

Nightgowns

by ASMA HASAN

MILLIE'S STORY

It was deathly hot at Austin, and the beginning of the school year. All the Fourth Formers, sophomores in normal language, came back early to go on this retreat; we were supposed to become acquainted with the others. The campus was quiet and empty, nothing like its usual state. Prize Day of last June was still in my mind: Candice Bergen's commencement speech (the closest I had ever come to a celebrity), packing everything up, the dictionaries that were supposed to be prizes, the long, long handshaking line. I couldn't believe we were back already. I ran around with the old girls, laughing, saying, "Let's check our mailboxes." I felt sorry for the new girls; they all stood around with shifty looks on their faces, arms crossed at their waists. I wondered which of the new girls was my roommate. Some of the new girls were wearing flashy, fancy jewelry and had permed hair. I smiled to myself, knowing that Austin would change them and by Parents'

Weekend they would all have straight hair and simple silver earrings.

For the most part, I hadn't changed to the Austin norm. I had dark brown hair, which I kept very short and never lightened. I wore what I liked, much beyond J. Crew, and hated Birkenstocks. I wore glasses because contacts were too much of a pain, and I would have to wake up fifteen minutes earlier to put them in my eyes. That never bothered the other girls there, who could stay up all night and function normally the next day. Maybe all this was why I had had trouble finding a roommate.

The retreat was average. We went swimming a lot. All the girls wore turquoise one-piece swimsuits. The daring ones wore orange or fuchsia suits; their muscular legs stuck out like pencils with knobs in the middle. Kyra was the only one in a bikini; she was obviously a new girl—no one wore a bikini in front of the guys. I thought she was nice, cutesy with her dark eyes and blondish hair. She was skinny and had a little perky nose. I had no idea that she was my roommate.

I was surprised at her excitement at being my roommate; she had been so quiet at the retreat. Later somebody who was in her cabin during the retreat told me that she had thought Kyra was a social climber; I didn't think so. We set up the room, her bed by the window, mine in the corner, tapestries and black and white posters on the walls. Pre-season sports began, and we didn't see much of each other, running around to practices and meals.

Suddenly it became cold and classes had already begun. All my classes were surprisingly hard, and I went to bed late on school nights for the first time in two

and a half years. Kyra and I liked each other, and we became good roommates; she didn't party in our room, and I didn't talk about her behind her back.

We had that unspoken understanding. We would lie in bed at night and tell each other our secrets—who we thought was hot; which girls were pretty or snobby; who was smart. We would talk about our flirtations; Kyra did most of the talking. She was the first roommate I had ever had.

We started playing this game in which one of us would describe the other out loud. Kyra would always say that my nose was soft and round (she was too nice to say that it was big), and that my lips were thick and round. I would always avoid describing Kyra; I was afraid that too much of my admiration of her would seep out.

Kyra had made a lot of friends, even with the old people. I remember in the beginning thinking that it was nice she had made so many friends, even with seniors. I was sort of condescending. Then I realized she was more popular than I was; she had made greater progress in three months than I had in two and a half years! She was even better friends with some of the girls I had known since Second Form, eighth grade in normal language. I wasn't upset, just surprised. People were coming to visit Kyra, addressing the notes on the door to her.

Kyra's grades weren't as good as mine, at least I don't think they were. I would just see a few grades on wisps of paper here and there. It was a comfort to me, though, to be able to think that I was at least smarter than she in school, that those two years had paid off for something. But I secretly thought to myself that my grades could not be *that* much better.

One night after Kyra spent a short half-hour describing me, I had to describe Kyra; I had been avoiding it for too long. I started out with the normal sort of thing:

“Your hair is really nice. It’s a nice type of shiny and soft. You have pretty eyes; they’re like brown glass. Your nose is perfect, like a little button but with a small peak in the middle. Your ears are a little small, but not too small. Your face is round, well—more oval-shaped, like a mask.”

Then I started to really let go.

“Well, everything about you is really perfect. I mean, I even admire your feet. Your toes aren’t stubby like mine. Your fingers are long and skinny, like your legs. And your knees are perfect too; they’re not flat and wrinkly like mine. Yours are smooth and heart-shaped.”

I waited for some sort of response. I paused to give her the chance to answer, to accept what I divulged, so I would not go any further. But she never answered.

“What I’m really trying to say, Kyra, is that I really . . . admire you. I mean . . . I guess I want to *be* you. I really want to be you. Everyone likes you; the guys think you’re hot, and the girls always tell you their secrets and say that they want to have a body like yours. See . . . I guess I feel that after two and a half years, I should be above your level, but I’m really below it. You have to understand; I don’t obsess over you or anything. I would just like to be like you. Is that weird?”

I let out a gasp of air; it had taken a lot of guts, or stupidity, to explain myself like that. I was scared of her reaction, but I wanted to hear it. “Kyra, are you there? Are you listening?” I realized suddenly that Kyra was asleep, that she hadn’t heard anything I had said,

that she was sleeping quietly, lying there in the dark, in her nightgown.

KYRA'S STORY

I was really nervous about Austin. In addition to being racked with nerves, I also had to leave home three days earlier than usual to go on this retreat. The purpose of the retreat was for all of us to become friends—teacher-type reasons. I stood watching all the old students run around and hug each other, saying things like, “Can you tell I’ve lost weight?” “Do you like my haircut?”

I pretended to be very interested in scratching my elbows and yawning—too cool for all this. I don’t even think anyone noticed. I took a sort of quantitative look at the old girls. They all wore J. Crew, preppie clothes. I was relieved; I wore the same type of clothes. The girls were pretty skinny. Most of them were blond. They all looked the same, though. Millie looked different from everyone. She had black hair, glasses, and wore red shorts. Nobody wore red shorts. It was just one of those things. She looked good in them.

I’m glad the retreat was organized. There were times when I was so homesick; I never could have managed being in classes right away. I remember a time, during one of our few hours of free time—the nightly bonfire—that I just felt like crying. It just so happened that Millie was sitting there. She told me corny jokes and laughed at them herself; it cheered me up, in a strange way. The next day we went swimming. I was the only one wearing a bikini; I whispered to Millie, remembering the red shorts, about how weird I felt. She said

that I should feel happy that I was the only one skinny enough to wear a bikini. I noticed Sara, a really pretty girl in my cabin, and hung out with her. The guys were all over her! All the girls were pretty, in their own way. Millie wasn't really pretty, though; she was different looking. I had no idea that she was my roommate.

I was so happy when I found out she was my roommate; I was glad I hadn't been stuck with some geek. Sara was in my dorm, too. I liked the dorm for the most part. I insisted on having my bed by the window; afterwards, I felt a little guilty, but Millie didn't complain. I later learned that Millie really wasn't a complainer; she would never raise her voice for anything. I didn't see much of her during pre-season sports; I was running around trying to organize myself.

It got cold, and I had to use my wool sweaters sooner than I thought. My classes required a lot of work, but I was in bed at precisely 10:30 on weeknights. Millie would stay up all night, it seemed, but she would oversleep the next day. Sometimes she would study in the bathroom so as not to bother me. She was caring and did nice things like that. When I wanted to party, I would go to Sara's room or someone else's room; I respected Millie for not drinking. There were so many things Millie was outgoing about, and there were other things that she wasn't outgoing about at all. She didn't talk to the guys at all; she didn't avoid them or anything, but she didn't especially make an effort.

Once when I was sitting at a lunch table, I was doing the normal girl flirt thing, laughing at what the guys said. Then Will, this tall blond kid, said something about my "gurn roommate." I wasn't sure what it meant, but I said, "She just studies a lot." Will said, "Admit it; she's

a geek.” He had a smug smile on his face like he was winning points with Sara and me. I stood up and slammed the bowl I was holding down on my tray. I nervously yelled at him:

“Look, Millie is a great roommate. She is nice, considerate and caring. She would never say what you just said about anybody, whether she liked them or not. And at least she has the confidence and individuality to avoid wearing stuff like that ugly J. Crew Rugby you’re wearing.”

I was glad I did that. It made me feel good—even if the guys called me a bitch for a week.

That was the night I started playing this game with Millie. I never told her about Will, but I wanted to build up her confidence. One of us would describe the other out loud, saying her nice features. I would tell her she was skinny and had good muscle tone. I wondered if I sounded fake. She would always say she was sleepy and would never describe me.

Once I started drinking, I was accepted into this circle of people, popular people. Practically every Saturday night, Sara and I, other girls too, would sneak over to the guys’ dorm next door. We wouldn’t be running up and down the hall with beer or anything, but we would go to a guy’s room and play chandeliers. The next day, the guy whose room I had been in would come up to me and put his hands on my shoulders and make some funny comment. It was great. I had made all these friends through drinking. I never lost control like Sara did, though; I think she would actually have sex with some guys. I would always leave when someone passed out because things were too serious then. I didn’t want to be involved.

All the girls took a liking to me right away. They borrowed clothes from me, never from Millie. She told me she liked it that way. I wonder if she noticed that the girls were making efforts to talk to me and not her. I didn't want her to be envious. She didn't show any emotions, though. She was really smart, everyone told me; I knew she worked hard for her grades.

One night, Millie finally said she would describe me. She starts going on about my hair and eyes, normal stuff. I am feeling sleepy. Then she says something about a mask, and I open my eyes. Then I hear that I am perfect, and so are my toes and knees. How strange! Millie was kind of comparing herself to me.

Then the talking ceases. I close my eyes. I figure Millie is done. Then she starts into this long speech about how she wants to be me, or admires me or something. I open my eyes. It sounds kind of like she's obsessing over me, but then she says she's not. I'm scared for some reason; I don't even want to breathe. How am I supposed to react to that? Why would she want to be me? People are always telling me if they think I have gained weight, or if they have a better grade on a test than me—not stuff like Millie was telling me.

There's just quiet then. Millie asks if I can hear her, if I'm there. I close my eyes. I don't answer because I don't want Millie to know that I know she looks up to me so much. It's embarrassing. So I just lie there, not saying anything. I know she wants me to say something, but I act like I'm asleep and nervously pick at the seam in my nightgown.

Asma Hasan comes from Pueblo, Colorado, and attends Groton School in Groton, Massachusetts. She wrote this story while in the tenth grade. She admits to “an incredible rush” from public speaking, and recently won the Richard K. Irons Public Speaking Prize. Future joys will include “traveling the world—especially Thailand, because that’s where W.Somerset Maugham lived, and Italy because I love pasta.”

