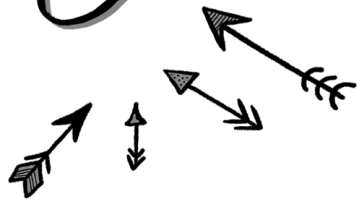


Truly
Madly
Royally



DEBBIE RIGAUD



POINT

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The title 'Chapter 1' is written in a large, black, cursive font. It is surrounded by several hand-drawn arrows of varying lengths and directions, some pointing towards the title and others away from it, creating a sense of movement and focus.

Chapter 1

FOR CENTURIES, the famed halls of Halstead University have echoed with expansive dialogue, provocative debate, and poignant questions. Or something like that.

But not at this moment.

“Yes,” I repeat to the incredulous faces around me. “I really do commute in every day.”

There’s an audible gasp among my fellow students.

“So, y-you’re a local?” says the obvious It girl of the group. People lean in when she speaks and agree with her before she’s even made her point. She probably owns the yacht they all look like they’ve just stepped off of.

“Well, local as in fifty minutes by train and light-rail,” I joke.

“Is it safe?” the girl sitting catty-corner to me asks, extra earnestly. I look away before she feels compelled to give me a sympathy hug. On an unrelated note, she’s the same person who used the term “third world” earlier.

Deep sigh. Why did I come to class fifteen minutes early today? If this were one of the common lecture halls, I'd be fine. But in a room that can barely fit the oval conference table we're all seated around, it's tough to zone out these Yacht Club kids.

"You don't drive?" It Girl will not let this go.

"I won't be seventeen until September," I say. "Until then, I'm saving up for a car."

"Why don't you just . . . ask your parents for one?" a wide-eyed boy asks.

Blocked.

My answer is to busy myself with my phone. There's too much awkwardness *not* to live-text this situation to my best friend, Skye Joseph. Since my summer program started a few days ago, I've been sending daily text-isodes of my "Overheard at Halstead U" series for Skye to binge-read.

Ready for this? I type, and then quickly summarize the conversation I've just had.

Ugh. Sorry, Skye responds right away. *But that's what u get for taking the bait.*

I chuckle to myself. It's true. This all started when some student asked another what the driving age is in New Jersey. (Everyone else at this program seems to be from out of state or even overseas.) I never miss a chance to rep my home state, so I jumped into the conversation with the answer. Serves me right.

Skye sends a follow-up text. *Don't let them stress you. The brave, get-things-done Zora Emerson I know would just keep moving.*

Easy for Skye to say. While we both got accepted into college-prep summer programs on actual college campuses, she's at a welcoming HBCU in Atlanta, and I stayed in New Jersey to attend snooty Halstead University. That's like the difference between going to a house party and going to a club. Or getting a ride from your ride or die, and a lift from Lyft.

"I almost wrecked the new Tesla," the It girl is saying now. She tucks her sleek gold strands behind a pearl-studded ear.

"You should practice on the family car next time," says a guy with that pink whale logo on his cap.

"That *is* the family car," she answers with a titter.

Guffaw.

The more she talks, the more I gather her star sign is Snob rising. But at least she inspires new material for my next text-isode of "Overheard at Halstead U."

I never thought I'd be so happy to see the professor walk in.



After class, I plug in my headphones and resume the audiobook I need to finish for another class. For a while, the memory of my annoying exchange with It Girl and her friends buzzes louder than the narrator's voice.

It's true. You won't see many people from Halstead U schlepping anywhere on a train, unless it's to Manhattan. There's even someone on campus so loaded, he has a security detail. I've seen his sleek fleet of black town cars, but I've never run into Richie Rich

myself. I overheard someone refer to him as royalty, so he's probably a spoiled corporate heir or something.

As out of place as I feel just being in class with these students, I can't imagine how uncomfortable it would be sharing a dorm room with one of them. I've convinced myself that *that* is the bright side of receiving a scholarship award that doesn't cover room and board.

Days like this make me happy I get to leave campus. And today I'm leaving earlier than usual. This afternoon at 3:00 p.m. is the Appleton Summer Soak & Arts Fest at the local summer camp. It's like Water Day and an art presentation rolled into one. Some of the grammar school students from Walk Me Home, the after-school chaperone service I started freshman year, have enrolled at the camp. Thanks to Walk Me Home, I've become an adoptive big sis to lots of Appleton kiddos. I promised the kids I'd come to the center today to help hang their final artwork. I can't wait to see their proud little faces.

Just one quick stop before I head to the train station.

Halstead U has an impressive campus, but no architectural star shines brighter than the school's acclaimed library. It looks like a legit castle. Gothic and majestic, some sections are almost three centuries old! But as ancient as the library's exterior structure is, the interiors have been recently renovated. And talk about modern and cool. It makes Appleton's public library look like a clunky, old-school iPod.

I reach the castle doors just as my audiobook's chapter on digital philanthropy ends. I have half an hour before my train

home, which should be more than enough time to swing by to pick up the book I reserved.

The twisting grand staircase that slices through the cathedral-ceiling entryway leads me right to the reference room. But just as I scan out the book, my cell phone rings. Loudly. *How could I have forgotten to turn off my ringer?*

I silence it as quickly as humanly possible but still get glares from people quietly studying at large oak tables. In sending the caller—my mom—to voicemail, I somehow call her back. On speaker! I hang up just as soon as the call goes through. Of course, my mom takes this as her cue to ring back. Even my phone's buzzing manages to sound loud. Heading down the echoey stairs to the main entrance is too risky. So I slip out of the reference atrium and hang a right into an area with rows of tall bookcases. It's a carpeted room, which absorbs the sound of the incessant buzzing. There doesn't seem to be anyone in this area, so I answer the call to find out what Ma's emergency is.

"Hold on," I say.

In my half a dozen visits to the library, I've never ventured to this part. Even though the maze of bookcases is clear of any other students, I still work my way to the back.

"Ma? Hi."

"Are you okay?" She sounds worried.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm at the library."

"Oh, good. Your day went well, then? Now that you're nearly a week in, you feeling better about being there?"

"It's getting better."

“Are you sure, baby? I don’t want you to be so stressed out about this.”

“I know I was nervous about coming here, but your constant checkups are making my anxieties harder to shake off.”

“What anxieties? You have anxiety?”

“Mother, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just a little hard to feel comfortable here. But I’m sure it’ll get better.”

“Yes, of course it will get better. Maybe you’ll find another student you can relate to?”

“Ma, I’m like the only person commuting, so I don’t get to hang out with kids at the dorm. And to be honest, it’s like half these people are speaking a different language. I could barely follow this one guy’s presentation in class earlier.”

“I’m gonna pray you find a friend there you can relate to. You know God always listens to a mother’s prayer,” she singsongs.

“Yes, Ma, okay.” She is like a broken record sometimes, but it’s sweet of her. “I gotta go. See you tonight.”

I hang up the phone, rest my forehead against the bookcase, and sigh.

“Great, now I’m worrying my mom,” I chastise myself out loud. “Not cool.”

“At least you know which way to look as you cross the street.”

The guy’s voice comes from the other side of the bookcase. He is obviously reacting to my private conversation. I try to look at him, but the shelves are so well stocked, I can only see flashes of his steel-blue shirt through the rows of books.

“And as for another language,” he goes on, “be grateful you haven’t been caught referring to the last letter in the alphabet as ‘zed.’”

He has a distinct British accent. Who is this guy? Normally, an unabashed eavesdropper would be my least favorite person. But something about him doesn’t set off any alarms or piss me off . . . yet. Maybe it’s his refreshing lack of smugness, which is hard to come by in this place. Still, I can’t let him off the hook that easy.

“Have I stumbled onto some library stand-up comedy routine?” I ask, slightly annoyed.

“I’m sorry. It was my poor attempt at lightening the mood.” He’s clearly embarrassed.

“Maybe next time don’t base your jokes on eavesdropping?” I say.

“Right,” he says, sounding sheepish. “Sound advice. Pun intended.”

I smirk to myself.

“Anyway, you wouldn’t want to swap problems,” I say, thinking back to that morning’s pre-class chitchat. “If you really heard what I’ve been going through, you’d decide you’d be better off ‘zed.’”

He chuckles. “Aah, I see what you did there. What sorts of problems keep a clever pun artist like you awake at night?”

I play along. Something about this anonymous church confessional setup makes me spill the tea.

“Let’s see—the classes here are twice as accelerated as my high

school's most advanced ones. I feel like I'm in a foreign world every time I step on campus. Oh, and there's a whole community of people I'd let down back home if I don't do well here."

I can't believe how honest I'm being about this, at last. And it feels easy doing it.

"Well, it sounds like my lonely world now has a population of two," the guy says. "I'm barely keeping up with my classes, I am a foreigner everywhere I step, and, oh, there's a whole *country* of people I would let down if I didn't do well."

"How are *you* coping?" I ask. He seems so okay with it all. I have to know his secret.

"Oh, I hide out in the library, for one," he answers with a smile in his voice.

I'm smiling, too. I rest my elbows on the bookcase, not even trying to see his face through the spines now. "I get it. I have a bookish hiding place, too. Weekend mornings at Ingrum's Books out on Route 42. That's my escape."

"I found you!" says a girl who does not have a British accent. I recognize the voice—it's It Girl herself. She's on the other side of the shelf. I feel an eye roll coming on. "Have you been avoiding your fans again?" she's asking the British-sounding guy.

"Nothing like that," he tells her. "I just need to stay here in this spot. I'm getting the best Wi-Fi signal and I don't want to lose it, nor do I want it to go away."

I can tell by the way he says it that that remark is meant for me.