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*ART
SAVES*

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Art Saves

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Art can save a life, a relationship, a nation, a Sunday afternoon, one's sanity—and art can save a space: for joy, for understanding, for all that is within us and beyond us.

We believe art matters now more than ever—or, rather, as much as it ever has. This is our proof.



Jesaka Long

Nerve, 1993

The scrawny security guy holds my ID in his hand and glances up. He's trying to determine if I'm who my driver's license shows me to be. Or he's scoping out the trash-filled parking lot behind me. We're in an isolated part of downtown Denver and I don't see how he's going to protect us from whatever big, bad threat might poke its head out of the dark.

"Hand," he says.

"Huh?"

My sister Jill nudges me and hisses, "Show him your hand."

I stick out my palm. He turns it over and draws a thick black X on the back of my white hand, like he's crossing out something expired. "So pretty," I say, meeting the guy's eyes.

He tells me to step aside and then checks IDs for Jill and her friend Bekah, waving them through the front door, no X in sight.

"Show's upstairs," Jill says and then points to a set of wooden stairs that look like they were put together to dare people to get to the second floor.

"Which is where they keep the dead bodies?" I ask. "Maybe just

the ones with the big X on their hands?"

Bekah laughs, her enormous mane of thick curls dipping down her back. There's no way I'm anything other than her friend's kid sister, but I'm proud she appreciated my remark, my smart aleck-ness, as my family calls it. Bekah's the coolest person I've ever met with her New York accent and leather motorcycle jacket and black stacked-heel boots and red lipstick. Even with her boots, she's short and intimidating as fuck. I have no idea if she's into girls at all. Whenever I ask Jill about her friends, she shuts me down like I could never understand the artsy world she joined in college.

Jill shoots me a look that would snap "be grateful" if it had a voice. We enter the room and its small, tight space stops me. It holds a smattering of tables and a patch of stage with a tiny dance area. And lots of long, dark shadows.

"You said concert, Jill."

Jill and Bekah ignore my comment, rushing toward a table at the very front. It's not like we've got much competition, so I'm not sure what their hurry is. They sit and I follow.

"Savannah," Jill says, "you—"

"Sav," I correct.

"You've never seen anyone like Ani DiFranco," Jill says.

"Who the hell is Ani DiFranco?"

All I know about tonight is that Jill and Bekah saw this person perform on their campus last night and then insisted they drive up from school to see her show here.

"Sav," Bekah says, my name sounding like a command in her smooth, low voice. "You don't know what's about to happen here."

"Ani is life changing," Jill says. "You should be grateful I'm sharing her with you."

Bekah pushes herself out of her chair. "Drinks. We need drinks."

"I'll go, too." I start to stand, but Jill shakes her head.

"Sit," she commands. "If this show wasn't up here away from the bar, you wouldn't have even made it through the front door. Let's not call any more attention to you."

They head back down those rickety stairs, leaving me alone to watch people trickle into this space. I spot several granola types with their long, unbrushed hair and flowy skirts; they look like many of the people at my high school, so there's no clue about the performer in their appearance. Or maybe it is a hint—Jill used to fit in with the hippie types before she traded her dresses in for ripped jeans and paint-splattered t-shirts. Give me The Breeders and Nirvana and Dignitable Planets. It's pretty clear none of those bands are showing up here tonight.

Two people with shaved heads scope out the available tables. It's hard not to stare: such hairless sightings are so uncommon. Because of the outdoorsy culture in Colorado, flannel shirts and boots or hiking shoes don't offer much in the way of signs that someone might be something other than straight. Women with shaved heads offer a hopeful clue. A steel-toed pair of Doc Martens (like the ones on my feet) are more helpful, but still no guarantee.

I strain to get a glimpse of the shaved head duo's hands, to see if they are branded with the glaring X. Although it's to make sure we don't get alcohol, it feels like a flaming sign that screams "this one does not belong!"

It doesn't take black marker on my hand for me to feel that way, like I don't belong. That singularity stays with me regardless of where I am. Deciding to shave off my hair last week felt like an opportunity to own it. When I looked in the mirror and saw my bald head for the first time, I blushed at the image staring back at me. I'm glad I did it, but some days it seems like I'm walking down the halls at school with the word DYKE on my forehead. Perhaps in black marker. It's not that I regret shaving my head, it's just that I didn't anticipate feeling so exposed.

My parents ignore it, like if they don't acknowledge my lack of hair it will ... go away.

I twist around in my seat, ready for Jill and Bekah to return before someone comes over to take a chair or something. This room (it's too small to call it anything else) is filling up with women—and a

whole lot of them look like, well ... they look like me.

A tall girl with a black asymmetrical bob passes through an extra shadowy section of the room. She looks like Paloma, this girl from my Biology class, but it's hard to tell. She always whispers a running commentary about our teacher. Sometimes I think she's trying to break me, get me to bust up laughing in the middle of a lecture. I haven't yet. Paloma hangs with a group of people who don't look like they'd go together ... but they do go together ... maybe because they don't fit anywhere else.

When I walked into class with my shaved head for the first time, Paloma stared at me. Then she said, "That's a close cut." She was extra funny that day and I thought maybe she'd ask if I wanted to hang with her and her friends.

She didn't.

Jill places a plastic cup in front of me.

"What's this?" I stare down at the fizzy brown liquid.

"It's plain pop," she says, a bit of snip to her tone. "You really think I'm going to buy my little sister liquor?"

"You're not my parent." It's a frequent refrain in our relationship.

"What do you have?" I point to Bekah's cup.

"Whiskey," Bekah says and takes a sip, her calm facial expression never changing.

"New York sophisticate." Jill takes a drink of her bottled Boulder Beer.

"How are you two friends?" I blurt.

Jill runs her fingertips along the back of Bekah's hand. "We had an instant connection."

"If you can't bond with the five people in our Feminist Collective, then who've you got?"

Jill's face falls. She has a boyfriend, but her reaction makes me wonder if she's fanning a flame for Bekah. Not that I blame her. Still, there's no way my sister's queer. Or gay. She hates it when I use the big "Q" word.

"That's it? Five?" I ask. Sure doesn't seem like the amazing new

world Jill has described to me. "Bekah, don't you miss New York and being around more people like you?"

I don't know what I mean by "like you." But here I go again judging people on their appearance. Not judging. Looking for clues that someone has something in common with me.

"I really wanted to study with two of the sociology profs," Bekah says with a shrug. "One of them has written about Madonna as an emerging feminist icon. I want to learn from a smart woman who can view the world we consume like that."

"Oh," I say, "I had no idea you could study Madonna in college."

I want to ask Bekah why she didn't go to Sarah Lawrence in New York City. Or, at least, I'd like to pry into what she knows about the college. It's my dream school, but it's so expensive. It'll be out of the question without big financial aid. Jill had to get an almost full-ride academic scholarship to go to her beloved college—and that's in Colorado.

"Ani should be on stage any moment," Bekah says. "She is life changing."

"Life changing," Jill echoes.

Like someone's life is really going to change in the upstairs of a rundown, rickety bar.

I take a drink of my pop and scan the room again, hoping to spot Paloma's asymmetrical hair. We started talking in class more after she got the new cut at the beginning of the school year. I hadn't thought about it before, but that's when she started hanging out with her group of friends, too. But I don't see Paloma (or the person I thought was her) anywhere.

"How do you know if someone's queer? Or how do you ask them without inciting some kind of freak out?" I ask.

"Most of us don't know ourselves enough to come out so young like you," Bekah says.

"Are you—"

My words are forever swallowed by the swell of cheers and whistles filling every millimeter of the room. Jill and Bekah jump from

their seats to join the cheering, so I follow. We're close enough to the stage I can see everything now that I'm standing.

That's when I spot her: the tiny singer with the shaved head standing in the middle of the stage with a guitar and black tape around the fingers of her left hand. She plays a few chords and then wails on her guitar.

"Ani fucking DiFranco!" Bekah screams, eliciting the cheers of those around her.

I stare up at Ani, at her beat-up platform boots, her sizes-too-big cargo pants, and tight black t-shirt. She resembles the me I tried to free when I shaved my head and spent several months of savings from tedious math tutoring sessions on my Doc Martens.

Ani finishes one song to big applause and immediately strums the chords of another tune. It hushes the crowd, like we'll scare the words away if we're too loud. Like lives depend on it. And Ani's voice croons about two people—Is it two girls? It must be two girls. Please let it be two girls—who maybe are breaking up and Ani is singing about writing graffiti on the other person's body about how hard they tried. About using both hands.

It is beautiful and everything feels beautiful and I can't believe I am here.

"She's gay, right?" I shout in Bekah's ear. "She didn't use pronouns."

"Can't the song be what you need it to be in that moment?" Bekah yells back. Then she turns away from me, focused on the stage. On the singer.

I don't say anything else, but I want to argue that I'm trying to figure out if other people are like me.

At the end of that ballad, Ani doesn't wait for the cheers and shouts to die down. She drives right into a song about traveling the country and "adults" who frown at her, passing judgement. Ani sings that their reactions must be because of her hair—her lack of hair—and her nose piercing, which sometimes catches the light from the stage.

I move and holler with the crowd, vibrating with elated joy, swept

up in their energy and this hot, sweaty feeling of being here together, in this open room with its tiny stage and questionable stability of nails and wood. It doesn't matter because we are right here, right now.

And then Ani bangs on her guitar and she launches into a fast song that of course I don't know. Then she sings about being "in or out."

She means *my* kind of out.

No question.

She's singing about people like me.

At the end of the number, I yell as loud as I can, with everyone else.

Over the sounds of the crowd, Ani says she's gonna play two more songs. The announcement creates one big groan in the audience.

Then she says a few of us should come up there with her. Everyone roars.

The lights over us brighten and Ani shields her eyes for a better view of us. Everyone wants to be up there on that tiny stage. We're all fighting for Ani's attention. Even Bekah.

I want to be up there with Ani. In that magic. To stand with someone like me.

She won't pick me. No way.

She can't pick me if I don't try.

Then tomorrow I'd wonder what would have happened if I tried to get on that stage. It's not like anything would really change, but at least I'd know I did something—something bigger than shaving my head and just hoping it would transform my life.

I don't have the nerve to get up there.

Ani's picking people. They are going up on the stage.

My moment's moving on.

Without me.

I push my way to the front of the small crowd and hold my hand up as high as I can, the marked side facing Ani.

"X means I was pre-chosen, right?" I shout.

Ani doesn't hear me.

"X MARKS THE SPOT!" I scream.

She sees me.

Ani looks right at me.

And laughs.

And then she tells me to get up there. With her.

I scramble up onto the stage my legs trembling so much I can barely bend my knees.

But I make it.

I take a deep breath and shield my eyes with my hand, like Ani, to scan the audience. It's like the fifty people multiplied, filling the space from wall to wall.

Jill and Bekah wave at me. Jill narrows her eyes and I swear she's jealous. Bekah fixes her gaze on Ani.

And Ani is spectacular up close with her shaved head and thick, dark eyebrows and huge brown eyes and arms so muscled from playing her guitar with such force.

"We've got another baby gay!" someone yells.

People laugh and whistle.

I search the crowd to see who might be a "baby gay."

Ani encourages whoever it is to come up.

People shift as they try to see who was chosen, who's making their way up on the stage.

It's Paloma.

I extend my hand to help Paloma keep her balance and she takes it, revealing the wide, black X across the back of her brown hand. "I thought I was the only one," I say.

Paloma laughs, flashing the gap between her two front teeth. "Thought I saw you, but then Ani started singing and, well—"

Ani strums her guitar, the opening notes of a song. Everyone screams.

"She's life changing!" I shout, leaning into Paloma so she can hear me.

"Hell yeah!" Paloma yells, her hair brushing against my ear.

The song's tempo increases.

I grasp Paloma's shoulder. "We should hang out sometime."

"What?" she shouts, tilting her head toward me.

I ignore the rejection alert that flashes red in my mind. "We should hang out! You know, not in Biology."

"Cool! For sure," Paloma says.

She steps even closer to me, her breath on my cheek. It makes me shiver under the hot stage lights. "Let's make it a queer girls date."

I grin hard, squeezing Paloma's shoulder again as Ani launches into the chorus. It's fast and upbeat and vibrates through the floor like the adrenaline zipping through my body. I close my eyes and raise my arms and bounce to the music and Ani's voice and this feeling I don't know how to name.

I open my eyes and Paloma beams at me. And the person next to her smiles and then it hits me: I belong here.

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