

**Lovestrings:  
Nobody can control who you love.**

By Jess Javni (2<sup>nd</sup> year Creative Nonfiction)

Seven days. Her life's next chapter will be determined a week from now. Years of practise, of hand strength exercises, of sheet music papering her bedroom walls as a child. One day. One audition. The country's most prestigious music scholarship up for grabs. The chance to train with the elite, to shine amongst the crowd. Her spirits have never been higher. When she plays, she thinks of where she comes from, where she's been, where she is going. She sees colours more vibrantly than they ever would be without the music in her hands. She thinks of love, and the possibility of it finding her somewhere in the future, beyond her high school teacher crush.

She glides the bow gently down the strings a final time. The violin mourns a wavering C in the dim classroom. Stray specks of rosin float up from the instrument and dust her nose. The note rings out in her jaw, vibrating each nerve from the tips of her fingers to the ends of her toes.

Hearing the final school bell ring, she lowers the instrument from her neck, enjoying the sudden evaporation of sweat from the light indent in her skin. The velvet belly of the violin case smells like sandalwood. There is a soft *click* as the music room door closes behind her. With a yawn, she adjusts the schoolbag on her back, ready for a relaxing movie night. In the window above the principal offices, she sees her teacher's face peering out over the courtyard. She lifts her hand gently in a playful salute. With a smile, her teacher waves back. Her heart pounds. Elation fills her up. Losing herself in the fantasy of music and her teacher, she prepares herself for the calm walk home.

But they have been waiting.

Watching.

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A girl your age blocks your path to the school gates. Her hair is patched with peroxide like a quilt. Long, dark roots sprout from her scalp, regrowth staining her blonde tresses. Behind her, you see a group of students form a semi-circle, creeping together like acid in a bowl.

—*We know what you are.*

'I don't know what you're talking about,' you reply, mystified by this stranger. Fighting is not your style.

—*You're a dyke.*

You take a step back. Try to walk away – that’s what they teach you growing up. Someone from behind shoves you back into the circle. An unwanted spotlight.

—*She’s married – as if she’d want you.*

The group are suffocatingly close. They move around you quickly, but their maniacal grins seem to linger in the air where they’ve previously stood. Your schoolbag digs hard into your back as a boy shuffles in behind you.

—*Um, no she’s divorced. God Sarah, don’t you know anything? You’re so gay.*

Your bag is heavy on your shoulders. You know you won’t be able to run very fast. But if you leave it behind, they’ll see the idle scribbles in your journal, and then they’ll know for sure. Evidence. Proof of your internal affair. Somebody spits in your direction. The clear blob lands on one of your T-bars.

—*It’s sick. Even the Bible says it – it’s unnatural!*

There are six of them, maybe seven. Mostly girls, you decide. You can’t see all of them but you can tell by the high-pitched voices ringing out from all directions around you. With a shriek, the peroxide girl flies at you and grabs a fistful of your hair, dragging you forward so your schoolbag topples from your shoulders. It thuds heavily at your ankles, its contents skittering across the asphalt.

—*Smash her!*

You flail, reaching for the fingers that feel like they’re scalping you, but just when you’ve got a good grip on her wrist, someone else slams their fist into your stomach. You double over like a sock puppet, and the girl rips her sharp nails from your hair, sending you crashing into the brick wall of the music room building. Your face collides with brick and you hear what sounds like a walnut cracking. Your eyebrow itches as a hot sliver of blood trickles through the dark hairs, down your cheekbone, and onto the ground where you have collapsed.

—*Give her another one!*

—*Go on, do her!*

You spit the mercury taste from your mouth and try to yell ‘stop’. Your voice is cut short by a sharp thud to the back of your skull, and the mercury flavour covers your tongue once more. Face - down on the ground, you watch as a black ant takes cover from the stampede of feet viciously pounding your torso. A dribble of blood slips from the corner of your mouth and blots the asphalt beneath. The insect scurries one way, dodging the downpour of platelets before changing its course.

It’s a flurry of laughter, shouting and swearing. Shoes and fists smash your body, creating bruises in places you’ve never imagined receiving them before. Cold brick against mottled flesh, school dress torn by skanky fingernails. The asphalt rubs your skin raw as they drag you across it. You don’t want to cry but the tears

surge out, flaking the caked blood from your nose. Outnumbered. It's easy to win a fight when your friends are standing around your victim, blocking her escape. You brace for the next impact, but you're never quite prepared. Each blow hits you from a different angle, a canopy of riveted school boots engulfing you on the wet ground.

You barely feel the crunch of another fist to your cheek.

*Pop.*

The sound of cracking knuckles, you assume. Until you see your tooth lying on the asphalt beside your head. All that money your mother worked overtime for to afford the braces that had moulded those beautiful teeth: gone. In a panic you reach for your mouth, trying to find out which tooth you've lost. One of the boys locks his meaty fingers around your wrist and pins it to the ground, his arm hairs tickling your skin like the legs of a caterpillar.

*—Hold her still, idiot!*

For a moment it seems as though they're retreating. The world is all sideways and upside-down body parts. It's hard to distinguish who is standing where. Then the peroxide girl's face swims into view once more. The girl's foot is suspended, momentarily, in your vision. Behind the thick boot in the foreground, you can see the mania in her eyes.

*—This will stop you from doing those disgusting things for a while...*

It's coming at full speed, and the boy's grip is iron. 'No, no, no...' You plead, letting your guard down, begging for at least one last asset to be left intact.

**CRUNCH.**

The heavy boot crushes all four fingers on your right hand. You feel each one snap beside your ear, like the tiny bones of a sparrow. You're screaming, but you can barely hear yourself. Your head is filled with the shrill symphony of untuned violins, all played by amateur hands. You are one of them now. Your hand lies limp beside you, the fingers crunched together like a blackened pretzel.

*—Ooooh, here comes your girlfriend!*

They're the last confusing words you hear as the gang retreats. You can't be sure you've really heard it, because you don't have a girlfriend. The world is spinning but the gang is no longer in it, their shrieks muted. Instead, the bubble of muffledness in your ears grows fatter. You roll onto your back, wondering whether you'll be able to breathe easier, because the intricate channels inside your nose are thickened with mucus and dried blood. It makes you think of childhood colds, when your mother would wrap you up in warm clothes and gently rub Vicks on your chest. For a moment, you feel safe inside the memory.

Then there are hands on you again, but it is different this time. They are soft. They don't pummel you, they gently hold you, as though you are made of the

most brittle china. The hands lightly brush your fringe from your face, stroke back the hair that clings to the sticky blood patch on your cheek. You sniff through your runny nose, embarrassed to show the teeth that you know now have a gap in them. The new hands come with a voice, and it is warm, speaking soothingly to you.

*It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you.*

The muscle below your left eye feels stretched, as though a watermelon has been implanted just under the skin. A sob swells in your diaphragm, the swelling in your cheek tightening, as the figure above tucks a woollen cardigan around you. It's the last person you expected to see, after that casual wave from the window what feels like hours ago. The attractive and kind teacher that has so unknowingly been the catalyst for all this violence.

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Punctured lung. Ruptured kidney. Broken ribs. Displaced kneecap. Two missing teeth. Dislocated shoulder. Vertebrae haematoma. Four broken fingers. Fractured eye socket. Hairline skull fracture. Swelling of the brain. Thirteen hours in intensive care.

Hope was just seventeen when she was senselessly beaten by a gang of girls and boys from her school. The simple mistake of confiding in a friend, and admitting that she had a crush on one of her female teachers, almost cost her life. With the testimony of three teachers and student witnesses, three of the gang were eventually charged with aggravated assault and given twelve-month good behaviour bonds. They never showed any signs of remorse for their actions. The story made the newspaper, but it was slightly unfamiliar to read. The journalist had written of "schoolyard fights", which implies that both sides were in the wrong.

*It's not a hate crime, the police told her. We have to be careful about what we label a hate crime...we need to be certain. We don't want people in the community getting too upset.*

Some of the people in the group that assaulted Hope used religion to justify their treatment of her. While it's unfair to generalise amongst all religious individuals, unfortunately a large proportion do feel that the Bible is right in calling homosexuals an "abomination". Politics aside, there are a few 'chapters' of the book that have conveniently been neglected. I will happily share a few gems I have discovered with you. According to their bible, the same bible they used as a waiver to their brutal bashing of my friend Hope, the following are also listed: eating shellfish is an abomination, getting a haircut is a mortal sin (wonder how satanic peroxide is?), disobedient children should be put to death, and women who aren't virgins on their wedding day should be executed. It's interesting that we don't hear about these other biblical 'rules', yet people still find it credible that homosexuality is wrong. As it is spurned from a book that condones naughty children being slaughtered, perhaps homosexuality's

wickedness is really all just a fable? A horror we tell our children so they will turn out just like us, nice and cloned and heterosexual?

Only in a society where gay marriage is still illegal, children are fed diets of extreme gender-specific toys and clothes, and sayings such as “that’s so gay” still used by children and adults alike, are similar assaults slipping through the cracks. Hope’s story is one of thousands, perhaps even millions, of hate crimes perpetrated on gay people all across the world, every day.

It is truly astounding how unaware the general (heterosexual) population is of homophobia in Australia, and the wider world. We like to put people in categories, because we can define them more easily, attempt to understand. Or perhaps to distance ‘us’ from ‘them’. After all, we are a generation mechanised by words and labels. Some people will refuse to dress their baby girl in blue, terrified she might get the wrong idea and ‘become’ a lesbian. Boys can’t wear pink because that’ll turn them into “poofers”. Never mind that we give Bratz dolls to young girls, heavily made up and looking like prostitutes. Or Baby Borns, encouraging them to want to be mothers as soon as physically possible. Or telling our boys that “boys don’t cry?” It’s no wonder so many men are unable to express their emotions healthily, and that the suicide rate of men is so much higher than women. And even higher for gay men, who have the added pressure of oppression and persecution.

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Nine years later, the physical injuries have healed, and Hope is a qualified high school music teacher.

Sitting in on one of her classes, it’s evident right away that this is her true calling. This afternoon, a quiet year eight boy sits in the corner and refuses to join the rest of the group. After setting up the others with individual songs to practise, Hope discreetly sits herself in the corner beside him. After asking him about his favourite bands, Hope finally has the young boy softly telling her that some students are calling him a ‘faggot’. He also admits that sometimes he feels like hurting himself. Hope promises to give him the support he needs to put an end to the bullying, and spends the rest of the class talking with him. Her connection with the children is magical to watch.

*No child, she says to me, should ever be left unheard.*

Having regained use of her fingers after intensive muscle rehabilitation, Hope has finally started playing the violin again. She insists it’s still a passion of hers, but in the meantime, she has kept her soul fed full with the children who are precious to her.

These days, Hope surrounds herself with people who love and respect her. She believes that people should treat others the way they expect others to treat them, herself included. Hope will still talk about high school—before the assault—offhandedly, as any twenty-something does, as though it was as normal an educational environment as any. She is now a close friend of the teacher who saved her all those years ago, a friendship forged in the most shocking of

circumstances. Hope still remembers the intensity of that crush, all those years ago, and what it cost her. But no longer does she regret feeling the way she did.

Because this is who she is.