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Senior Year

A Poem by Melissa Kearney Parker

The school bell rings

I know it well

It beckons me to Pre-Cal hell

Where I will sit

In misery

And long for Trigonometry

But if by chance

I see him there

The skinny boy with messy hair

Then he might ask

Perhaps, maybe

“Oh, will you go to Prom with me?”

I know, I know. The poem is ridiculous. For one thing, as much as I abhor Pre-Calculus, there is no part of me at all longing for Trigonometry, or any other math class for that matter. Math is the worst. Even Algebra, which was supposed to be kind of, sort of, somewhat easy. For some reason, numbers just don't work in my head. I tell myself that I have plenty of other gifts and abilities to make up for my lack of math skills. For example, I'm loyal. I have perfect vision. I can sing every Jonas Brothers song ever written. And I'm great at making lists.

So you see, it's really no big deal that I can't multiply fractions or solve for x .

Another thing that makes the poem ridiculous is the person who inspired it: my best friend, Sam Morneau. The skinny boy with messy hair. The craziest, most adored boy in our senior class. The only boy I've ever loved.

The boy who will absolutely, positively, most definitely not be attending Prom.

It's not what you think. He doesn't have some philosophical vendetta against the idea of Prom or anything that it stands for. It's just that he and the guys have a gig in Oakland that night. A music gig.

Sam is in a band. A boy band, to be specific. It sounds silly, but they're actually pretty good. And no, I'm not just saying that because I happen to be in love with one of the members.

It's kind of funny, because nowadays, you hear about a lot of people wanting to form rock bands or punk bands or going into rap and hip hop, but you really don't stumble across a group of guys who will look you dead in the eye and say, “We want to be the world's next big boy band.” It just doesn't really happen. Boy bands get made fun of on an hourly basis.

But the guys are absolutely serious. They have a few songs, a little bit of choreography, they even have a name: The Kind of September. Now they just need fans, exposure, and a recording contract and they'd be good to go. Actually, that's why they're trying to book as many gigs as possibly before graduation. Because once high school ends, they're all pretty much on their own.

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Not that any of their parents would boot them out onto the street, but I know none of them would be pleased to know that their kids had decided to forego college to chase some ridiculous dream of becoming the next Backstreet Boys. My parents certainly wouldn't.

Though to be honest with you, I think that's exactly what the guys are planning. Sam applied to a few colleges but he hasn't committed to one yet. And time is kind of running out. We're only a week away from Prom/the Oakland gig. My mom keeps asking me where he thinks he'll end up (she's probably asking for Sam's mom, which is funny because Sam usually tells his mother everything). I keep telling her that I honestly don't know, but I'm hoping it's close to Long Beach, which is where I'll be going to study graphic design.

Mom knows about The Kind of September and she's supportive of my friends, but neither she nor my dad believe that this will last beyond the summer. They're realists. Plain and simple. To an extent, I guess I am, too. I want good things to happen for them. But I'm also incredibly selfish and I don't want to lose Sam or whatever non-relationship I have with him. If he became a rich and famous pop star, everything would change.

"Mel!" The sound of Joni's voice snaps me out of my muddled mind. "Didn't you hear the bell? Come on, we're going to be late!"

Joni and I only have one class together, and that's AP Literature. It also happens to be my only AP class. I've never been the best student. Don't get me wrong, my grades are decent, but I'm not a very good test-taker. And while Joni can maintain her 4.0 without even opening a book, I have to study and work really hard to keep my grades up. The only reason I'm okay at English and Literature is because I do well with writing and essay questions.

"Oh, chill out Jo, we'll make it," Jesse Scott, Joni's boyfriend, assures her, running a lazy hand through his auburn hair. "Besides, we've only got what, three weeks of school left? It's not like one tardy now is going to prevent us from graduating."

"Us? No. But you? Not unlikely." Joni teased.

She has a point. Punctuality has never been one of Jesse's strongest suits. Neither has caring about school or grades or anything else that he deems insignificant or irrelevant. It's actually kind of funny that he and Joni ended up together. She's such a controlling, perfectionist, Type-A personality and he's so rebellious and laid-back. He only takes AP classes, he says, because if you take the AP exams then you don't have to take actual exams and you don't have to pass the AP exams. It's like laziness masquerading as overachieving. Which is kind of impressive when you think about it.

"Oh please. All the teachers are rooting for me," Jesse says.

"They can't wait to get rid of you," I corrected him.

"Ouch. I thought you were supposed to be the nice one, Melissa," Jesse pretends to be wounded.

"Speaking of nice, I heard someone is thinking of asking our sweet little Mel to Prom," Joni announces in a sing-song tone.

My first thought is that Sam changed his mind and he decided to ditch the Oakland gig because he realized that he's passionately and desperately in love with me and he doesn't want to miss out on a chance to dance the night away in a fancy hotel ballroom. Then I realize how totally and completely ridiculous I'm being because there is no way Sam would ever miss that gig. He was way too excited when they got it.

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So who could it be? I mean, I don't really hang out with anyone other than Sam, Jesse, and the rest of their bandmates. Cory Foreman is Joni's twin brother and he's always been like a brother to me, too. Oliver Berkley, the new British guy in school is super cute, but he's also super shy. I don't think we've exchanged more than one or two words even though he's in a band with some of my best friends. Finally, there's Josh Cahill. I never hung out with Josh until he became a part of the band, but he's absolutely hilarious. If I didn't already have a thing for Sam, I might have a thing for Josh. He's just so friendly.

Still, I'm pretty sure that none of the guys would even think of backing out on the gig, especially for something like Prom.

"You did?" I ask Joni. "Who?"

"Bradley Garner."

"Oh." I kind of knew Bradley. We were in the same math class. He'd offered to help me out a few times, but I always turned him down since Sam and I usually did our math homework together. Considering that Sam is even worse at math than I am, however, I probably would have been better off with Bradley.

"So, what do you think, Melissa? Are you gonna say yes?" Jesse asks.

"Um... Probably not," I reply.

"Aw, poor Bradley!" Jesse laughs. "Why not?"

"Because I want to go to your show!"

"You come to all of our shows. You can skip one night for Prom," Jesse argues. I think he actually feels really bad about not being able to take Joni.

"I know. But I promised Sam I'd be there." And if I can't spend Prom night with him, I really don't see the point in going. "Besides, this is your biggest gig yet and you need your designated photographer."

"Can't argue with you there," Jesse admits.

"You know, Mel, I think Sam would understand if you wanted to go to Prom instead. It's a big night," Joni says. I think she knows that I have feelings for Sam. I think she also knows that he doesn't reciprocate those feelings. That's why she's always encouraging me to date other guys and get some distance. But I can't help it. Sam is my best friend. I'd do anything for him. And I know he'd do anything for me.

Except take me to Prom. But whatever.

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My last class of the day is Study Hall. Study Hall is, quite frankly, the best class I've ever taken. We're supposed to either sit and read a book or work on our class assignments, but for seniors, Study Hall is basically Sit Around And Talk Hall. Best of all, Sam is in the same Study Hall as I am.

He's already there when I arrive, sitting in his usual seat at the very back of the class, and saving my spot in front of him. He looks up when I walk in and smiles. I've known him my entire life and still that smile makes my heart skip a beat.

As soon as I take my seat, he says, "So word on the street is you're thinking of going to Prom with Bradley Garner."

"Where did you hear that?" I ask.

"Josh," he said.

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“Well, as usual, Josh is wrong.” I actually don’t know Josh well enough to know if he’s always wrong, but he did think that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was based on a true story.

“So, you’re not going to Prom with Bradley?”

“I’m not going to Prom, period. I’m going to your show.”

“Good.” Sam says. “I mean... If you want to go to Prom, you should go. I know you were looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, back when I thought we could all go. But it really wouldn’t be fun without the rest of you.”

“What wouldn’t?” Cory asks, as he and Josh join us in the back of the classroom.

“Prom,” Sam replies with what I could only call a smug grin.

“So, you turned poor Bradley down, huh Mel?” Josh asks.

“He didn’t even ask me yet,” I tell him. “And how do you know he was thinking of asking me in the first place?”

“Because he asked me if I thought you would go with him,” Josh replies, popping a piece of candy into his mouth. We’re not supposed to eat in Study Hall, but somehow, Josh gets away with everything.

“And what did you tell him?” I ask.

“I dunno. Give it a shot,” he answers.

Great.

“Why would he ask you?” Cory wonders.

“I guess he suspects that Mel and I have a certain chemistry. You know, we just get each other. We’re like this.” Josh crosses two fingers and holds them up.

“Yeah, totally,” I remark.

“So, how are you going to do it?” Josh asks.

“Do what?”

“Reject his invitation. Will you let him down gently? Or will you be brutally honest and say, ‘Oh Bradley, I would go with you if I wasn’t desperately, passionately, hopelessly in love with Josh Cahill, the man of my dreams, my Knight in Shining Armor, the peanut butter to my grape jelly...’”

At that, Sam, Cory, and I all throw our heads back and laugh. Here’s the thing about Josh. He thinks every girl in the entire school is in love with him, and to be fair, quite a few are. He is the flirtiest person I’ve ever met. I’ve seen him put the moves on a microphone before. But he’s also cute and hilarious, so he can get away with it.

“And here I thought I hid my secret yearning for you so well,” I tease.

“It’s okay, Mel. You’re only human.” Josh pats my hand.

“Okay, everyone, settle down, settle down,” our Study Hall instructor, Mr. Uhlman, says. “I know it’s the end of the year, but let’s try and keep it quiet today. I know every single one of you has at least one exam you can be studying for.”

“Yeah, but some of us aren’t bothering with college, so what’s the point?” Josh mutters under his breath.

“We still want to graduate,” Cory whispers back. He’s not as ambitious as Joni, but he’s still a very contentious student.

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“Yeah, yeah.” Josh leans back and tries to balance a pencil on his nose. Several girls giggle.

“I just want a nap,” Sam murmurs with a huge yawn.

“Aw, young Samuel. Up too late composing our next chart-topping single?” Josh asks.

Although all the guys contribute to writing their music, Sam is the one who will stay up until two and three in the morning perfecting his ideas for songs or putting the finishing touches on a new melody. Most of the time, he’s not even aware of the time passing.

“Not this time,” Sam replies.

That surprises me. Sam is always working on their music. It’s his thing.

“Well then, what *were* you up to?” Cory asks. “I know you weren’t actually doing your homework. You just got another detention from Señora Roldán for not turning in your Spanish essay.”

Sam isn’t exactly the best student in the world. It’s not that he isn’t smart. He’s just really lousy at completing assignments that he isn’t passionate about. Unfortunately, that’s pretty much the entire high school curriculum. Except for Greek Mythology. For some reason, he really thrived while we were reading *The Odyssey*. Probably because he’s seen the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou* so many times, he practically has it memorized.

“Nothing, really. Just got into a bit of a heated and controversial conversation with my mom,” Sam answers.

Now *that* surprises me even more. Sam and his mom are super close. They always have been, especially since his dad died when we were six. Laurel Morneau is probably the sweetest, most caring, genuine person I know. She’s like a second mom to me. I can’t imagine her arguing with anyone over anything.

“What about?” Josh asks.

“College. The future. Life in general,” he replies with a sigh. “It all ended with her telling me that it was ultimately my life, my decision. She can’t tell me what to do anymore now that I’m eighteen. But she thinks I’m making a huge mistake and that I’m going to regret it if I don’t go to college.”

“Oh, we’ve all had that talk,” Josh assures him. “My parents still think I’m joking about the whole music thing.”

“Our parents have been surprisingly supportive, but that’s probably mostly Joni’s doing,” Cory says.

“Yeah, but your parents are also completely loaded and they don’t care what you do,” Josh reminds him.

It’s true. Joni and Cory are what my dad calls “trust fund kids.” Neither will ever have to work a day in their lives if they don’t want to, which is ironic considering how ambitious and grounded Joni is. She’s always been very driven, even when we were little kids. She actually used to *lecture* Sam and me for not applying ourselves more. She didn’t understand back then that most people are much slower learners than she is.

Then again, Sam might *not* have been applying himself. He may have just been indifferent. Me? I’m definitely a slow learner.

“What do you think, Mel?” Sam asks, catching me off guard.

“About what?” I ask.

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“What would your parents say if you told them you weren’t going to college?”

“Oh. They probably wouldn’t say anything. They’d just kill me.”

Okay, so that might be a bit of an exaggeration. But for as long as I can remember, my parents have drilled it into my head how important it is to study hard and make good grades so that I can go to any college I want. In their minds, higher education is not optional. It’s mandatory.

I understand why. My parents have both had to work really hard to afford the life we have, especially here in the Bay Area. Life here is crazy expensive, especially for a couple with three kids. We’ve come close to moving several times over the last few years just because of how much living here costs. But this is home to all of us. Both my parents grew up here and all of our friends and family live here too. None of us even want to think about living anywhere else.

Regardless, while I do believe college is a good idea for most people, I don’t think it guarantees success, just as I don’t think not going to college guarantees failure. My parents would not agree with me.

“Would you let that stop you?” Sam asks.

“Um... I don’t know.” I don’t even know why we’re having this conversation. I’m definitely going to college. I’ve already signed up for Freshman Orientation at Cal State Long Beach.

“Oh, come on, Sam. Mel is too much of a good girl. She’s not a rebel, like us,” Josh says.

“Hey, I can be rebellious,” I insist. Not that I’ve ever done anything gutsy or dangerous or even remotely scandalous in my life. The closest I’ve come to rebelling was accidentally forgetting my toothbrush the time my siblings and I spent the weekend at Joni’s because our parents were out of town. And even then, Joni’s parents offered to buy me a new one.

So yeah, I’m not exactly a badass.

“Mel, no offense, but you cry every time you forget to do a homework assignment,” Cory says.

“That is so not true. I’ve cried like, twice,” I tell him.

“That’s because you’ve only forgotten your homework twice,” Sam reminds me with a grin.

“There’s nothing wrong with being a goody-two-shoes, Mel,” Josh says in a tone that suggests just the opposite. I’m sure in his mind, *everything* is wrong with being a goody-two-shoes. I’m boring, I don’t take chances, I live so carefully, so by the book. But as far as I can tell, there’s nothing wrong with that. Plenty of people live by the book and they seem like they get along just fine.

“You know what, last time I checked, you were in a *boy band*. That’s like, the least rebellious type of band you could possibly form,” I tell him.

“She’s got a point,” Sam acknowledges.

“Hey! Whose side are you on?” Josh asks. “I thought this was about you, anyway. You and your diabolical plan to skip college and - ”

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“Mr. Cahill, Mr. Morneau,” Mr. Ullman intervenes. Somehow, Cory and I never get in trouble for talking. It’s always Josh and Sam. I guess we just look more innocent. “Please show some respect for your classmates who are trying to work.”

“Yes, Sir,” Josh salutes him. Then, under his breath, he mutters, “I respect you, nerds. Carry on.”

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After the last bell of the day finally rings, Sam, as usual, walks me to my locker.

“Do you want to go get a smoothie or something? I don’t really want to go home just yet,” he says.

“Of course,” I reply. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah. I just want to give my mom a little longer to cool down. She barely even looked at me this morning.”

“I’m so sorry,” I tell him. It’s not like Sam at all to fight with his mom. It’s not like him to fight with anyone. “I wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Well, actually - ”

“Hey, Mel.” A new voice interrupts Sam. He and I both turn to see Bradley Garner smiling down at me.

Uh-oh.

Again, I really don’t know Bradley all that well. He seems smart and sweet and I guess he can be funny at times. He’s tall, taller than Sam, with dark hair, blue eyes, and thick glasses. He’s actually pretty cute. But to be honest, the few times I’ve talked to him, I’ve detected no hints of a personality. Like, none. Last year, he told our government class a story about the time his great uncle ran for state Senator. Now, you’d think something like that would be really interesting, but he managed to turn it into the most boring story ever.

“Hi, Bradley,” I greet him.

Sam, meanwhile, stares at Bradley with a strange mixture of amusement, bewilderment, and pity. He’s probably thinking the same thing I am.

Is Bradley seriously about to ask me to Prom in front of another guy? In front of Sam?!

Now granted, Sam isn’t actually my boyfriend, but we do have kind of a weird relationship. However, I think most people look at us and think we’re more like brother and sister than boyfriend and girlfriend which, I’m not going to lie to you, is very disappointing. But still. If I were a guy, I wouldn’t ask a girl to Prom in front of her boyfriend *or* her brother.

“I just thought I’d stop by to see if you needed any extra help on the math homework. I remember you mentioning that you were struggling last week,” Bradley offers.

For some reason, this makes Sam giggle, and not the cute kind. Like, the snorting and spitting through the nose because he’s kind of gross and immature giggling. Honestly, if I had any sense at all, I would be in love with the nice, sweet guy who offers to help me with my homework and not the guy snickering in his face for it. But the heart wants what the heart wants, I guess.

“Oh, that’s really sweet of you, Bradley, but I think I’m okay,” I tell him. “Besides, if I get stuck, the answers are in the back of the book.”

“But that’s no way to learn,” Bradley says.

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Guys, here's a lesson for you. When asking a girl out, don't lecture her. Seriously. It is the worst way to woo someone.

"Well, to be fair, I probably won't ever use Trig again in my life so..." I trail off.

"You want to be a graphic designer, don't you?" Bradley asks.

How does he know all this? Now I feel *really* terrible. I don't know anything about him.

"Um, yeah," I reply.

"That's so cool."

"She's really good," Sam pipes up. I think he's tired of being left out of the conversation.

"She's also a great photographer."

"That's nice." Bradley barely acknowledges him. "So listen Mel, I've been thinking, and I was wondering... Do you have any plans for Prom night?"

Oh, thank God! He didn't ask me! I mean, I know he's probably leading up to it, but at least he set it up so that I don't have to outright reject him. I can just tell him that I'm going to the guys' concert and leave it at that!

"Actually, yeah, I do. They," I indicate Sam, "have a concert in Oakland that night and I thought I'd go support them."

"She's our biggest fan." Sam sounds really proud of that. I think he's getting some sort of kick out of watching me reject Bradley, though I have no idea why. I guess guys just like it when they win.

"Well, I was just thinking that if you'd rather go to Prom, well maybe I could take you."

What? No! He was supposed to smile politely, tell me that that sounds like a lot of fun, and walk away. He wasn't supposed to ask me anyway!

"Oh. Um..." Great. Now what? "Bradley, that's really nice of you to ask me, but I promised them that I'd be there. I already have a ticket." Actually, since I'm with the band, I technically don't need a ticket. But it sounds better if I say that I do.

"You wouldn't rather go to Prom?"

Honestly? Yes, I'd love to go to Prom. But with the right guy. So I tell him, "I wouldn't. I'm sorry. But thank you for asking me." Somehow, the way I say it makes it sound like he was offering to do me a favor. Maybe in a weird way, he was.

"Sure. Don't mention it." He sounds let down, but I know he'll be okay. It's not like I'm the girl of his dreams. "I guess I'll see you in class tomorrow."

"I'll be there." Unfortunately.

Without ever bothering to acknowledge Sam, Bradley shifts his backpack up onto his shoulder and walks away. Once he's out of earshot, Sam doubles over in a fit of laughter.

"*What* is so funny?" I demand.

"Mel, you're such a heartbreaker. It's adorable."

"I am *not*! He's not in love with me. He barely even knows me."

"Yeah, but he wanted to go with you. I can tell. He probably daydreamed about it. You in a sparkly dress, with your hair all up and pretty... Slow-dancing in the gymnasium..."

"Actually, Prom is in a hotel."

"Whatever," Sam waves my comment aside. "Anyway, as I was saying before that poor, devastated soul interrupted us, do you want to go somewhere? Grab a bite to eat or something?"

"Sure."

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As if I could ever say no to Sam.

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We end up at our favorite local coffee house just a few miles away from Fisherman's Wharf. It's such a touristy area, but I love the sea, the wind, the distant barking of sea lions. It's home to me and very comforting, despite the crowds.

Sam, meanwhile, seems distracted. Instead of inhaling his coffee the way he normally does, he's twirling it absentmindedly with a stirrer and staring out the window at the passerby.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask him, breaking his concentration.

"Hmm?" he asks, raising his eyebrows. "Oh. Nothing."

"You sure? You look uncharacteristically broody." Nothing ever gets Sam down. "Is it about that thing with your mom?"

"Oh. No. Well, yeah, sort of. But no, not really."

That answer makes absolutely no sense.

"Then what is it?" I ask.

Finally, he sets the coffee stirrer down and looks me directly in the eye. For a moment, I feel my breath catch in my throat. Is he about to ask me to Prom? Confess his undying love for me? Tell me that he knows I'm in love with him and that he doesn't feel the same way? The possibilities are endless and it's making time stand still in a very unpleasant way.

But then he says, "I want you to come with us."

I assume he means to the Oakland gig.

"What do you mean? I am coming with you."

"No. I want you to come when we begin our touring. When we start recording. We're going to make it, Mel. I just know we are. And I want you there with us. It wouldn't feel right without you."

"Wait... What?" I ask. I'm not sure I'm comprehending. My heart is pounding so loudly in my ears, maybe I'm not hearing him correctly. "What are you saying?"

"I know it's a lot to ask of you, and I know your parents might not approve. And I wouldn't ask you if I thought you had your heart set on Long Beach. But I don't. You belong with us, Mel. You're part of the team."

"Sam, I..." I have no idea what to say. Yes, I'm sort of part of the team, and yes, I've been with them since the very beginning. But this is crazy. Everything he's saying... It's impossible. He's right. My parents would never approve. I can't not go to college. "I don't know..."

"I know," he says, taking my hand across the table. "I know it's not fair of me to just spring this on you, and I don't expect an answer right away. Just... think about it. You could just put college off for a semester or two, see if we can make it. If we don't, or if you end up hating life on the road, you can turn around and never look back. But things are happening, Mel. I haven't told you... but... things are happening. The Kind of September is going to make it."

I have no doubt about that. I never have. One way or another, the guys will make it work. They love their music too much not to. But me? I'm not a superstar. I'm not a dream-chaser or a go-getter. I've always done what's expected of me. Except go to Prom, apparently.

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Then again, the way Sam is looking at me, as if he sees a whole other person than the one I've always believed myself to be, makes me wonder if maybe, just maybe, I could be all those things that he is. All the things I've always secretly wanted to be.

But what would I tell my parents? How could I explain this to anyone? True, I am eighteen, legally an adult. My parents technically have no say in my life anymore. But I do want them to be proud of me. I do still crave their approval. Not to mention I'm nowhere near financially independent.

There's no way this will work. It's too complicated. Too risky.

"Sam, I believe with all my heart that you'll make it. But I just... Don't know if it's the right path for me. I still don't really know where my place is in the world."

"It's with us, Mel. It's scary and it's unconventional and everyone will probably think you're crazy. But your place has always been with us. Joni and the rest of the guys all agree."

"Really?" I ask.

"Yeah. Like I said, it just doesn't feel right without you," he confesses with a shrug.

"You don't have to decide anything today or tomorrow or even next week. Heck, you don't have to decide anything until you actually leave for Long Beach. I just wanted you to know. Please, Mel. Just think about it."

Again. There's no way I can tell him no.

"Okay," I promise. "I'll think about it."