

The following short stories were written by students in my 10 Honors class for their identity projects. Notice what each says about what it means to be a teenager, and what is revealed about the author's identity in each.

Adolescence: A Reflection **by Josh Drago**

Silkworm Peabody failed to clean all the Raisin Bran out of his teeth that morning, and hundreds of the brown pieces squatted on his poorly rinsed toothbrush in vain, drying out for later. The boy thought about what it would feel like to starve as he tongued his upper right molar in search of leftovers, still bearing taste. He couldn't wait to get his braces off, but somehow feared the unknown in most areas, especially dentistry. The news of his battling wisdom teeth had cut like a scalpel a few days before. The specter of surgery was looming in his near future but nevertheless he kept a metallic smile on his face. Of course when a girl walked by, he pretended to be angry and deep to seem as sexy as humanly possible. The eye contact with which he was met, interpreted as admiration, was only curiosity with a sharp hint of disgust.

It was any other day. He tightened the straps of his backpack to facilitate everyone's view of the new pants that he bought over the weekend. He forgot to shave this morning, and he wore the brown stubble like a badge of maturity. Little did he know it made him look more like a careless hobo than the desired George Clooney. He wore the same shoes he wore every day, their age showing in the most gross way possible. The boy's chest was displayed unattractively through his tight shirt, as were the small rolls in his stomach, which should have been concealed. He chose to view them as something else, a firmly toned example of abdominal glory, the sight of which was a privilege to all who beheld it.

With a quick nod to all of the men Silkworm used to climb the social ladder, he made his way to class. He liked firm handshakes, really solid reassuring grips that were concrete symbols of companionship. Anything else felt like a lie to him. Peabody sat down next to a young man, who commenced a diatribe about a silly television program from the previous night. The other student's eyes were garnished with a yellowish crust around the edges, which Silkworm wished to wash off with a fire hose. The teacher began class robotically, and he scribbled on his page to fool the teacher and give the impression that he was hard at work. The scheme worked to please his teacher, but to his dismay, the student would not shut up. Silkworm didn't know why he was smiling and nodding, encouraging the crusty pupil was the last thing he wanted to do, but he continued nevertheless.

Peabody always looked forward to second period. This was the forty minutes that Tiffany Sanchez, angelic Tiffany, sat next to him. Every day he marveled at the perfection of her shiny hair and lustrous nails, and wondered what spell she used to eradicate pimples and blemishes. He greeted her using a silly accent he slipped into sometimes when handling women, a sort of nervous habit. She giggled out of pure pity. Her need to reach out to the less fortunate (being the true martyr she was) caused her to strike up a conversation with Silkworm. Maybe Hans, leaning regally on the blackboard, would become jealous. As he stepped away from his improvised throne, chalk marks decorating his rear end, Tiffany laughed out loud, and turned towards Peabody to find a grin spread across his face. The boy claimed her laughter as the prize for his latest witty remark, and his naive misinterpretation added to the girl's pity. She looked at him dolefully, and started to copy Silkworm's homework.

Tiffany had moved to Porksville from lands far, far away, sometime during eighth grade. Her innocence was quickly claimed as she grew faster than Silkworm's dirty fingernails. She never ceased using her un-cool classmates with pristine intentions, or at least that's how she felt about it. In short, she managed to breed vanity and charity with Miss Universe-type grace. She didn't realize that nerds were falling in love with her right and left, led on by her intentional kindness. Many realized the insincerity of her actions, but those who were desperate enough to misuse their IQ and misinterpret her, were sadly denied.

As the rest of the day passed, Peabody recollected the good reactions he had been receiving from his peers. He thought to himself how he must have done a good job dressing, and must smell very nice. He thought about how easily he could find a girlfriend, if his friendship wasn't so valuable to the masses of females. Maybe, he reflected, withholding some of his charm and charisma would cause the ladies to want it more. That must be it.

Nobody told him that his fly was open.

He discovered this as he sat down in his desk for English class, and in fixing the problem created the loudest zipping sound in history.

Later that day, Peabody decided he needed to make things happen between him and Tiffany. She obviously had feelings for him, but couldn't be open about them due to her introverted tendencies. It was time to act. He approached her after school, jogging awkwardly after her to catch up as she left the building. He commented that she seemed to be having trouble with her schoolwork, and generously offered his time to help her. Her parents had been pushing her to take more initiative in her school life, so she agreed. They were to meet at Silkworm's house on Sunday evening with their thinking caps armed and ready. Of course, the boy had other plans.

She arrived at Peabody's house about a half an hour late, but nevertheless ready to learn. In preparation, the boy had altered the environment he once knew as his room. Earlier that morning he had procured about two hundred rose petals and placed them romantically in a path to his bed. He adorned his night table with an empty bottle of wine, which he filled with grape juice. A small box of chocolates rested on his pillow, in the shape of nothing else but a heart. He left his textbooks in school, so there would be no turning back. After being introduced to his parents, Tiffany was led dramatically into Peabody's love-laden chamber. She felt her temperature rise as soon as she stepped on the soft petals.

She was about to throw up.

When Silkworm presented her with a brimming glass of grape juice, she was pushed too far. The boy was met with a slammed door and a large red stain on his carpet. The only other time he cried in his life was the moment he realized that he was more than likely going to be alive for the death of his parents.

As he walked into the bathroom to get some tissues, he looked around. He saw the gunky toothbrush, the electronic scale, his unused razor, and his hair-gel. The bottle caught his attention for some reason, and he picked it up, reflecting. As his eyes scanned the label, it all made sense to him. THE GEL HAD EXPIRED. When he glanced up at the mirror, he saw that his hair didn't even HINT at the "slept in" sheen promised on the bottle. Why hadn't he noticed? Tiffany didn't even need a keen eye to tell that Silkworm looked like a mess. No wonder she hadn't cooperated. Peabody had learned a lesson: Pose in the mirror at least once again after the primary session. It is supremely important for one to have an accurate self-image.

Honestly By Amanda Ngai

LEENA

The hallways are crowded, like miniature freeways. People stop and talk at curves, shoot middle fingers or mutter curses at the slow ones. The school itself is slowly falling apart. Paint chips off in certain areas and the ceiling caves in from leaks in the roof. But the steady stream of students makes the place look alive. As I thread through the masses, I navigate, grinning from ear to ear, and coming face to face with my friend Lex who leans against my locker.

He is my “friend that everybody says I’m supposed to get with, but, ha, I’d rather date my mother.” Our classmates’ ideas never get between us though, and a nice warm feeling creeps through me when I see his smile.

It’s that “let’s make trouble and do bad things like write nasty stuff about people on bathroom walls” smile. Typical Lex, with more layers than an onion, whose smile suggests things that I could spend all day figuring out. I’ve always loved his smile, ’cause it’s so incredibly mysterious. It makes you raise one eyebrow and curl your toes in anticipation, expecting anything and everything. Makes you afraid too, because if you were hoping not to see something in it, you can’t figure out whether that specific thing is there or not.

Scary, but immensely fascinating.

The way I’m describing him, you might think I *like* him or something. Well, here’s for all you romantics — I wiped his snotty nose when he was crying, band-aided every inch of that boy’s body (well...not *every*), had to smell him for hours after our many hikes through the woods, changed his sister’s diapers with him, tackled him numerous times in soccer, rolled around in the dirt with him, etc, etc.

How’s that for romantic?

I mean, seriously, we’re just in high school and people are expecting us to fall in love with each other when not too long ago we took baths together while playing rescue heroes with his action figures and my Barbies.

But instead of being attracted to him ’cause of all of this, I’m merely proud of him. Proud of my boy Lex growing up to be so handsome, proud of the way all my friends and basically all females follow him around like flies to honey.

’Cause that’s what he is, my honey — my boo. I trust him, and whenever he is down, sad, tired, or downright angry he comes to me. *I’m the only one who can handle that*, I think with a private grin. A grumpy Lex is something only a mother could love, or in this case, only a mother and me.

He leans against my locker like a little kid, that dangerous gleam in his eyes. “Leeeeenntnaaaa,” he whines mischievously. I can’t help but feel his spark creep into me, and I laugh.

“Get away from me you miniature devil. You’re corrupting me as we speak. I’m trying to be good and you’re not helping my cause,” I say, blocking my face with a folder.

“But you gotta help me, Leena!!! She’s stalking me! I’ve tried everything! I’ve tried telling her I’m gay, but that got killed real quick since all the cheerleaders jumped in to assure her, that, oh, if Lex is gay, he wasn’t on our date last week.”

“That’s what you get for dating cheerleaders,” I reply smugly, stuffing some books and papers into a locker that is flooding over like the Mississippi in springtime.

He throws me a dirty look.

“Thanks a million. I tried everything. I tried ignoring her, then hiding from her. Then I tried getting some girls to rough her up.”

I gasp. “Alexander Keen!”

He continues. “I did every freakin’ thing on this planet!!! As long as I’m single, that girl won’t leave me alone.”

“Serves you right,” I comment playfully. Lex flirts. He really does. I’ve been seeing this coming for a while, but I didn’t expect it to be this amusing.

Silence.

“Aileen. I’m not playing anymore.” His voice has gone from joking to soft and pleading, and his eyes have also gone deep and troubled in a second. My full name, *Aileen*, such a rare sound leaking from his ever-running mouth, appears only in true times of distress.

Though his mom, sister, and I may be the only ones who know, Lex is a sweetheart deep inside. He hates hurting people. But he just doesn’t look, and the consequences after he leaps are, well, less than wonderful.

I slam the locker shut and look into his adorable face that attracts nothing but trouble for me to fix. I roll my eyes, and act exasperated and indecisive for a moment. A sigh escapes my mouth, and I put my hands on my hips.

“Well, I need to check my planner but I think I can fit you in for a session tomorr...”

I never get to finish my sentence, as I am smothered by a pair of overly affectionate adoring arms that not only squish me and almost crack my ribcage, but also knock a smile onto my face.

“Thanks Leena! You’re the best. Tomorrow at your house at five after soccer?”

“Mmmppghhh, nngghfff,” I reply from under his jacket.

“Cool! Gotta run. Bell rang already,” and with that, he disappears down the crowded hallway, making a bubble around him as he moves effortlessly through the parting crowd.

I stand there grinning wildly, hair messed up and collar of my jacket rumpled. Lex is such a mess, but I love him to pieces. And I can’t wait to figure out this one.

After tennis practice, I head home. I take a shower, letting the cool water melt away my outer shell; I watch my worries swirl down the drain. I start to think.

Why is it that Lex and I get along so well? I mean, we clash. Personality wise, I guess you could say. And we never crushed on each other. Even though he’s all perfect looking.

Then I realize. It’s cause he’s not.

The reason I like him so much, is because I like his imperfections. The shape of the bridge of his nose from when he broke it looks a little bit Roman. The way his full but narrow lips always come out lopsided when they try to smile. The annoying way he’s always changing stations, changing girls, changing clothes, and changing moods. The one or two scars on his back and chest. His attitude (sometimes). The stupid insensitive stuff he says without meaning to. The imperfect things about him. That’s what I like best because, I, Aileen Cho, am very imperfect.

Stepping out, I dry my hair, and walk around in a towel while I try to find something to wear. Doesn’t matter what, anything will do. I don’t need to impress someone with imperfections.

I throw on the nearest, comfiest thing I see and brush my hair back to keep it out of my face. The house feels cool and empty with no one here, and I clean the place up a little, remembering that Lex is coming.

“Speak of the devil,” I murmur to myself as the bell rings. So I open the door.

LEX

And there she is, just her regular self, non-compromising Leena, with a definite Leena attitude. I knew she wouldn’t dress up for me.

She almost looks like a little boy, if little boys ever looked like faeries in little boy clothes. The faded, yet closely hugging jeans hang off her hips and curve with her, softly folding under her heel. On top she’s wearing an undershirt, plain white. I know it’s probably one of my soccer ones that she shrank to mold to her form. It wraps around her snugly, long on her waist, bunched up showing a little skin at the hipbone, moving up on her ribcage, and that’s where the little boy similarities stop. It tugs and pulls in all the wrong directions, making me want to look. Plain blue and white, faded, soft, and comfy, with delicate collarbones and a slender neck rising out of it.

“Hey!” her cheerful smile snaps me out of it as I give her my best smile.

“You gonna let me in or give me your plan at the door?”

I walk in, and notice the quietness. I open the fridge door as she turns on the radio, humming fragments. Grabbing a soda, I throw myself onto the couch, sprawling on the cushions, arms and legs dangling off as I lay my head back and examine the ceiling. The quiet whirr of the fan mingles with Leena’s lightly hummed melody and the sounds of her moving around the kitchen. She chatters softly as

she washes a few dishes, and calls her mom. The sounds relax me and make me peaceful, calming my thoughts until I hear her yell.

“Slob!”

This brings me back into reality and I snap up startled.

She stands above me wielding a dishtowel, watching my reaction with a giggle.

“What?” I mumble grumpily.

“C’mere and help me dry these dishes. You can explain your situation to me meanwhile.” I follow her into the kitchen, and absentmindedly towel the pieces she hands me.

“Well, it all started back around the time of the soccer championship. If that brilliant little ninth-grader hadn’t made posters of me, none of this would have happened.”

“If the brilliant Lex Keen hadn’t given her his picture, none of it would have happened.”

“AANNNNYWAY, that girl got a hold of one. And it was stark-raving obsession at first sight. She started out by writing me passionate anonymous letters about how she wanted me doing this here and touching that there and—”

“All right, all right I get the point, just get on with it,” says Leena, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

“Then she decided to make anonymous stalker phone calls. The kind when you giggle and then hang up. Eventually she progressed to sounds. Almost gave my mom a heart attack once when she picked up the phone. I was still red the next day.”

“I bet you were,” snorts the amused girl beside me.

“Thank you Aileen Cho. Anyway, then she reveals herself, follows me around, sends me flowers, begs me to meet her, flashes me once and tells me she’ll kill herself if I don’t talk to her, yada yada, blah blah blah...”

“Lex! Pay more attention to these things. Maybe she’s serious!” I look down at the concerned face beside me, and give her a thoughtful look to satisfy her.

“I’ll be more careful. So anyhow, here she is saying that unless I give her a concrete reason why I don’t love her by Wednesday, she’ll do something drastic. And for the life of me I can’t think of anything to say. ‘My parents don’t let me love yet?’ Or, ‘Love? Ewwww!!! Cooties!’”

Leena convulses in laughter, sitting on the counter top, letting the joyful sound ring through the apartment. It filters out the open windows and neighbors sitting on the porch smile at the happiness floating on those girlish giggles.

I look at the little boy-woman-pretty girl beside me, taking a moment to enjoy that laugh. I can’t help smiling warmly at her. She reminds me so much of that girl that I’ve known from the beginning of time. So confident. So comfortable. So relaxed and sweet — unaffected.

“Hold on, be right back. Lemme grab some teen magazines that deal with those issues and a pen and paper.”

She goes back to her room, and I sprawl out on the couch again.

From the way I’ve been describing Leena, one might think I had a thing for her. In all fairness, I don’t know if I don’t. Some days, she just takes me by surprise. I just look at her, and something holds me. I don’t know, it’s like her aura glows, soft and strong, and pulls me in with a smile. But she doesn’t know it. She’s clueless, giggling, free Leena, expecting nothing and wanting even less. And that’s okay by me. ’Cause I don’t know what I want, so why should I confuse and frighten her? Maybe it’s just lust kicking in. Anyway, I’d never sacrifice all the closeness we have for a confession. As we are right now, we’re closer than just a mere relationship. I can sleep next to her and she won’t think anything of it. At least I can be close to her that way. If I ever said anything, you can bet that would end.

She’s so clueless, and so happy. And I don’t know why that bothers me.

She walks into the room like a sunbeam floats through the air, her soft, black hair glinting quietly. It moves like a curtain, a waterfall. Her bare arms, slim and toned from tennis, hold papers, and she glides, instead of walks. It’s like her feet never touch the ground, yet, it’s so realistic, so normal.

“Here we go,” she flops down next to me unceremoniously, breaking the picture, making it dissolve into thin air. A flood of glossy magazines land on my lap, and anonymous beautiful faces stare back at me.

“Here we go: How to Gracefully Refuse. ‘Tip #1: Don’t lie!!!!!!!’ C’mon Lex, this is gotta be where we start. I mean, you’re not interested in her, so just tell her! That’s good enough reason there!”

“But I’ve told her to her face! She wants me to explain why! And I can’t just say I don’t like you ’cause you’re ugly and I think your personality sucks!” I moan, frustrated.

She purses up her mouth, and glares at me. “If that’s how it’s got to be, it’s better than lying. That is, unless you have another reason.”

The later afternoon sun filters through the windows, setting her hair on fire. She looks up to me with the same determined yet compassionate frustration. The few soft beams dot the bridge of her nose, and glow like little sun kisses on her skin. We sit on the couch, glaring at each other in a deadlock, the stacks of perfect glossy paper faces between us, separating us.

“Or I could say I’m in love with someone else.” I say, softer, less stubborn.

“Hey! What an awesome idea! You could even play it up, saying how you’ve been suffering for this person for months, and that way she’ll be able to sympathize with you. Just tell her your heart is broken and you can’t love anyone right now.” Leena cheerfully pounces on the idea, completely missing my intention. She turned it over in her head, excitedly.

“It’d be perfect! Way to go, Lex. See, you didn’t even need me. There’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

“Wish I could skin her,” I mutter darkly. Which only sets her off again, and I can’t help laughing with her as we relax on the couch, letting the magazines fall and crumple to the floor. We laugh and joke, making mock plans of exposing my homosexuality, telling her that I only love animals like that, or that I’m suicidal. Telling her I’m moving to Australia and my evil twin is taking my place. Convincing her that I don’t exist.

All kinds of silly stuff like that, and it makes me feel better somehow.

She’s so clueless, and so happy. I turn around and stare her in the eyes. “When’s your mom coming home, Leena?”

She yawns, and checks her watch. “Not till tomorrow afternoon. Business meeting in Washington. Why?”

The idea pops into my head, childish yet exciting, somehow frightening.

“Remember the sleepovers we used to have, when we played cowboys and Indians on the floor and broke vases and bruised our shins on coffee tables?”

She raises an eyebrow. “What are you suggesting?”

“Whaddya think?” and I can’t resist giving her an Austin Powers smile. “Shagadelic, baby,” I croon, sticking out all my teeth and bugging my eyes.

She cracks up again, then sobers. “I don’t think your parents would approve of that, ’cause, you know...it just looks wrong. Even though they understand we’re not that way.”

“That’s okay,” I reply. “I’ll get someone to cover for me, probably Matt. His dad isn’t home tonight and I covered for him that one time with Jess. But I’ll have to say, I did it full well knowing that they weren’t thinking cowboys and Indians at that little sleepover. More like, horsies, let’s have a rodeo...”

She smacks me, eyes wide. “Stop playing!” Then she’s quiet. “Um, Lex, do you think, Matt and Jess have really....done...um...?”

I can’t help snickering. I catapult off the sofa and to the fridge in search of another soda. “Had sex? Done the nasty? Gone all the way? Made sweet moan?”

The English joke bursts her into another fit of girlish giggles but I see her blush faintly, and I love it. I love how she’s still a bit of a little girl, not some jaded party chick that’s done it all. I couldn’t stand that. The question is still in her eyes.

“C’mon Leena, you don’t still think they’re just holding hands? In answer to your question, is the world round? Is the sky blue? Is the pope old? Did Bill and Monica really?”

She blushes a bit and grins at my affirmation. But I see the surprise in her eyes.

“I mean, they’re juniors. It’s not that big of a deal, and wasn’t too long ago. As a matter of fact, you’ll hear a steamy detailed account from Jess in not too long, as soon as he gives her permission to tell ya. And, this will be one girl conversation that I won’t be trying to listen in,” I reply casually, and pop the top off a root beer.

“It does kinda shock me, ’cause I know those two aren’t into that scene. But I guess....it makes sense...”

I notice a laundry basket by the couch, and I saunter over, grab a pair of panties and stick them on my head, terrifying a hopelessly laughing Leena.

“Lex, stop! Put those back!”

“This song, is, um, dedicated to the *loovvee* of mah life, *Jeh-sssee*.” I quietly drawl in my flawless Matt impression, flipping my superstar hair back. I strum a few imaginary guitar chords and clear my throat. “I’m too sexy for my shirt, I’m too sexy for my pants, I make ya’ll ladies wanna dance.” I bust out wildly, snapping fingers, jamming my imaginary electric guitar.

She’s rolling on the couch, laughing hard and soundless, and I take the panties off my head and throw them in the basket as I join her.

I live to make Leena laugh.

I watch her as the happiness reflects off her face. I become an idiot for her, just to see her smile on those days when the world is cold and sad. When her face becomes drawn, and all the hugs in the world can’t make it better. That’s when I become her goofball, her clown. Anything to make that smile come out. Anything to make the sun shine.

I can’t stand seeing her sad. I don’t understand it in my typical male kind of way, but I can’t take seeing her unhappy. Makes me want to do stupid things. The last time she cried, I went out with Matt and found a street sign with her name on it. It was in the next town, and we drove for hours, risking arrest as the quietly unscrewed the sign in the night and drove away. When I gave it to her the next day. She was so mad at me and so delighted that she forgot to be sad.

I was just glad it worked.

And here we are, laying in the afternoon sunshine like two lazy pets on the couch, laughing like little kids. And it suited me just fine. Because when she’s happy I’m happy, and that’s all that matters to me.

“So, whaddya say? Can I? Can I?” I beg like a little kid.

She looks at me, and does the mommy impression. “Okay, but remember to bring your toothbrush, clean underwear, and one stuffed animal.”

I grimace. “I don’t sleep with animals.”

She giggles. “Then bring your lovable self.”

I bounce up, noticing the time. “I’ll pack and be back in an hour. Don’t do anything fun without me.”

Her grin is worth a thousand bucks. “I won’t. Get out.”

The door slams behind me, and excitement floods my veins and courses up and down, mixed with adrenalin and this sweet, warm feeling I can’t place. I love her—the slim, lightly tanned girl with eyes so deep that if you accidentally fell in they could drag the bottom for days and never find you.

That’s what it is.

I love her.

And I wanna stand on top of the building and shout it, I LOVE AILEEN CHO! My heart feels like it’s gonna pound until it pounds itself to death; either that or that it might explode. I feel light. And beautiful. Beautiful like thunderstorms while it’s sunny, like little kids in the park, like making the final goal in the game. I might die from happiness.

But first I got to get home and pack.

LEENA

The door slams after him, leaving me standing there. I chuckle one last time, thinking of the afternoon’s jokes as I go to clean my room. Yeah, Lex is pretty special. But a sudden thought that I don’t like intrudes my head. He was really casual about that Matt and Jess business. I mean, casual as in, “so what, maybe I have too.” By the way, the Matt and Jess thing still shocks me. Knowing them, I guess I would expect it. But it still came as kind of a surprise, just because, well, I remembered when she was a spoiled brat in a pink hat and he was the little blond kid with big gloves back in the days when we all played house together. Guess they’ve all grown now. Maybe everybody is except me, and that thought makes me feel weird. Especially thinking that Lex might be. He’s always been close. He grew from a

bratty insensitive kid into my sunshine. Somehow, I can't picture my sunshine with anyone in some backseat. So, somehow I'll have to find out, otherwise, it'll drive me crazy.

And that bothers me.

I throw some clothes in the dryer, and put some clean ones away as I tidy a bit and check to see if the sofa bed has clean sheets. Although I don't really believe he'll use it; we've always shared my bed. It wasn't even like that; it was just a matter of friendship. We were comfy enough, and I liked having something to keep me warm. With a grin, I remember when we all camped at Jess' grandma's house one time. Lex got cold and lonely one night and crawled in so we could talk, and we fell asleep that way. Guess Jess' grandma got a pretty big shock the next morning. She chased him out with a broom while I sat on my butt and laughed helplessly. We all did, and the poor confused woman threw her hands up and marched out, giving us sinister looks over breakfast and sermons about the recklessness and shamelessness of kids nowadays.

I wonder why it bothers me.

It might just be jealousy 'cause he's such a close friend. Or maybe I'm just being stupid. But, he's had a lot of girls chase him. Granted, he's never stayed in one relationship that long. But then, he always got his way. Trust Lex to get what he wanted. Be it a smile from me, a grade from a teacher, a victory in the game, or anything from a girl.

I shake my head, almost as if trying to shake the thought off. But it is lodged, stuck like an invisible thorn in my brain. You know how people say realization hits them "like a ton of bricks?" Well, realizations never hit me. They just creep in quietly and stay there, lodged — bugging the hell out of me.

I wonder why it bothers me.

I almost yell in frustration, trying to escape the thought. I march determinedly into the kitchen and start making dinner to distract myself. The noodles are simmering, and the veggies and chicken roasting in orange sauce when I hear the doorbell ring.

"C'mon in," I yell from the kitchen, knowing it's him.

"Honey I'm home," he jokes with his classic grin. Sniffs the air, and makes a beeline for the kitchen, poking around, sniffing, and commenting.

"Yum, let's get our eat on. I'm starved."

"Hold your peace and go throw some utensils on the counter. We'll just eat at the bar stools."

"Yes Ma'am." He trots off obediently. "Now, that's how I like my men trained. Like Lassie," I tell him and he rolls his eyes.

We eat, and then watch a movie on cable. Afterwards, it's dark, and I'm tired. We lie on the sofa, forgetting to pull out the bed. He's sprawled across me, but my head finds its way onto his chest, just resting there, drooping. I yawn. He's so warm and comfy, and he smells fresh and clean, that boy smell, a hint of cologne and just, him. I can hear his heartbeat if I focus, but I'm too tired to focus.

The words sneak out of my mouth, without my permission. I'm surprised and angered at them, but they don't cower. They just ask, all sassy and disrespectful to me. I stick my tongue out at them. "Um, don't take this the wrong way, but back there; when we were talking bout Matt and Jess, you seemed pretty casual. I mean, maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm a little girl or something. But I kinda wanted to know, like, *have you?* You know, had sex?"

There. I said it. I feel him shift a little against me, and I pray the silence doesn't mean anything.

"Well, once I almost got attacked by this cheerleader in the locker room, I had to beat her off with my cleats..." he murmurs.

The picture makes me giggle and relax, but I still wait for what I want to hear. "Nah. Never found anybody special enough. Not for lack of choice, just...it's just that..."

I'm desperately happy and I don't know why. I wonder if he can feel my huge grin in the darkness. "That what?"

He's quiet again. I can hear my heart in my throat, its singing, *da-dum, da-dum*, Leena, you're dumb, *da-dum*...but it's dancing too, laughing, glad that I am.

"It's 'cause I keep comparing them to you, and even though they might be sexier or have supermodel figures and be flawless, they're not you. You're something else, it's like you stole your beauty from those days outside in our childhood on a beautiful day. You took the strange quality that

made everything beautiful and you made it your own. You're not afraid of what people say, and you shine from inside out, like some kind of faerie. And I guess, not a lot of girls can stand next to that."

My fingers tremble, and I felt weak and thin, fragile, like tissue paper, next to his chest. Why am I acting like this? His hands could've torn me up just like a kid at the birthday party shreds the delicate paper of his present; his fingers could undo all the bows in my head. Now they study me like Braille in the dark, like he wants to read me and remember me for a test. They trace my nose, my chin, my neck.

I pull away, and so does he, both of us slightly embarrassed, I guess.

"G'night Leena," he says lightly and normally.

"G'night," I say even more normally.

In my room, I crawl under my covers, still feeling the butterfly touch on my cheek, tracing me to my neck. I'm angry at myself for pulling away, yet confused. I don't understand what feels different this time. Why it doesn't feel like Lex is...*just Lex*.

I want to crawl back to him and do some of those things that Jess did to Matt. Just the mere thought makes me ashamed. Mess up our friendship like this just because we are in the house, late at night, and just, being weird.

Or was it something else?

His breath. It didn't come exactly right when I asked him. I knew he was telling me the truth. And somehow in a boyish way he explained why. It was just the reason why...and the fact he hesitated, trying to make what he said normal.

But it wasn't the same.

I read Lex like an open book. And tonight, I opened to a chapter I've never read. And I don't know how long it's been there, or what it says. But I thought I got a glimpse of the title.

And it bothers me.

LEX

It hurts. That she would leave the room so normally. That I think she's realized she isn't just Leena anymore. And now after finding out, she just chose to walk away. So this is why I never fell in love in the first place, idiot, I remind myself. To spare myself from nights like these when you feel like the darkness is laughing at you, and you can't pinpoint it and kill it, because it's everywhere.

To spare myself from hurt. And now it hurts.

But why her? She's the one person I can't afford to lose. And she's the one person that I screw up on. I should've kept my mouth shut. Now she knows. And she still walks away. She read me like an open book, and she didn't like my topic. Or my sentence structure for that matter, I think ruefully. But then, math's always been my strong point.

I try to imagine what she is thinking right now. I'm probably not too far off...she's probably wondering if I caught feelings for her, how long...what I'm expecting...blah blah, blah...all those other girly things that girls wonder about.

I squeeze my eyes shut, and just hope she isn't crying or being sad. I can't believe I would make Leena sad. I never want to do anything but make her smile in this lifetime. And the next and the next. Or in heaven if there were no following lifetimes. Or in hell, if she went down there and I had to follow her. I just don't wanna make her sad.

I can't help but give a little shudder, when, silently, above me, I feel a shadow move. I don't know what to feel. Delirium. Quick, gain control. Sweet ecstasy crashing over me in a huge wave, breaking me.

I know it's her. And I can only hope she's forgiven me. As I feel her long, smooth legs sliding into the blankets so effortlessly, I know she has. And what this means, I can only imagine.

But imagining is okay, I can do that. Anything for her.

I can hear her breathing so close to me, soft and pepperminty, and a few strands of soft downiness brush my bare chest. I wouldn't care if I died right now. I think, matter of fact, this might be the best moment of my life. When I passed all my tests with flying colors, and when I won the league championship, that was okay. I guess.

This is better.

LEENA

There is nothing better than knowing somebody loves you, and knowing you love them back. I don't care what kind of love. But this kind of love is best.

In fact, I'm glad it only took me a few minutes of quiet solitude to figure that out. And to think I never considered it in a lifetime.

I can hear his irregular breathing next to me, but I can also feel his smile. It glows down on me, and I know what it looks like. It's mysterious, impossible to pinpoint and label. It's infinite, and indecisive. It's meaningful, but the meaning eludes me. It's a lifetime of personal jokes mixed with longing, and a tinge of the boy Lex I used to know. The eleven-year-old who was always doing something stupid.

I love him.

Understatement of the year, but I don't know how to say it better.

So I don't say it at all. I just express it the only way I know how.

It's not hard to find his mouth. The first soft, small, chaste touch is slow, warm, damp and full of wonder. I can sense him shifting, squirming, melting under my unexpected movement. But he's back in a second, adding a little bit of urgency in the soft kiss, his lips caressing mine gently yet, full of longing that he transfers to me. And under my closed eyelids I see fireflies.

Not fireworks. That's not how it's meant to be. Fireflies, small and softly glowing. He'd put them in jars and I'd beg him to let them go. They illuminated the darkness with soft little bursts of light, as his lips brushed my closed eyelids. Then he pulls me close to him, and I draw in a deep breath. Why does it feel so strange yet familiar, the way we are now? I fit so perfectly inside his arms, and he softly wraps around me, holding me, while his magic fingers slide through my hair and he makes a little sweet happy sound as he buries his face in it.

I wonder how long he's been waiting to do that. And I wonder how long I've been wanting him to do that.

The long sensitive fingers continue to stroke my hair. Slowly, carefully, as if it were a spider's web, they trace the length of my hair. Following through to my collarbones in curious wonder, they pause. I turn and burrow into his chest like a baby, a little ashamed but wanting, sliding my hands up his back, feeling his strong shoulders tense from the restraint.

He's restraining, because, he knows where this'll lead. He'll be there before I will. But I've never felt this good before, and like a drunk child, I feverishly seek out more.

Good thing one of us has self-control.

He rolls off to the side, and I can hear him breathe, heavily and irregularly. It's the only way of reading his emotions in the dark, when I can't see his face. And his breathing says, damn. I wish I didn't have to stop. I don't wanna stop. But I have to. But it felt so good.

I know what his breathing says 'cause I'm breathing the same way. And that's what I'm thinking.

LEX'S POV

I couldn't have described that to you so calmly.

The things she makes me feel, I can't understand. I've had a girlfriend or two that I've made out with, even further than this. So why does it feel like the end of the world and I can hardly breathe?

Didn't feel that way before. Does now, and I study the ceiling intently. It could drop on my head for all I care. I feel like she picked me up and threw me in the sky and I broke into a million pieces, flying, and fell like little pieces of shooting stars.

I lick my lips; she tastes like peppermint and strawberry, soft and deep and sweet. I swear to God I don't know how I did it. I don't know how I rolled to the side with her clinging to me like she wanted to make herself translucent and empty to let me in.

And I don't know why I did it. Maybe 'cause now wasn't right. 'Cause it was just the beginning. And we had all the time in the world.

Thank God.

But in my arms, she'd felt like a faerie, fragile, but unbreakable. Her body was balsa wood, bendable and strong, flexible and soft, on a slim frame. And her softly scented skin had almost killed me, if it's possible to die from the sweetness of it all.

We turn and stare at each other. Her face wears a new smile, deep as forever, but new as a butterfly still wet from its cocoon. Her eyes glow softly in the dark, and she reaches out and gently strokes my cheek. "Goodnight, Lex," she whispers innocently.

"Goodnight, Leena," I whisper back, and blow her a small kiss. She smiles at the gesture.

"You're not safe, you know. Better keep your distance." I grin.

She replies with a delightfully naughty look, the look of a kid whose hand just got caught in the cookie jar and doesn't care.

"I love you."

And it all wells out of me, I want to laugh and cry, and tell her, YES!

"I love you too," I reply and close my eyes.

We don't awake till the first rays of the morning sun brush our eyelids in golden dust, illuminating the soft pink of her slightly open rosebud lips.

Dawn has arrived, and the long years of silence are finally over.

The Beginning.
