



*The
Drug
Virgins*

JL Gillham

Don't cry. Do. Not. Cry. I inhale a slow, deep breath as I will myself to keep back my tears. It's been a mere two weeks since my mother's funeral, but I want Niagara Falls to dry up sooner rather than later.

I've been dreading lunchtime the most. All three previous years on sunny days Mom often swung by with wraps or salads from Safeway during her break as a cashier. We'd sit on one of the metal benches outside. When the elements worked against us, I snacked on trail mix between classes and instead devoured books in the library during my long break.

The renovations in the library were supposed to be done by the end of summer. A hastily scribbled piece of paper taped to the locked door informs me I've at least another week to wait until I can retreat here. With both of my usual options out, I trudge toward the cafeteria. After rounding the last corner, I see Candi, Queen of the Clucks, strolling out of the senior lounge followed by three ducklings. The one dimple on her left cheek makes a quick appearance until her grin is replaced by a flirty pout.

She twirls a strand of her golden-blond locks. I watch as Candi heads to the bathroom followed by the trio, each one gobbling up the nonsense Candi spits out. Their heels make clicking sounds as they scramble across the hallway to catch up to their leader.

I've got two options. If I turn left I'll be swallowed up in the noise of the cafeteria filled with freshmen, sophomores, and juniors all eating, talking, and texting at the same time. I crane my head to the right and notice the murmur is not only less likely to give me a headache, but there is also an odd floral scent. My nose leads me into the senior lounge.

The shuffle of my footsteps is muted by the tan carpet, a stark contrast to the hard floor of the cafeteria. Dark-brown wooden round tables are scattered around the room, each with different amounts of folding chairs. Although there are hardly any vacant seats, this place sounds more like the low chatter of a coffee shop than a stadium after a touchdown.

On top of each table is a clear plastic cup resting in the center. I bridge the short gap between the entrance and the closest table, which also happens to be the only empty one left. The metal chair is cold as I grip it and pull it out enough to sit down. I plan on dropping my backpack onto the other chair at the table, but it's further away than I realized. I'm too lazy to rise, walk to the seat, and place my bag on it, so instead I plop it onto the floor next to me.

Ready to block out the rest of the world, I snag my current distraction. It's a memoir of Beethoven that caught my eye when I strolled by a table displaying a handful of musician-focused books at the city library. I place the book on the table right next to my bag of trail mix.

My eyes peer down into the plastic cup, finally able to discover the origin of the scent. A yellow rose floats atop the water, devoid of any hint of a stem. I allow the perfume to fill my nostrils and then instantly regret it. A loud sneeze embarrasses me.

"Gesundheit," comes a female voice from behind me.

Before I can turn to add a face to the voice, she walks over to the empty chair, pulls it back so far it touches a boy's seat behind her, sits down, and puts her black Dr. Martens up on the table. I instantly recognize her from freshman-year Spanish, but can't recall her name. She's chopped off half of her honey-brown hair, which now reaches her shoulders. On each ear are matching

simple silver “X” earrings. Still surprised she’s joined me, I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

“You’d think the Student Government Association would fork over a cappuccino machine instead of flowers. I mean, how are these gonna help us stay awake on our first day back after a three-month-long party?” she asks while toying with the flower. The girl then pulls it out of the cup, gives it a quick shake, and pins it behind her ear. “How do I look?” she asks, this time staring right into my eyes.

Before I can come up with a witty response, or any response at all, the flower falls onto the table face down.

“You killed it,” says the boy from the nearby table. His chair is touching my uninvited guest’s seat. He stands and walks over to Evie, but has his eyes fixed on me. This boy’s golden-blond hair is perfectly trimmed. As he smiles, one dimple on his left cheek reveals itself. Candi’s one dimple and matching hair tone fills my mind. This must be her brother.

“Nah. Must’ve gotten a sniff of your cologne,” Evie says while stretching.

I’m guessing they already know each other by the way they seem to fall into conversation so easily.

“Ode, de gym class,” he responds. The cobalt-blue jacket he’s wearing has “Bulldogs Lacrosse” embroidered on the upper left. It’s unzipped and slightly reveals a white Earth Crisis shirt. I’ve seen him in the halls, but never talked to him before.

“Gross,” I blurt out with a look of obvious disgust painting my face.

The girl plugs her nose with one hand then uses the other to fan in front of herself. “Just kidding, Luca. You know I love your scent. Polo, right? Mumsie’s always gets it for my dad on Father’s Day,” she says.

A low rumble comes from my stomach. I hope I’m the only one who heard that! I snatch my lunch. The act of ripping off part of the plastic bag of trail mix doesn’t make a sound. I pretend to busy myself examining the dried mango.

“It’s Evie, by the way,” the girl says, looking at me.

“I think we had Spanish together,” I reply, surprised at my slightly upbeat tone.

“Si, señor,” Evie states.

“I think you mean señorita,” Luca responds. He’s still staring at me, though his conversation is clearly with Evie.

I look away embarrassed, wondering if his stare relates to realizing I’m “that girl,” the one whose mother’s car crash made the front page of the local paper. A shudder ripples through me as I attempt to avoid recalling the photo of metal meeting metal. One rainy night plus one sharp turn equals a broken lamp pole *and* a broken family.

“Who’s your friend?” Luca asks, glancing at Evie.

“Columbia,” Evie answers in more of a question than an answer.

She must be better with names than other languages, I think to myself. “Cola,” I say, correcting her. I glance up to see if the boy is still staring at me. His head is cocked, and it looks like he’s trying to read the title of my book upside down.

“Beethoven. Sweet,” he states. Then he adds, “I’m Luca, by the way.”

I force myself to smile, even though all I want to do is crawl under the table and hide.

“You should come to the show tonight,” Luca says. He turns around and heads back to his chair.

At first I think he’s going to sit back down. The frown pulling the corners of my lips down surprises me. I lick my lips to keep from revealing my disappointment. Then, to my surprise, he digs in his backpack and pulls out a stack of pumpkin-orange flyers and puts them on Evie’s and my table. Luca takes the one on top and hands it to me.

I scroll down the entire paper in a few seconds. Before I have a chance to ask which band is his, he speaks up.

“We’re Bottle Mutiny,” Luca says without a hint of embarrassment. “But we’re not playing tonight.”

“Bottle Mutiny?” I furrow my eyebrows as I repeat him, unable to stop my mocking tone.

Luca clears his throat then begins speaking. “It’s a play on the term Straight Edge, being anti anything related to drugs or alcohol.” Luca shrugs his shoulders then continues. “The name’s a work in progress.”

“You should change it to The Drug Virgins or The Straight Edge Band,” I blurt out before thinking about what I’m saying. I bite my lip, worried Luca will think the idea is terrible.

“That’s a great idea,” Luca says before I can begin back pedalling.

His eyes make their way to Evie’s and my table and land on my trail mix. Wordlessly, I offer him the bag. He moves to my right, close to my backpack. I watch as he opens the snack bag and dumps half the contents into his mouth. Hopefully the vending machine has some decent munchies in it this year, because half a bag of trail mix won’t cut it.

Normally, I also have a couple pieces of fruit and a water bottle, but without mom’s income our pantry is almost empty. At least there’s a bag of chips waiting at home for me.

“I prefer the name Bottle Mutiny,” a girl says from out of nowhere. Her pale skin is odd considering it’s the end of summer. Even though the air conditioning is cranking, she wears a topaz cotton scarf. It covers her bare neck and almost touches the bottom of her pixie haircut. Her simple white shirt and jean skirt resemble my own outfit, except her scarf gives her a hint of sophistication. And the fact that she’s in something more feminine compared to my jeans.

“It’s so avant garde,” she continues.

I glance in Evie’s direction. Evie’s rolling her eyes then shakes her head in disgust at how over the top this fangirl is.

I can't help but laugh out loud. The act of laughing feels foreign. It's as if the muscles around my mouth atrophied from lack of smiling. Not only are Luca's eyes on me, but also those of the students at nearby tables. I need to come up with a quick response.

"Cola choked on a nut," Evie says, coming to my rescue. Her eyes are sparkling as she stares at me. Our own private joke. Yes, it's at the other girl's expense, but laughing feels so good. It's been weeks since I wore anything but a frown.

The girl in the scarf huffs and walks away. To my surprise, Luca grabs all of his belongings, including the stack of flyers, and heads toward her.

Our lunch break goes quickly. As I rise to leave, Evie begins to walk past me but pauses to rest her hand on my arm.

"See ya in a few hours," Evie states, like there is no doubt in her mind I'm going.

Evie's strolling away before I can tell her instead of joining her tonight I'm going to drown myself in the ridiculous amount of homework given, considering it's the first day back at school. I hope she's not too disappointed. The path leading toward the vending machine is overflowing with students, but I elbow my way through.

While browsing the options, I grimace. There is nothing but carbs and high fructose corn syrup. After purchasing a bottle of water and Doritos, I open the bag. I plan on walking and eating, but right before I enter history Luca brushes past me and through the door. A sigh escapes my lips as I toss the uneaten snack into the trash. I decide it's better to have a rumbling tummy than bad breath. Then I practice my casual smile to give Luca when I pretend to realize we have a class together.

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Still upset I didn't get a chance to chat with Luca earlier, I take an empty seat in the second row of my last class today. When I look up at the board, I notice there are no notes written and no teacher bustling around like a kid whose put off cleaning their room until hearing mom climb the steps. To my surprise, someone behind me taps me on the shoulder.

"Cola," Evie says, with a tone of excitement which sounds genuine.

I turn around to face her. "Hi, Evie," I say. My heart begins to race like when I thought I was going to miss the bus this morning. Is this where she ambushes me with questions about my mother's accident? After a slow breath in through the nose and out through the mouth, I force the panic to let its foot off the gas.

"I'm so excited we have a class together," she begins then, after a pause, rolls her eyes and adds, "It's just too bad it's history. So boring."

I give her a forced smile. The nerdy part of me has been looking forward to this class the most today.

"Phone," she says and reaches her hand out to me.

I don't respond, but narrow my eyes.

“Cell phone,” she states matter-of-factly. “So I can put my number in it, of course. Or do you only use an app? I prefer Voxer, but Mumsie and Dad always message me on Facebook.”

I bite my lip, too embarrassed to speak. Evie stares at me like I’m a child who forgot how to spell her first name. When I shrug my shoulders, her eyes widen.

“Oh, sorry,” she says. Then she begins drumming her fingers on the table. “That’ll make things a lot more difficult.” She’s staring off into space.

I’m about to turn back around, hopeful the teacher has arrived to save me from any more embarrassment. Before I do, Evie speaks up.

“Anyway, you should probably change into shorts before tonight. Then again, an extra layer of covering might help the bruises be a shade lighter,” she says, rambling.

I open my mouth about to ask her what she’s talking about. She must pick up on my confusion.

“The pit,” she says, making me feel like an unschooled child again.

The first thing which comes to mind is a fire pit. I imagine bands playing violently in the background as the crowd dumps over barrels of burning embers and begins walking across them like the Hawaiian fire walkers I’ve seen on The Discovery Channel.

“It’s amazing,” Evie says, with a starry look in her eyes like she’s talking about a hot guy. “There’s nothing like it. As the music blares, every part of your body is on high alert. Your pulse races like you’re about to skydive. Who needs a shot of alcohol with an energy like that?” she finishes.

The way she’s explaining what I realize is a mosh pit reminds me of a religious person sharing about his or her faith. Part of me wants to shrink away. I’ve never considered myself a control freak, but since the funeral, the pressure of keeping the family together has changed me. I’ve unconsciously and sometimes consciously taken over the parental role as my dad swims deeper into depression. If I don’t keep my act together for my dad’s sake and mine, who will?

A smaller part of me leans in. I don’t know whether it’s curiosity or a desire to forget my troubles, even if only for an hour. The more I let my mind chew on the idea, the tastier it becomes.

Evie goes into more detail, and I drink it in. As she continues prepping me for the evening, I find myself nodding along. At some point in the conversation, I decide to join her.

Just as I am about to let her know my decision, I say, “My mom died.” I don’t know where the statement came from. Maybe it’s because after knowing this girl for only half a day, I feel like a door has opened that I can’t shut. And I realize I don’t want to.

I stare at Evie, my eyes pooling with tears. My statement from earlier today about not crying flashes across my mind. I ignore it and let Niagara Falls flow.

“It was a car accident. Drunk driver hit her. I mean, it’s not like she had cancer and there was time to say goodbye,” I ramble. “Not that cancer would’ve been better, but...” I trail off.

Evie doesn’t say anything. Instead she places her hand on my arm, a simple gesture that transcends words.

I begin again, unable to stop now that I've started. "I'm too young to have lost my mom. She was my best friend, not just my parent." I continue on until my throat runs dry, long into when the class should've started.

There is another sorrow I don't get to share because the substitute teacher finally arrives. Maybe it's for the best I don't share it with Evie. Maybe, though she's sympathetic with a mom who's passed away, she wouldn't be sympathetic to how low my father's gone and the thing that brought him there.

What I don't get to say to her I take a moment to at least admit to myself for the first time. In less than two weeks, it's as if I've lost both parents. One to death and the other to disappointment.

Thanks for reading The Drug Virgins. If you don't want to let go of Cola and her friends check out:

Dancing on the Straight Edge

Coming Spring 2017

Have you ever had a secret that threatened to destroy your world?

The only way Cola survived the past six months was by surrounding herself with her new friends. The Straight Edge Group, an anti-drug and alcohol scene located in Washington D.C., welcomed Cola with open arms. But Cola wonders how welcoming they would be if they discovered her hidden truth.

On the eve of her eighteenth birthday it seems like evidence of her hypocrisy is popping up no matter where she turns.

How long can she keep dancing on the straight edge while her secret threatens to push her over the side and destroy her friendships, family and sanity?

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