

eleanor & park

rainbow rowell



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He'd stopped trying to bring her back.

She only came back when she felt like it, in dreams and lies and broken-down déjà vu.

Like, he'd be driving to work, and he'd see a girl with red hair standing on the corner—and he'd swear, for half a choking moment, that it was her.

Then he'd see that the girl's hair was more blond than red.

And that she was holding a cigarette . . . And wearing a Sex Pistols T-shirt.

Eleanor hated the Sex Pistols.

Eleanor . . .

Standing behind him until he turned his head. Lying next to him just before he woke up. Making everyone else seem drabber and flatter and never good enough.

Eleanor ruining everything.

Eleanor, gone.

He'd stopped trying to bring her back.

august 1986

1

park

XTC was no good for drowning out the morons at the back of the bus.

Park pressed his headphones into his ears.

Tomorrow he was going to bring Skinny Puppy or the Misfits. Or maybe he'd make a special bus tape with as much screaming and wailing on it as possible.

He could get back to New Wave in November, after he got his driver's license. His parents had already said Park could have his mom's Impala, and he'd been saving up for a new tape deck. Once he started driving to school, he could listen to whatever he wanted or nothing at all, *and* he'd get to sleep in an extra twenty minutes.

"That doesn't exist!" somebody shouted behind him.

"It so fucking does!" Steve shouted back. "Drunken Monkey style, man, it's a real fucking thing. You can kill somebody with it. . . ."

"You're full of shit."

"You're full of shit," Steve said. "Park! Hey, Park."

Park heard him, but didn't answer. Sometimes, if you ignored Steve for a minute, he moved on to someone else. Knowing that was 80 percent of surviving with Steve as your neighbor. The other 20 percent was just keeping your head down. . . .

Which Park had momentarily forgotten. A ball of paper hit him in the back of the head.

"Those were my Human Growth and Development notes, dicklick," Tina said.

"I'm sorry, baby," Steve said. "I'll teach you all about human growth and development—what do you need to know?"

"Teach her Drunken Monkey style," somebody said.

"Park!" Steve shouted.

Park pulled down his headphones and turned to the back of the bus. Steve was holding court in the last seat. Even sitting, his head practically touched the roof. Steve always looked like he was surrounded by doll furniture. He'd looked like a grown man since the seventh grade, and that was before he grew a full beard. Slightly before.

Sometimes Park wondered if Steve was with Tina because she made him look even more like a monster. Most of the girls from the Flats were small, but Tina couldn't be five feet. Massive hair included.

Once, back in middle school, some guy had tried to give Steve shit about how he better not get Tina pregnant because if he did, his giant babies would kill her. "They'll bust out of her stomach like in *Aliens*," the guy said. Steve broke his little finger on the guy's face.

When Park's dad heard, he said, "Somebody needs to teach that Murphy kid how to make a fist." But Park hoped nobody would. The guy who Steve hit couldn't open his eyes for a week.

Park tossed Tina her balled-up homework. She caught it.

"Park," Steve said, "tell Mikey about Drunken Monkey karate."

"I don't know anything about it." Park shrugged.

"But it exists, right?"

"I guess I've heard of it."

"There," Steve said. He looked for something to throw at Mikey, but couldn't find anything. He pointed instead. "I fucking told you."

"What the fuck does Sheridan know about kung fu?" Mikey said.

"Are you retarded?" Steve said. "His mom's Chinese."

Mikey looked at Park carefully. Park smiled and narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, I guess I see it," Mikey said. "I always thought you were Mexican."

"Shit, Mikey," Steve said, "you're such a fucking racist."

"She's not Chinese," Tina said. "She's Korean."

"Who is?" Steve asked.

"Park's mom."

Park's mom had been cutting Tina's hair since grade school. They both had the exact same hairstyle: long spiral perms with tall feathered bangs.

"She's fucking hot is what she is," Steve said, cracking himself up. "No offense, Park."

Park managed another smile and slunk back into his seat, putting his headphones back on and cranking up the volume. He could still hear Steve and Mikey, four seats behind him.

"But what's the fucking point?" Mikey asked.

"Dude, would you want to fight a drunk monkey? They're fucking huge. Like *Every Which Way But Loose*, man. Imagine that bastard losing his shit on you."

Park noticed the new girl at about the same time everybody else did. She was standing at the front of the bus, next to the first available seat.

There was a kid sitting there by himself, a freshman. He put his bag down on the seat beside him, then looked the other way. All down the aisle, anybody who was sitting alone moved to the edge of their seats. Park heard Tina snicker; she lived for this stuff.

The new girl took a deep breath and stepped farther down the aisle. Nobody would look at her. Park tried not to, but it was kind of a train wreck/eclipse situation.

The girl just looked like exactly the sort of person this would happen to.

Not just new—but big and awkward. With crazy hair, bright red on top of curly. And she was dressed like . . . like she *wanted* people to look at her. Or maybe like she didn't get what a mess she was. She had on a plaid shirt, a man's shirt, with half a dozen weird necklaces hanging around her neck and scarves wrapped around her wrists. She reminded Park of a scarecrow or one of the trouble dolls his mom kept on her dresser. Like something that wouldn't survive in the wild.

The bus stopped again, and a bunch more kids got on. They pushed past the girl, knocking into her, and dropped into their own seats.

That was the thing—everybody on the bus already had a seat. They'd all claimed one on the first day of school. People like Park, who were lucky enough to have a whole seat to themselves, weren't going to give that up now. Especially not for someone like this.

Park looked back up at the girl. She was just standing there.

"Hey, you," the bus driver yelled, "sit down!"

The girl started moving toward the back of the bus. Right into the belly of the beast. *God*, Park thought, *stop. Turn around.* He could feel Steve and Mikey licking their chops as she got closer. He tried again to look away.

Then the girl spotted an empty seat just across from Park. Her face lit with relief, and she hurried toward it.

"Hey," Tina said sharply.

The girl kept moving.

"Hey," Tina said, "*Bozo.*"

Steve started laughing. His friends fell in a few seconds behind him.

"You can't sit there," Tina said. "That's Mikayla's seat."

The girl stopped and looked up at Tina, then looked back at the empty seat.

"Sit down," the driver bellowed from the front.

"I have to sit somewhere," the girl said to Tina in a firm, calm voice.

"Not my problem," Tina snapped. The bus lurched, and the girl rocked back to keep from falling. Park tried to turn the volume up on his Walkman, but it was already all the way up. He looked back at the girl; it looked like she was starting to cry.

Before he'd even decided to do it, Park scooted toward the window.

"Sit down," he said. It came out angrily. The girl turned to him, like she couldn't tell whether he was another jerk or what. "Jesus-fuck," Park said softly, nodding to the space next to him, "just *sit down*."

The girl sat down. She didn't say anything—thank God, she didn't thank him—and she left six inches of space on the seat between them.

Park turned toward the Plexiglas window and waited for a world of suck to hit the fan.

2

eleanor

Eleanor considered her options:

1. She could walk home from school. Pros: exercise, color in her cheeks, time to herself. Cons: She didn't know her new address yet, or even the general direction to start walking.
2. She could call her mom and ask for a ride. Pros: lots. Cons: Her mom didn't have a phone. Or a car.
3. She could call her dad. Ha.
4. She could call her grandma. Just to say hi.

She was sitting on the concrete steps at the front of the school, staring out at the row of yellow buses. Her bus was right there. No. 666. Even if Eleanor could avoid the bus today, even if her fairy god-

mother showed up with a pumpkin carriage, she'd still have to find a way to get back to school tomorrow morning.

And it's not like the devil-kids on the bus were going to wake up on the other side of their beds tomorrow. Seriously. It wouldn't surprise Eleanor if they unhinged their jaws the next time she saw them. That girl in the back with the blond hair and the acid-washed jacket? You could practically see the horns hidden in her bangs. And her boyfriend was possibly a member of the Nephilim.

That girl—all of them—hated Eleanor before they'd even laid eyes on her. Like they'd been hired to kill her in a past life.

Eleanor couldn't tell if the Asian kid who finally let her sit down was one of them, or whether he was just really stupid. (But not *stupid-stupid*—he was in two of Eleanor's honors classes.)

Her mom had insisted that the new school put Eleanor in honors classes. She'd freaked when she saw how bad Eleanor's grades were from last year in the ninth grade. "This can't be a surprise to you, Mrs. Douglas," the counselor said. *Ha*, Eleanor thought, *you'd be surprised what could be a surprise at this point.*

Whatever. Eleanor could stare at the clouds just as easily in honors classes. There were just as many windows.

If she ever even came back to this school.

If she ever even got home.

Eleanor couldn't tell her mom about the bus situation anyway, because her mom had already said that Eleanor didn't have to ride the bus. Last night, when she was helping Eleanor unpack . . .

"Richie said he'll take you," her mom said. "It's on his way to work."

"Is he going to make me ride in the back of his truck?"

"He's trying to make peace, Eleanor. You promised that you'd try, too."

"It's easier for me to make peace from a distance."

"I told him you were ready to be part of this family."

"I'm *already* part of this family. I'm like a charter member."

"Eleanor," her mom said. "Please."

"I'll just ride the bus," Eleanor had said. "It's not a big deal. I'll meet people."

Ha, Eleanor thought now. *Giant, dramatic ha.*

Her bus was going to leave soon. A few of the other buses were already pulling away. Somebody ran down the steps next to Eleanor and accidentally kicked her bag. She pulled it out of the way and started to say sorry—but it was that stupid Asian kid, and he frowned when he saw that it was her. She frowned right back at him, and he ran ahead.

Oh, fine, Eleanor thought. *The children of hell shan't go hungry on my watch.*

3

park

She didn't talk to him on the ride home.

Park had spent all day trying to think of how to get away from the new girl. He'd have to switch seats. That was the only answer. But switch to what seat? He didn't want to force himself on somebody else. And even the act of switching seats would catch Steve's attention.

Park had expected Steve to start in on him as soon as he let the girl sit down, but Steve went right back to talking about kung fu again. Park, by the way, knew plenty about kung fu. Because his dad was obsessed with martial arts, not because his mom was Korean. Park and his little brother, Josh, had been taking taekwondo since they could walk.

Switch seats, *how* . . .

He could probably find a seat up front with the freshmen, but that

would be a spectacular show of weakness. And he almost hated to think about leaving the weird new girl at the back of the bus by herself.

He hated himself for thinking like this.

If his dad knew he was thinking like this, he'd call Park a pussy. Out loud, for once. If his grandma knew, she'd smack him on the back of the head. *Where are your manners?* she'd say. *Is that any way to treat somebody who's down on her luck?*

But Park didn't have any luck—or status—to spare on that dumb redhead. He had just enough to keep himself out of trouble. And he knew it was crappy, but he was kind of grateful that people like that girl existed. Because people like Steve and Mikey and Tina existed, too, and they needed to be fed. If it wasn't that redhead, it was going to be somebody else. And if it wasn't somebody else, it was going to be Park.

Steve had let it go this morning, but he wouldn't keep letting it go. . . .

Park could hear his grandma again, *Seriously, son, you're giving yourself a stomachache because you did something nice while other people were watching?*

It wasn't even that nice, Park thought. He'd let the girl sit down, but he'd sworn at her. When she showed up in his English class that afternoon, it felt like she was there to haunt him. . . .

"Eleanor," Mr. Stessman said. "What a powerful name. It's a queen's name, you know."

"It's the name of the fat Chipette," somebody behind Park whispered. Somebody else laughed.

Mr. Stessman gestured to an empty desk up front.

"We're reading poetry today, Eleanor," he said. "Dickinson. Perhaps you'd like to get us started."

He opened her book to the right page and pointed. "Go ahead," he said, "clear and loud. I'll tell you when to stop."

The new girl looked at Mr. Stessman like she hoped he was kidding. When it was clear that he wasn't—he almost never was—she started to read.

"I had been hungry all the years," she read. A few kids laughed. Jesus, Park thought, only Mr. Stessman would make a chubby girl read a poem about eating on her first day of class.

"Carry on, Eleanor," Mr. Stessman said.

She started over, which Park thought was a terrible idea.

"I had been hungry all the years," she said, louder this time.

My noon had come, to dine,
I, trembling, drew the table near,
And touched the curious wine.
T'was this on tables I had seen,
When turning, hungry, lone,
I looked in windows, for the wealth
I could not hope to own.

Mr. Stessman didn't stop her, so she read the whole poem in that cool, defiant voice. The same voice she'd used on Tina.

"That was wonderful," Mr. Stessman said when she was done. He was beaming. "Just wonderful. I hope you'll stay with us, Eleanor, at least until we do *Medea*. That's a voice that arrives on a chariot drawn by dragons."

When the girl showed up in history, Mr. Sanderhoff didn't make a scene. But he did say, "Ah. Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine," when she handed him her paperwork. She sat down a few rows ahead of Park and, as far as he could tell, spent the whole period staring at the sun.

Park couldn't think of a way to get rid of her on the bus. Or a way to get rid of himself. So he put his headphones on before the girl sat down and turned the volume all the way up.

Thank God she didn't try to talk to him.

4

eleanor

She got home that afternoon before all the little kids, which was good because she wasn't ready to see them again. It had been such a freak show when she walked in last night. . . .

Eleanor had spent so much time thinking about what it would be like to finally come home and how much she missed everybody—she thought they'd throw her a ticker tape parade. She thought it would be a big hugfest.

But when Eleanor walked in the house, it was like her siblings didn't recognize her.

Ben just glanced at her, and Maisie—Maisie was sitting on Richie's lap. Which would have made Eleanor throw right up if she hadn't just promised her mom that she'd be on her best behavior for the rest of her life.

Only Mouse ran to hug Eleanor. She picked him up gratefully. He was five now, and heavy.

“Hey, Mouse,” she said. They’d called him that since he was a baby; she couldn’t remember why. He reminded her more of a big, sloppy puppy—always excited, always trying to jump into your lap.

“Look, Dad, it’s Eleanor,” Mouse said, jumping down. “Do you know Eleanor?”

Richie pretended not to hear. Maisie watched and sucked her thumb. Eleanor hadn’t seen her do that in years. She was eight now, but with her thumb in her mouth, she looked just like a baby.

The baby wouldn’t remember Eleanor at all. He’d be two. . . . There he was, sitting on the floor with Ben. Ben was eleven. He stared at the wall behind the TV.

Their mom carried the duffel bag with Eleanor’s stuff into a bedroom off the living room, and Eleanor followed her. The room was tiny, just big enough for a dresser and some bunk beds. Mouse ran into the room after them. “You get the top bunk,” he said, “and Ben has to sleep on the floor with me. Mom already told us, and Ben started to cry.”

“Don’t worry about that,” their mom said softly. “We all just have to readjust.”

There wasn’t room in this room to readjust. (Which Eleanor decided not to mention.) She went to bed as soon as she could, so she wouldn’t have to go back out to the living room.

When she woke up in the middle of the night, all three of her brothers were asleep on the floor. There was no way to get up without stepping on one of them, and she didn’t even know where the bathroom was. . . .

She found it. There were only five rooms in the house, and the bathroom just barely counted. It was attached to the kitchen—like literally attached, without a door. This house was designed by cave trolls, Eleanor thought. Somebody, probably her mom, had hung a flowered sheet between the refrigerator and the toilet.

When she got home from school, Eleanor let herself in with her new key. The house was possibly even more depressing in daylight—dingy and bare—but at least Eleanor had the place, and her mom, to herself.

It was weird to come home and see her mom, just standing in the kitchen, like . . . like normal. She was making soup, chopping onions. Eleanor felt like crying.

“How was school?” her mom asked.

“Fine,” Eleanor said.

“Did you have a good first day?”

“Sure. I mean, yeah, it was just school.”

“Will you have a lot of catching up to do?”

“I don’t think so.”

Her mom wiped her hands on the back of her jeans and tucked her hair behind her ears, and Eleanor was struck, for the ten-thousandth time, by how beautiful she was.

When Eleanor was a little girl, she’d thought her mom looked like a queen, like the star of some fairy tale.

Not a princess—princesses are just pretty. Eleanor’s mother was beautiful. She was tall and stately, with broad shoulders and an elegant waist. All her bones seemed more purposeful than other people’s. Like they weren’t just there to hold her up; they were there to make a point.

She had a strong nose and a sharp chin, and her cheekbones were high and thick. You’d look at Eleanor’s mom and think she must be carved into the prow of a Viking ship somewhere or maybe painted on the side of a plane. . . .

Eleanor looked a lot like her.

But not enough.

Eleanor looked like her mother through a fish tank. Rounder and softer. Slurred. Where her mother was statuesque, Eleanor was heavy. Where her mother was finely drawn, Eleanor was smudged.

After five kids, her mother had breasts and hips like a woman in a cigarette ad. At sixteen, Eleanor was already built like she ran a medieval pub.

She had too much of everything and too little height to hide it. Her breasts started just below her chin, her hips were . . . a parody. Even her mom’s hair, long and wavy and auburn, was a more legitimate version of Eleanor’s bright red curls.

Eleanor put her hand to her head self-consciously.

"I have something to show you," her mom said, covering the soup, "but I didn't want to do it in front of the little kids. Here, come on."

Eleanor followed her into the kids' bedroom. Her mom opened the closet and took out a stack of towels and a laundry basket full of socks.

"I couldn't bring all your things when we moved," she said. "Obviously we don't have as much room here as we had in the old house. . . ." She reached into the closet and pulled out a black plastic garbage bag. "But I packed as much as I could."

She handed Eleanor the bag and said, "I'm sorry about the rest."

Eleanor had assumed that Richie threw all her stuff in the trash a year ago, ten seconds after he'd kicked her out. She took the bag in her arms. "It's okay," she said. "Thanks."

Her mom reached out and touched Eleanor's shoulder, just for a second. "The little kids will be home in twenty minutes or so," she said, "and we'll eat dinner around four thirty. I like to have everything settled before Richie comes home."

Eleanor nodded. She opened the bag as soon as her mom left the room. She wanted to see what was still hers. . . .

The first thing she recognized were the paper dolls. They were loose in the bag and wrinkled; a few were marked with crayons. It had been years since Eleanor had played with them, but she was still happy to see them there. She pressed them flat and laid them in a pile.

Under the dolls were books, a dozen or so, that her mother must have grabbed at random; she wouldn't have known which were Eleanor's favorites. Eleanor was glad to see *Garp* and *Watership Down*. It sucked that *Oliver's Story* had made the cut, but *Love Story* hadn't. And *Little Men* was there, but not *Little Women* or *Jo's Boys*.

There were a bunch more papers in the bag. Eleanor had a file cabinet in her old room, and it looked like her mom had grabbed most of the folders. Eleanor tried to get everything into a neat stack, all the report cards and school pictures and letters from pen pals.

She wondered where the rest of the stuff from the old house had ended up. Not just her stuff, but everybody's. Like the furniture and the toys, and all of her mom's plants and paintings. Her grandma's

Danish wedding plates . . . The little red UFF DA! horse that always used to hang above the sink.

Maybe it was packed away somewhere. Maybe her mom was hoping the cave-troll house was just temporary.

Eleanor was still hoping that Richie was just temporary.

At the bottom of the black trash bag was a box. Her heart jumped a little when she saw it. Her uncle in Minnesota used to send her family a Fruit of the Month Club membership every Christmas, and Eleanor and her brothers and sister would always fight over the boxes that the fruit came in. It was stupid, but they were good boxes—solid, with nice lids. This one was a grapefruit box, soft from wear at the edges.

Eleanor opened it carefully. Nothing inside had been touched. There was her stationery, her colored pencils, and her Prismacolor markers (another Christmas present from her uncle). There was a stack of promotional cards from the mall that still smelled like expensive perfumes. And there was her Walkman. Untouched. Un-battered, too, but nevertheless, there. And where there was a Walkman, there was the possibility of music.

Eleanor let her head fall over the box. It smelled like Chanel No. 5 and pencil shavings. She sighed.

There wasn't anything to do with her recovered belongings once she'd sorted through them. There wasn't even room in the dresser for Eleanor's clothes. So she set aside the box and the books, and carefully put everything else back in the garbage bag. Then she pushed the bag back as far as she could on the highest shelf in the closet, behind the towels and a humidifier.

She climbed onto her bunk and found a scraggly old cat napping there. "Shoo," Eleanor said, shoving him. The cat leapt to the floor and out the bedroom door.

5

park

Mr. Stessman was making them all memorize a poem, whatever poem they wanted. Well, whatever poem they picked.

“You’re going to forget everything else I teach you,” Mr. Stessman said, petting his mustache. “Everything. Maybe you’ll remember that Beowulf fought a monster. Maybe you’ll remember that ‘To be or not to be’ is *Hamlet*, not *Macbeth*. . . .

“But everything else? Forget about it.”

He was slowly walking up and down each aisle. Mr. Stessman loved this kind of stuff—theater in the round. He stopped next to Park’s desk and leaned in casually with his hand on the back of Park’s chair. Park stopped drawing and sat up straight. He couldn’t draw, anyway.

“So, you’re going to memorize a poem,” Mr. Stessman continued,

pausing a moment to smile down at Park like Gene Wilder in the chocolate factory.

“Brains love poetry. It’s sticky stuff. You’re going to memorize this poem, and five years from now, we’re going to see each other at the Village Inn, and you’ll say, ‘Mr. Stessman, I still remember “The Road Not Taken”! Listen . . . *Two roads diverged in a yellow wood . . .*’

He moved on to the next desk. Park relaxed.

“Nobody gets to pick ‘The Road Not Taken,’ by the way, I’m sick to death of it. And no Shel Silverstein. He’s grand, but you’ve graduated. We’re all adults here. Choose an adult poem. . . .

“Choose a *romantic* poem, that’s my advice. You’ll get the most use out of it.”

He walked by the new girl’s desk, but she didn’t turn away from the window.

“Of course, it’s up to you. You may choose ‘A Dream Deferred’—Eleanor?” She turned blankly. Mr. Stessman leaned in. “You may choose it, Eleanor. It’s poignant and it’s truth. But how often will you get to roll that one out?”

“No. Choose a poem that speaks to you. Choose a poem that will help you speak to someone else.”

Park planned to choose a poem that rhymed, so it would be easier to memorize. He liked Mr. Stessman, he really did—but he wished he’d dial it back a few notches. Whenever he worked the room like this, Park got embarrassed for him.

“We meet tomorrow in the library,” Mr. Stessman said, back at his desk. “Tomorrow, we’re gathering rosebuds.”

The bell rang. On cue.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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