

EDUCATING SIMON

A novel by Robin Reardon (Kensington, 2014)

Excerpt

When I arrived at the Lloyds' flat yesterday for spelling practice, it was Colleen who let me in. She looked very sober, and my first thought was that something had happened to La La. But then I saw the cat in a sunny spot on the rug, legs curled under her. Even she looked tense, though.

"Is something wrong?" I asked Colleen.

"I think Toby should tell you, if he wants to. He's in his room."

If he wants to? Well, there was no point standing here interrogating Colleen, so I followed the sounds of Gloria Gaynor that emanated from behind Toby's door. "I will survive!" she was wailing to the world, to the man who had hurt her.

I knocked but heard no answer. Louder knocking; still no response. I opened the door, and was nearly assaulted by the music. Toby was facedown on his bed, and over Gloria I could just hear his sobs. I closed the door and waited for several seconds to see if he knew I was there, taking in the conspicuous absence of anything pink or girly. The little rug, the throw, even the yellow-haired troll was missing. I located the volume control on the stereo set and turned it down. Toby sat up suddenly, eyes wild with an odd combination of fear and fury.

He made an attempt to speak which I translated as, "It's you."

"What's happened?" I was afraid I already knew.

This question, or perhaps the difficulty of answering it, brought on a new fit of weeping. I sat on the side of the bed and waited until Toby could sit quietly beside me, a box of tissues at his elbow. "He found out."

"He?"

"My father."

Ah. It was as I had feared. “How?”

Between hiccoughs Toby explained that yesterday he’d been dressed as Kay, singing along to something by Taylor Swift, when his father had arrived home unexpectedly. He had opened the door to tell Toby to turn the volume down and had caught full sight of his “daughter.” When Toby had gotten home from school today, his room had been purged of femininity.

Something like this had been bound to happen, one of life’s inevitabilities. Still, I couldn’t help thinking that cracking the metaphorical door to show me who she really was had made Kay more vulnerable and had exposed her sooner than would have happened otherwise.

“How do things stand now?”

His voice practically squeaking, Toby gestured to take in the room with a sweep of his arm. “Look at it! It’s decimated! I’m destroyed! Even my music. He’s killed all the girls!”

Gloria began her song for maybe the third time since I’d arrived; evidently Toby had it on repeat. “Where’d you get Gloria, then?”

He blew his nose. “It’s an old iPod I’d thrown into a drawer.”

“What’s the etymology of *draconian*?”

“Simon, I don’t care! My life is ruined. Can’t you see that?”

“I was merely trying to sympathise in a way that might calm you down. Bad idea; sorry.” We sat there for a few minutes whilst Toby played with damp tissues, his breath catching from time to time. Then I asked, “How do you know you’re Kay?”

“What?”

“Without the pink, or the skirts, or the music even. Are you still Kay, or was she all trappings and no substance?”

He was on his feet, facing me, glaring at me. “How dare you? I’m Kay! I’m Kay Lloyd!”

“So your father didn’t take that away from you.”

“Of course not!” He breathed in and out a few times through his nose, somewhat juicily.

“And do you still want to get on that stage and present yourself as you really are?”

“How can you even ask that?!”

“Then I would advise that you keep your head down, let him think he’s won. Otherwise you could lose his support for this competition.”

“It’s not fair.”

“No. It isn’t. Nor was it fair when my mother took me away from everything and everyone I’d known, made me give up my cat, and forced me to move to a place I have no intention of staying. My sole focus right now is on what will get me back home.”

“And getting there will take you out of your mother’s control. You’ll be on your own. I won’t.”

“True, not right away.” This was a crucial difference; he was correct. “So are you having second thoughts?”

“No. I just have to find a way to make him understand.”

“Probably not the best way to keep your head down.”

“I suppose not.”

“Did he tell your mother?”

He sat on the bed again. “No. And he made me promise not to.”

“Why?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“How did he get rid of all this stuff without her knowing?”

“He made Colleen do it today.”

“So, does Colleen know?”

“Well, she had to deal with the girl’s clothing, so probably.”

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll come home early again and find the iPod?”

Toby jumped up and switched off the music. “I just had to hear that.”

“Does he come home early very often?”

“No. Well, sometimes.”

“Because he did one day when I was here, and I haven’t been here very many times.”

“Well . . . he never used to.”

Thinking back to the day I'd met him, I remembered how hastily he'd drawn away from Colleen. It was a distinct possibility that he'd started coming home early when he began to—well, spend time with her. A slow burn of anger started inside me at the injustice of an adulterous man ripping his child's identity away in the name of—of what? “When he saw you, what did he say?”

Toby's voice was sulky. “He called it nonsense. He said it was twisted. ‘This is the last straw,’ he said. ‘No more of this girl stuff.’ He called it a phase and said it was time I got over it.” Toby's voice rose. “It's not a phase! It's not!”

“I believe you. I don't pretend to understand it, but I believe you.” Suddenly, it occurred to me to ask, “You know you're not alone, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“There are lots of people who are not the same sex inside as they are on the outside. Lots of boys who are really girls, and vice versa.”

“Are you sure? Where are they?”

My heart twisted. This poor kid, thinking he was unique in this trap, and yet being brave enough to go as far as he had before he'd hit this brick wall . . . “Look up the term *transgender*. I'll bet transgender kids communicate over the Internet, and I'll also bet quite a few of them are in Boston. Do you want to do that now?” Some things, I felt, were more important than spelling practice.

He practically flew to his computer and was opening link after link faster than I could follow him. Watching over his shoulder, I was astounded at the number of hits. There was the Boston Area Transgender Support group, whose Web site said they supported people teenage and older. There was the Boston Alliance of GLBT Youth. There was TransAction, sponsored by Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services. There was Massachusetts Transgender Legal

Advocates, a group of lawyers dedicated to protecting the rights of transgender people. The list went on.

And suddenly the screen stopped changing. Toby stood and threw his arms around me. He sobbed and sobbed, and held me tighter and tighter. How long, I wondered, had he been in pain like this, not understanding how this could have happened to him, how this could be true in a world where—for all he knew—no one else was like him, terrified of being himself, terrified of what would happen to him if he allowed—if *she* allowed herself to be open, to relax for even one second? And now—now to see that this is a real thing, a phenomenon that's as true and as real for other people as it is for her?

I have a damned good imagination. And I could barely imagine what this must be like. When I realised I was gay, it's true that I had felt alone at first, and I had believed I needed to hide the truth. But I was sure in the knowledge that there were lots of others like me, that someday I would be able to come out, and that when I did there would be a community of people like me, and other people who accepted me even if they weren't gay. Mind you, I know gay people have to put up with a lot of shit, but so far I've encountered precious little of it. And it was never like this, like it is for Kay, for me. Never.

I led Kay over to the bed and reached for the box of tissues. When she was able to speak, she said, "Thank you. I didn't know. I thought—" and she went into a fresh bout of weeping. "I thought it was just me. I thought I was just weird."

I laughed. "You might be weird, Kay Lloyd, but if so, it's not because of this."