

The Smell of March

Jessica Pleyel

You know that smell? The smell of March? The worms coming out of the ground, flowers beginning to bloom, and the snow finally melting? I bet some of y'all are starting to notice that now. March has always been a special time of year for me, for as long as I can remember. My parents, brother and I moved up to Michigan from Louisiana in March of 1991. I was three, so I don't remember living in Louisiana, but I certainly grasped the cooking and culture, and kept the accent due to my momma who has kept hers.

Now Lani Brisset Pleyel *is* indeed a southern belle! Her life has consisted of clothes, jewelry, cooking, and of course make-up. Her fashion inspirations? Mardi Gras, Chicos and RuPaul (NO ONE does a contour and eye better than RUPAUL!). My mother does her face to the nines. I remember when we first moved to Michigan and I was in the front of the supermarket cart and my mother gasped and whispered to me, "Where are all these women's makeup? Why ain't their hair done? I mean... none of us are *that* beautiful!"

Momma had a hard time with me as a kid. She wanted a girly girl—a little princess, but I preferred to play outside in my brother's old clothes. She would beg me to learn to sew, or to play Barbies or color, but I had bigger ideas: I wanted to be a knight. Or an adventurer like Steve Irwin. Or maybe even Balto. Hell, for a whole year I would only answer to "Cody," the main character from *Adventurers Down*

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Under. But I definitely had to be outside to play those games. I was always imagining a world bigger than the one I knew.

And I had a best friend who loved playing the same games as me.

Her name was Kristina. We met in Kindergarten. I will always remember her white dress with blue flowers. She was quiet, shy and petite. Her big blue eyes peered from under shaggy brown bangs. She had freckles everywhere (and said they were fairy kisses). When our kindergarten teacher wanted to read us a story, I made sure to sit by Kristina. As Mrs. Gerow began reading *The Three Little Kittens*, Kris and I began reciting the story. Mrs. Gerow heard us and boomed, "WELL! If you two know it so well, why don't you come up and read it!" Kris's eyes were wide with fear, but I grabbed her hand and we performed the nursery rhyme like my mom had taught me:

"The three little kittens they lost their mittens and didn't know where to find them!"

When we finished the nursery rhyme, all the other children clapped.

Kristina and I became inseparable from that day onwards. We always joked I was the funny loud one and she was the pretty quiet one. It was the perfect combination!

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Kristina and I would play every moment of everyday, especially in the summer, when my parents would let us play outside sunrise to sun set. We would always be characters in our own world. I think this is where I have felt most comfortable in my whole life. I would be the brave knight, she the evil sorceress, or the princess I would need to save and hundreds of other characters. I still can think of the characters: a blend of video games, Sailor Moon, Pokemon, and Animorphs (for all of you nineties kids. Any in here?)

Kris always wanted to play at my house. She didn't invite me over to her house. Although both of our families struggled with money, Kris's family was struck really hard with the imminent depression that was and is Michigan economics. Her parents couldn't afford to feed her more than one meal a day in the summer. Well! My Louisiana mother didn't want to hear about that! She cooked for us constantly. The first thing that will happen if y'all ever meet my mother is she will ask "whatcha want to eat? We have jambalaya in the fridge, brownies on the counter and red beans and rice boilin'!"

Now it was apparent that I ate. I was a big, chunky kid. When I was young, it was a benefit. I could stay warmer in the winter, and could swim all day in Lake Michigan even in May. Whereas Kris would turn purple. Also, if kids picked on

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Kristina, I would defend her. I liked my role as her protector, her knight in shining armor.

There was this one time when we were playing on the merry go round. Kris would sit with the other small kids and ride, while I would push with the boys. I would push, and push and say, "I'm STRONG AS AN OX!" But that time, Kris fell off. And as she fell off the boys began to trample her. I stopped pushing and yelled "STOP!" and grabbed Kristina up before the playground supervisor could even reach us. Kris used to brag after that that she got the rule put in place to not sit on the merry-go-round.

We played our imaginary games a lot longer than most kids. The characters continued to develop into middle school. Some had relationships, some hated each other, some died, but then were miraculously back later in the game. We always changed the game in March. That would be the time we could finally play outside after the long Michigan winters. Even while we were in classes, we would write notes constantly. We even would alter our handwritings for specific characters, and mimic each other's. But as Kris and I got older, things started to change.

Kris wanted to have other friends, and so we started spending less time together.

She started wearing dark eye makeup, and hanging out with the rebellious girls.

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She started to have a crush on this guy—Brian O’Halla. I also kind of liked him, but mostly for his Chrono Trigger cheats guide. They started to date and I got jealous.

Our world began to fade. We would try to keep up, but Kris was moving on to other friends. I got anxious. I didn’t want to lose her. I called and called and called her house phone. Counting the rings.

538-6193. Ring Ring Ring Ring Ring Voicemail.

538-6193 Ring Ring Ring Ring “WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?” Kris’s older brother Joe roared.

“Where’s Kris?” was all I could bumble out.

“Masturbating. What? Does that turn you on? You fuckin freak lesbian!”

I didn’t know what most of those words meant. I told him so, and he laughed.

So I asked my mom, as she washed dishes. She didn’t even blink as she told me the facts, straightforward and simplistically. “Well sug’ a lesbian is a woman who loves another woman, and masturbating is what you do when you touch yourself down there.”

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I was shocked. I mean I had been masturbating since age three (my mom always told me that was okay, even when I awkwardly asked her what I was doing and why it felt good. She would tell me about the time her mom caught her, and instead of going to repent to the priest, she would take her pennies and go buy penny candy down the street. My mother is a smart, smart woman.)

But a lesbian? I mean my first sex dream was about Kris. It was hazy and soft, and all I remember is the blue velvet couch and Kristina being beautiful. I never kissed Kristina, but I often thought about it.

My mother asked who said those things, and I said Joe. She scoffed and said, "Well what in God's name is a twenty one year old man talking to MY 12 year old daughter about those things?!" She threatened to call Kris's family but I begged her not to. Kris already didn't want to talk to me. It would just make things worse.

And that wasn't the end of my bullying. As a two hundred pound butch middle school girl, I heard a lot of comments. "LESBO! FATSO! UGLY! SICK!

DISGUSTING! WHY DON'T YOU GET A GUN AND GO SHOOT YOURSELF IN THE FACE!?"

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I went home and cried to my mother, who would hold me, and tell me I was beautiful. I never did believe her. Honestly, I still don't.

My mother offered to help me go to Weight Watchers. I was too ashamed to do that, but I did start counting calories, and playing Dance Dance Revolution this ridiculous video game that you played with your feet instead of your hands. The calorie counting got real.

900 kcals per day + 60 min of DDR (-1000 kcal) + going to Curves with my mom (-300kcal)=
-400 kcals per day.

And oh honey did I lose weight. And oh honey did I bleach my hair blonde. I wanted to be Jessica Simpson, or a playboy bunny. Hopefully both. By sophomore year of high school, I had lost over 100 pounds, went from a size 18 to a size 0.

My mother loved it! As I whittled away at my body, I became the daughter she always wanted. Not because I was thin, but because I wanted to be feminine. My mother would love me at any weight, and often worried I had a problem. And I did. And I denied it. And she loved me anyway. There was one night in particular, when I couldn't move because the pangs of hunger were too much. My mother

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came and sat by my bed and whispered, “Sweetie—we have jambalaya in the fridge, brownies on the counter, red beans and rice... Please eat something.”

“Mom I want to dye my hair” “YES BABY!”

“Mom I want to buy clothes,” “Oh my goodness, of course sugar! And look at you!

You fit into just about anything now!”

“Mom I want some new makeup.”

“Whatever you want, chil’! Let’s make you up like a beauty queen!”

“Mom I want to buy bras!”

“WELL LET’S GET A VICTORIA’S SECRET CREDIT CARD!”

My mother loved that. And I loved that I was making my southern mother proud. I was pretty and feminine—now all I needed was a “man” (My mother SAID I could have the pick of the litter!)

I tried to find men to have crushes on. I cried out of relief when I found Bruce Lee to be sexy, in an old rerun of *Eye of the Tiger*, or Gackt a Japanese pop star (who was more femme than I was). I eventually dated a man who was 21 and obsessed with hipbones. “Better thin than fat,” he used to say. Man that was fucked.

At this time, Kristina refused to talk to me. At prom, I got dressed to the nines in a sequined dress, hair the highest it could go, bright makeup. A regular Barbie. I

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came into prom and saw Kris from across the room. She began running over, and for a moment I thought she was going to hug me, but instead she tried to punch me. As a few of our friends grabbed her she yelled, “you stole my spotlight! I was the pretty one, and you were the funny one! That was our deal” All I could do was leave.

This wasn't the end of her rage. Kristina hacked my xanga (y'all remember those?!), and told everyone that I had an eating disorder. She posted it in big red letters.

I'M ANOREXIC

I'M ANOREXIC

I'M ANOREXIC

I was devastated, embarrassed and still in denial. I was just so damn proud of how my hands fit around my thigh. People began asking more questions, and I would get defensive. But at least I still had Abby and the others in our group of friends.

Abby was my closest friend through my junior year of high school. We bonded over summer walks, listening to Cake and Death Cab for Cutie, and creating the best MySpace and Xanga backgrounds. Also lots of mirror selfies, and photo shoots.

Kris and Abby were also friends, but they did stuff I wasn't into in high school: drugs, lots of sex and drinking. Kris didn't like that Abby and I were friends.

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Kris, remembering my handwriting, forged a letter to Abby's mom detailing their weed smoking, and then accused me of tattling on her and Abby. For this, I was kicked out of our circle of friends as a "snitch."

And for some reason, I still can't be mad at her. And part of me still loves this girl.

She got married a while back. They have two kids, he's an army medic trying to go to school, and she stays home with the kids. He's really anti- LGBTQ, and she's gotten rather homophobic too (after her stint of having sex with women in high school). She doesn't know about me being queer. Or the crush I had on her.

She Facebook messages me often now. She asked a few weeks ago, "You made art with you dad that fixed your relationship, why can't we? It is March again..."

I remember the crisp March days of us running through fields, and being one of hundreds of characters, and how my identity could change in a moment. From Knight to Soccerer to Sailor Moon.

I still don't know how to think about her. And I often feel that way about myself—I don't know what to think.

I think of my mother, and the pageant that is her fashion.

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An ongoing criticism in my performance work has been my costuming. And how it makes me seem “fake.” Do y’all think I’m fake?

And anyways, isn’t everything a costume? I still don’t know if I can tell the difference.

March came and went this year, and I already miss it.