings, and you’re free to go.