

How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life

A Novel

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Chapter 1

started my count at one.

By the time we got out of the car and began walking toward the sign that said Byerly Hall: Admissions Office, I was at nineteen. Reciting my prime numbers always helped me relax. It was an old trick I used for getting through important tests or presentations. It was what I did before every cello recital and Mathletes scrimmage.

23, 29.

In Harvard Yard, the grass grew a brilliantly bright and fertilized green. The flowers didn't dare stray outside their closely tended beds. My father kept smiling and nodding approvingly at everything. The campus looked just the way it had in dozens of glossy promotional pamphlets — perfect.

31, 37, 41.

I broke off briefly to count how many steps led up into the office waiting area (twelve, not a prime number) and inhaled the fresh, slightly leathery scent wafting through the room. We

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were here. My dream school, my family's dream school, the college I had known I was destined to attend since birth.

Harvard.

My mom gave the receptionist my name, and we were instructed to take a seat while we waited for my interviewer to appear. As usual, we were half an hour early. The waiting room was filled with overstuffed armchairs and a long leather couch. Bookshelves of alumni records lined three walls, and a television in one corner was playing a segment about Harvard's history in a continuous loop.

I sat down by the window and looked out at the Yard. Summer vacation was about to end, but the grounds were still deserted, save for a few squirrels. Sunlight filtered through the trees and lay in puddles on the grass. The ivy-covered brick buildings glowed red. Even the clouds in the sky seemed to have been placed with artistic precision. My chest was so tight I could barely breathe.

After seventeen years of dreaming, I was actually here, actually at Harvard. Being so close to everything I had worked for made me feel light-headed. I quickly pulled a thermos out of my backpack and took a few sips of tea. It was lukewarm after four hours in the car, but the familiar sweet-spicy taste helped settle my stomach.

I looked over at my mom and dad. They were both dressed in their "parents of the applicant" outfits — pressed slacks and matching blue cashmere sweaters. "We look very sensible" is what my father had said earlier. "Yes, very," my mother had agreed. But when my dad turned around, I saw that the tuft of hair on the back of his head was sticking up. He was usually fanatical about keeping it slicked down. The sight of it flopping around freely made me even more nervous.

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I mentally ran over my interview questions checklist.

“Tell me a little about yourself.”

(serene smile). I’m ambitious and determined. I put one hundred and ten percent into everything I do. I don’t like to be just average at anything, so I’m always pushing myself to be the best. I’m interested in a wide array of academic subjects. I also try to be environmentally and politically aware — I’m active in my school’s recycling program, and in addition to reading the newspaper every day, and recycling it (polite laugh), I’m heavily involved in student government.

“What’s your biggest weakness?”

I suppose being a perfectionist could be considered a weakness. For example, I always quadruple-proofread all my papers for school. But I like to think of it as one of my strengths as well. I’ve never missed a comma.

I jerked to attention as footsteps clattered up the stairs. A girl ran through the door, flushed and breathless.

“Sorry,” she said at the desk. “I’m Valerie Marks. Am I late for my interview?”

“You’re fine,” the receptionist said. “Have a seat.”

Valerie plopped down on the couch next to me. “Hi! I’m Valerie, but I’ll kill you if you call me that.”

“I’m Opal,” I said automatically. “Er . . . what do people call you, then?”

She laughed, as though I had made a joke. “Everyone calls me Val. Are you here for your interview, too?”

I nodded, trying very hard not to stare. Valerie “call me Val” was wearing old, faded jeans that were ripped across both knees. An equally beat-up leather jacket covered a green T-shirt that proclaimed “Jesus Is My Homeboy.” Her dark brown hair was chopped short in complicated chunks and streaked with chili-red highlights. A tiny diamond stud sparkled in her nose.