

# Becoming an Oates Girl

by Kristen Tsetsi

Lunelle had spent her life a buttercup, slender and bright and cheerful and light, her happiness smudging the men who held her. They reveled in her gaiety, smiled “I’ve-found-her!” sighs at her movie-girl mood that never changed and ever pleased, at her baby lotion soft (and deceptively youthful) skin. They, the men, licked her buttercup dust from their fingers until even their nails were clean.

She, Lunelle, was the kind of girl (before *him*) who—in the meat-freezer cold of Fargo winters—refused to ride in a car or a bus from the college where she taught compassion for Oates’s broken *Beasts* and *Solstice* women. She walked, thighs flaming fire-cold, without complaining or grumbling or cursing the goddamn Midwestern winters the way the others did. She, Lunelle, ran ahead—skipped, even—and giggled, swinging her hair around to smile and rub-rub-rub her silly-cold thighs and say, “Brrr!” She, Lunelle, picked up snow and tossed it high, raised her face, closed her eyes, and collected soft powder on her lashes. She laughed, then, and skipped back to him (more specifically, to *him*) and took his hands and led him forward and onward, saying, “Oh, grumpy-grump!” when he complained he couldn’t feel his toes. Once inside her cozy and well-lit apartment (sunlight hit her hair just so in the afternoons), she offered hot chocolate and peeled off their clothes and sat naked atop of him while water heated on the stove.

*He* was the dashing dapper-doll she’d spotted one fall crossing the street with a parrot on his shoulder, its feathers boasting vibrant rainbow shades. He—*he*—wore a sleeveless t-shirt and handed sunflower seeds to the beak hovering cheekside. Lunelle had waved from her side of the street and said, “Hi, there!” Giggling, she’d asked the parrot’s name, and from then and on they were together. For their one-year—her first long-term—he’d planted a patch of sunflowers in the soil under her kitchen window and she’d clapped her hands and kissed the air.

Today, *now*, the sunflowers peak, now in full autumn, *Gillian's* season since three years before when, parrot shouldered and one uprooted sunflower dragging, he—*he*—left under a ghost sheet. “Getting candy corn,” he lied.

He left, he later sighed, because she was too perfect. (She didn't argue the impossibility of being “too” perfect.) He flipped her hair, said, “Thick and bouncy!” He spat in her eyes. “They sparkle, for Christ's sake!” But also, she was too optimistic, too chipper about “goddamn everything.” To prove him wrong she, Lunelle, had said, “No, it's not true, baby blue. Listen to this, to what I was thinking, and you'll see I, too, am some days sinking into the depths of sadness and gloom, and that I am—hardly!—like a...flower...in...in...bloom! Listen,” she said. “Sometimes? Sometimes I think my heart could just break from autumnal beauty that's too much to take, the rusts on brown trees—I could fall to my knees!” But she knew. That was too beautiful, too. “You make me fucking crazy,” he said.

So she, once Lunelle, became an Oates woman, because they—damaged, *imperfect*—are loveable, sickly adored the translated world over.

She, *Gillian*, breasts shaved to *Beasts* nubs and hair permed curly, buys lipsticks called *Tangerine Tango* and *Mazatlan*. Her students snicker at the bold smears coloring her teeth and at her pronunciation of “Rastafarian” (Ra-sti-*fay*-rien), roll their eyes when she uses words like “stichomythia” and “brackish” for their ugliness.

She is Lunelle only on Halloween nights when, gold-lit under the porchlight, she drops dried buttercup buds in children's cheap plastic pumpkin buckets.

