

CHARLIE ALICE RAYA

we need
to talk
about sex
preview, friends & quotes

easy town books



HOW THE SEX TALK
GOT INTO
THE EASY TOWN STORY

Originally, I only wanted a fun opening for book 2, travelling, and eventually I settled on: 'We need to talk about sex.'

I couldn't make the opening work.

But by then, I had a lot more on sex than expected, both in the book and in my notes. And I thought, well, sex isn't going anywhere, and it's all over the place already, so I might as well use it.


In fact, the sex talk, as the team in the story calls it, has its own journey within the journey, and by now even its own website.

I usually treat the subject with curiosity and bluntness, or to quote Alice:

'No, Leo. This whole fuss about our sexuality is one of the major things that screws with us. We have to dig in bluntly to unearth everything we humans have made weird.'

book 2/1, travelling, San Francisco





And it probably helps that I am interested in many other subjects as well, or to quote Alice:

'You know,' Alice said, suddenly sombre. 'I wish we could just face all the sex issues and then move on. So many things are more important than our sexuality. But our sexuality fucking fucks with us.'

book 2/2, travelling, Russia

On the other hand:

'I've been thinking about sex on and off for some years. And I can't help feeling that somewhere in all of this mess, beauty and horror, is an important key. Sex makes up so much of our lives and cultures.'

book 2/1, travelling, San Francisco

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT SEX

from book 2/1, travelling, Happy Flying

What you need to know beforehand

Alice Adler convinced the US billionaire Tom Holbon to join her in developing a town experiment.

Some month later, Alice and part of her team travel around the world to build an international network for the Easy Town Project.

They fly with Tom's private double-deck airliner.

The interior of the airliner was expensive on both decks: velvet and leather seats, plus sofas, carpets, wooden panels, indirect lighting, dark furniture, light-coloured walls.

But it wasn't overdone. It sort of felt comfortable and practical rather than overly luxurious.

book 2/1, travelling, San Francisco

Before the travelling team take off for the first time, Alice has to give a pep talk in the airliner's lounge.



Alice was standing between the two semicircular sofas, and she felt the urge to take yet another step backwards.

More people were entering the lounge from both directions: the passenger area next to the bar, and the spiral staircase next to Tom's quarters.

Alice grimaced. Nearly a hundred and thirty people, board crew included. And so many unfamiliar faces.

Tom and Fran stood in the front row. Leo, Alice's assistant, was with them. Audry was at the bar. Andy, Devery and Javiera leaned against the central circular sofa, and Jazz stood near the staircase. All right, some faces were familiar.

When the last arrivals had squeezed into the lounge, everyone focused on Alice, and she met the expectant glances with a half-smile, trying to guess professions and ages, and trying to decide what to say. Pep talks had a way of sounding silly, and she had no idea how to avoid that.

For some seconds, her eyes lingered on a couple. He whispered something into her ear, she smiled, and he sealed his remark with a kiss.

'We need to talk about sex.' *Oops.*

Instantly, the air filled with giggles and murmurs. Eyes widened, some people blushed. Leo pursed his lips. Tom and Fran tensed.

Well done, Alice. But since it's out, I might as well get on with it. I'm supposed to talk. Why not talk about something that keeps puzzling me? And what better place to talk about sex than the crammed and indirectly lit lounge on Tom's plane?

Alice inhaled. 'Like I said, we need to talk about sex. Sex has been puzzling me for some time, and I'd like to find out whether there's some sort of key, something that could help us to better understand our actions, behaviour, motives and needs. Sex makes up so much of our lives and—'

That's how far Alice got, because Fran interrupted her. 'Alice, you're not in your first week any more. You can't jump something like that on us. And I don't want to discuss this in public.'

Most people seemed to hold their breath.

Alice swallowed. Not so much from embarrassment, but because she really wanted to argue her point. Except, getting into a public argument with Fran, or anyone really, wasn't a good idea. Not with so many new faces around, not on the first day. Besides, Tom's eyes clearly stated: 'Don't look at me. You brought this one on yourself. Sort it out.'

Alice forced her mouth into a lopsided smile: 'Sorry, everyone. That thought just popped up, jumped over the checkpoint and popped out.'

Many people chuckled, and everyone was breathing again.

Alice inhaled. 'Now, welcome on board everybody. Today we'll start with a six hours flight to San Francisco. Not enough time to meet all the new faces, but we can make a start. You've been briefed, so all I can say is: happy flying.'

Happy flying. Really? Hell, I blew this one too.

Juno Brooks, their red-haired pilot, saved Alice from more embarrassment by announcing that it was time to find a seat. In a reassuring voice, she added: 'I am proud to be your pilot. Weather conditions are excellent, and we will take off as planned at ten thirty this morning. My crew and I are thrilled to be part of this exciting project. It is our great pleasure to ensure your comfort, safety and well-being on board of this airliner. Please, do not hesitate to come to us with any request or question you might have.'

So, that's how it's done.

At once, nearly everyone started to move towards one of the exits.

Alice was undecided where to go or what to do. Tom was talking to Fran, moving towards the private quarters. Leo was surrounded by his team, moving towards the passenger area. Andy and Devery were busy with their new team members, probably explaining that the little scene between Alice and Fran shouldn't worry anyone. It really shouldn't, Alice thought when Tom's voice made her turn.

'Let's talk about sex then,' he said with the hint of a smile.

'You want to talk about sex? With me?'

Tom inclined his head. 'Alice, you messed up the pep talk, and my wife is still upset about that.' Tom paused, briefly looking over his shoulder. Alice followed his gaze and saw Fran enter the private quarters.

'She's sorry about attacking you in public,' Tom said. 'She will tell you herself. Just give her a moment to calm down.'

'Can I ask you why bringing up sex bothered her this much?'

Tom pursed his lips. 'Let's say, she's an all-American. We are a bit prudish, sometimes. Also, I think she's angry that you couldn't for once—' Tom stopped.

'Keep my mouth shut?'

'Alice, you do understand, don't you?'

Alice sighed. 'Yes. You want to be comfortable with everything I do, because you really want to support this project.'

'Ah, well put. See, we know you, and we want to support you. But you can be—'

'—sorry?'

Tom gave her a half-smile and said: 'OK. So let's talk. How about we sit down in the corner over there. I had the seats put there for our open office. We have our workspace, and at the same time, we are accessible for our teams. What do you think?'

'Hence the table between the two seats, the single seat facing the two, and the extra coffee table so we can offer our guest a drink?'

'Ah, you get the idea. Yours is, of course, the window seat.'

'Thanks. I like it.'

'Excellent. And look around, for now we have the lounge to ourselves.'

'Hm. Shouldn't there be a chaperon while we're talking about sex?'

'I detect the first signs of recovery. I'm glad you're less moody. I told Fran, all Alice needs is something that intrigues her, then she'll be fine.'

Alice smiled a little.

The engines rumbled, and the airliner slowly left the hangar. Gradually bright daylight filled the lounge.

Alice and Tom were fastening their seatbelts when the flight attendant appeared. He gave them a satisfied nod and disappeared down the spiral staircase.

'So?' Tom said.

‘All right. I’ve been thinking about sex on and off for some years. And I can’t help feeling that somewhere in all of this mess, beauty and horror, is an important key. Sex makes up so much of our lives and cultures.’

‘Go on.’

‘I don’t know where to start or what to include. Though for now, I’d say, let’s include everything that has even the slightest connection to sex. From advertising to riding a horse. From passionate love making to genital mutilation—’

‘Genital mutilation? Um. Sorry, carry on.’

‘Um, from marriage to trafficking. From honeymoon to domestic violence. From gender to architecture. From fashion to sex education. From puberty and menopause to cooking. From going to war to making love. From dancing to homosexuality. From the Kama Sutra to parenting and whatever else we can think of.’

‘Well, that’s not what I expected. What are our questions?’

‘For example. Where does the irritation with the human body and especially with our genitals come from? Why do we still know so little about our bodies? Why has the body been demonised and mystified in so many cultures? What are we afraid of? Why are sex and nudity perceived as offensive? What is the offence? What is it we are guarding by hiding behind clothes. What is sex? Where is the connection between sex and violence? What’s so funny about genitals and sex that it constantly comes up in jokes? Or on a different note. Why do governments still concern themselves with gender, sexual orientation, fertility or even marriage? And what makes sex so important? How can sex be such a wonderful experience for some, and the worst experience for others? Why is one touch pleasant, and another intrusive? Why is rape a violation that goes far beyond physical pain?’ Alice inhaled. ‘So, when I talk about sex, I’m not just thinking about making love but about everything that has even the slightest connection to sex.’

‘Um. That’s a lot.’

‘I know. But I’m sure that somewhere in all of this, there’s a key—’
Alice paused and looked out of the window, distracted by the take-off.

The airliner stopped on the runway. The engines accelerated. Then the brakes were released, and the airliner shot along the runway and took off into the blue sky.

It was only after they had reached altitude that Tom said: ‘If we find the mysterious key, what are we going to do with it?’

‘We won’t know before we know what the key is. Best case scenario: we’ll have a better understanding. It might help us to treat ourselves and our fellow humans better. Because one thing seems to be clear: our sexuality has brought a lot of devastation to people, and that for centuries. If we understand sex better, maybe we can enjoy the pleasant aspects of it while avoiding the destructive ones. And since our sexuality influences us far beyond the sexual act, a better understanding might help us to reassess, and maybe even rethink and redefine, a lot more than just sex.’

‘But how would we apply the findings to our town experiment?’

‘I don’t know. We could make a point of not caring about anyone’s gender or about their sexual preferences. Maybe most importantly, we could have an open discussion about sex, sexuality and all that comes with it. Make our sex research part of the experiment.’

‘How would you start?’

‘I’d set up a small team. A group of people who are comfortable enough with each other to explore everything without holding back, and who don’t believe they have all the answers already. Also, I’d like to ask each project team to consider where and how sex might be influencing their specific fields.’

‘OK. That sounds workable.’

Tom’s phone pinged, and he checked his display. ‘Oh! One of our new team members posted your pep talk online.’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Yes. Fran writes the internet is celebrating.’

‘So it’s not just on the Hub?’

‘No, it’s everywhere. And happy flying gets some applause too, Fran writes.’

‘Great.’

sex talk, volume 1

quotes



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During the first two days, many people joked about the sex talk. And when Alice came back from the airliner, the teams tested how serious she was about discussing sex. Usually it was a laugh, but yesterday Fran rebuked Julia for a silly remark about old couples having sex with creaking joints. 'Julia, there are enough sex jokes around as it is. Let's have a discussion about sex that actually gets us somewhere, and that's worth more than a few cheap laughs. Besides, I have good news for you. Sex can be fantastic no matter your age.'

book 2/1, travelling, Happy Flying





‘Will you include LGBTQ plus issues in the sex talk?’

‘Oh, don’t give me the LGTB jumble!’

‘What?’ Leo retorted, suddenly reminded of what it felt like to be on Alice’s receiving end. Two words: Not good.

‘I hate abbreviations and letter jumbles,’ Alice continued bluntly.

‘Especially when there’s no ring to it, and when it’s constantly extended.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘No. And anyway, instead of LGBT, I’d call it The Straight Movement.’

‘The what?’

‘That’s what it’s about, isn’t it? Not hiding who you are, or what you prefer. So you are straight about your sexual preferences, gender and whatever else hides in those letters. Or you call it the No-Fuss Movement.’

‘Sometimes you’re insufferable,’ Leo said, only slowly cooling down.

‘And if you call it The Straight Movement, you have less of the *them and us*. And I could be part of it too, because I don’t make a fuss about my sexual preferences or anyone else’s.’

‘Is there any chance of you not repeating this in public?’

‘No, Leo. This whole fuss about our sexuality is one of the major things that screws with us. We have to dig in bluntly to unearth everything we humans have made weird.’

Leo sighed, but he couldn’t help chuckling about the *humans have made weird*.

Alice lowered her voice. ‘I’m sorry, Leo. I shouldn’t have been this blunt.’

‘Usually I think it’s good that you speak your mind.’

‘Well ... Sorry.’

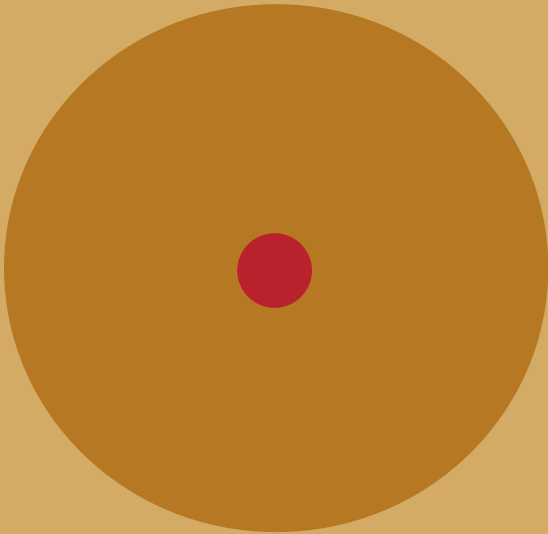
‘Thanks for the apology.’

‘Hm. And to answer your actual question, yes, homosexuality and all the rest will be included. And I have a little theory about why homosexuality—’ Alice hesitated. ‘Sorry for being blunt again, but I can’t think of a better word. The theory is about why homosexuality might be perceived as an intrusion.’

book 2/1, travelling, San Francisco









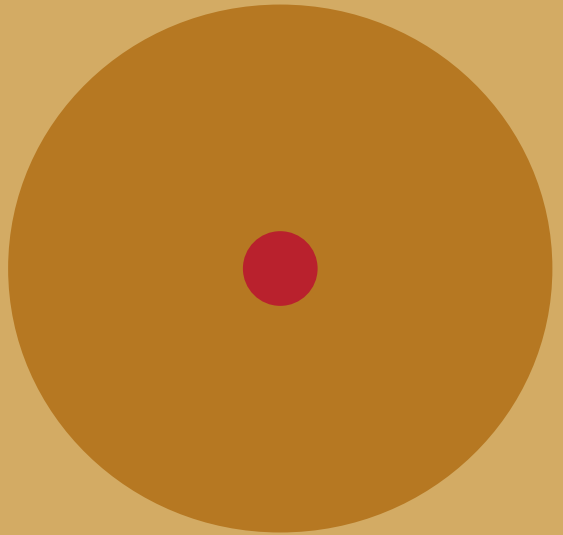
‘It’ll take time to get rid of cliches and generalisations.’

‘How about we shoot them into the universe, and they can get lost in another galaxy? Besides, where do generalisations get us? We put people with boobs in one bucket and people without boobs in another, and there: we believe we understand the world.’

‘You do know that men have breasts too?’

‘All right, let me be more precise: we put milkboobs in one bucket and all other boobs in the other. And we still believe we understand the world.’

book 2/1, travelling, Rio de Janeiro





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After a while of contemplative drinking, snacking and watching the beach, Devery asked: ‘So you don’t think the world would be a better place if it was run by women?’

‘The world would be a better place if gender didn’t matter.’

‘Smart. But really, what’s your view on the matriarchy?’

‘Don’t get me started on mothers.’

‘Alice.’

‘All right. A world run by women. First image that comes to my mind is the women prison. Sorry. Let me try again.’ Alice fell silent. She looked at the beach and the ocean, without seeing either.

Eventually she shook her head. ‘No. The world wouldn’t be a better place if it was run by women. Nor is it a better place for being run by men. Obviously. But I’m sure, it would be a better place if it was run by a good mix of people who don’t suffer from inferiority or superiority complexes, and just get the job done.’







‘I asked Fran to put together a little team to develop ideas for how we can integrate the sex talk in our teams, at the Hub Stations and in our businesses. We’ll probably have to establish some simple rules. But I’d like to make the sex talk a journey within our project, and I’d like to take everyone on that journey without pushing too many rules.’

‘I agree,’ Jazz said. ‘But we have to act decisively when people are violated.’

‘Yes.’ Alice sighed.

‘What is it?’

‘I wish sex wasn’t an issue.’

‘It is.’

‘I know.’

book 2/1, travelling, Buenos Aires



friends



What you need to know beforehand

The travelling team are in South Africa and have left Cape Town this afternoon. Presently, they are on their way to Injaberg to meet the Project Team South Africa.

Lesedi and Karabou are programmers at the Hub Station in Cape Town.

The Hub started as the project's own social media platform and has evolved into an internet within the internet.

The Hub Stations maintain the Hub network around the world, and include facilities for education, health, art and businesses to support local communities.

THE is a security company which cooperates with the town project.

The first part of the extract will give you some additional background.

In the evening, Lesedi and Karabou sat over a first draft for a revised Hub application process.

‘Ever heard of Injaberg?’ Lesedi asked.

‘Never. But I looked it up. Small town. North of the Garden Route. Four or five hours drive from here.’

‘They have no idea what’s waiting for them, do they?’

‘No,’ Karabou said, standing up and filling her glass with water from a glass bottle.

‘Should we have warned them?’ Lesedi asked, holding out her glass for a refill.

‘No. They wouldn’t have listened.’

‘Do you think, they’ll understand better when they’re back?’

‘I doubt Alice will. She’s too— don’t know— too stubborn, too determined to make things work.’

‘Maybe she’s right,’ Lesedi said, taking a sip of water.

Karabou sat down and drummed her fingers on the desk. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I mean, maybe that’s what it takes: believe.’

‘Since when are you religious?’

‘It’s not about religion. But nothing is going to change if we keep believing that there’s nothing we can do. If you want to change something, you have to believe that change is possible, even against all odds. It’s absolutely impossible to change something if you don’t believe that it can be done. Things are not possible, because you believe they are. But they can only become possible if you do believe.’

‘Stop that. You’re making my head spin.’

Lesedi sighed.

‘Anyway, how did the contact with Injaberg come about?’ Karabou asked.

‘Some artist who had an exhibition in New York.’

‘Woman?’

‘Yah.’

They laughed and stopped when the door was pushed open by Unathi.

He looked so dreadful that Karabou and Lesedi stood up at once.

‘She’s dead,’ he said trembling. ‘Nku killed her.’

‘Ayanda?’ Karabou whispered, tears shooting into her eyes.

‘Yes.’

The travelling team arrived in Injaberg around ten in the evening. Everyone was tired and stiff from the five hours drive. To be fair, the landscapes had been stunning, the sunset amazing, and the starlit sky was a dream. But it was pretty cold again.

The hotel was on the outskirts of the town, sitting in a green plot, which was surrounded by high hedges. It was a broad single house with three floors, an orange facade, high rooms, all painted in earth colours and decorated with African paintings, masks and animal sculptures — giraffes being a favourite with the hotel owner. All in all, it was a homely hotel. No posh plush or big polish or soft carpets. Just comfortable, nice rooms.

The team were welcomed by South Africa THE guards who had taken over the management of the hotel for the duration of the travelling team's stay. This meant that the travelling team could move around the hotel freely, nip into the kitchen for a snack, pour themselves a beer at the bar, use any room for meetings, or, as Dennie added: 'We can sleep in a different bed every night.'

'Not every night,' Devery said. 'It's not that big.'

'All right, every other night then.'

They were all sitting on the floor,
Lesedi holding Karabou,
Karabou holding Unathi, rocking him like a child.

Ayanda was Unathi's sister.

Karabou grew up with them. Neighbours. Best friends. Secret keepers. Especially the secret that Unathi loved men.

Ayanda and Nku married two years ago.

She was so happy at the wedding.

Then she changed.

They knew that Nku beat her sometimes, especially when he was drunk. They knew it was really bad when Ayanda wouldn't see them for weeks. They tried to talk to her. But the only thing she ever told Unathi or Karabou was: 'If you love me, you don't say a word to Nku or anyone.'

Two or three weeks ago, Nku lost his job as a police officer. No one knew why. He said, it was temporary, and could he work at the Hub Station in the meantime?

But the Hub had a strict policy regarding violent behaviour, even suspected violent behaviour. Not a chance, Nku would be cleared for a job at the Hub.

When Karabou told him, he hurled himself against her, attempting to beat her. If it hadn't been for her fighting skills, she might have ended up in hospital.

She had him down on the floor, belly first, arm twisted, in a minute — a long minute.

Colleagues came running and marched him off the premise.

But on the way out, Nku saw Unathi, holding hands with a man.

Unathi didn't even notice. He was so wrapped up in the flirt.

That was, until Nku lost it again and started screaming insults.

Ever since neither Unathi nor Karabou had dared to leave the Hub Station. Fortunately, the station had some twenty flats.

A day later, Nku came back with a gang.

But THE was prepared and pushed back hard, making sure Nku wouldn't dream of attacking again.

And now Ayanda.

She was so happy at the wedding.

And everyone was so proud of her and her husband.

Ayanda and Nku.

The perfect wedding photo.

About a week ago, Unathi read the introduction to the town project's sex talk. And only a few days ago, they wrote an essay for it. All three of them: Unathi, Karabou and Lesedi.

And all the time, Ayanda was on their minds.

All the time, they believed there was still time, that they could find a way to help her.

They tried to understand the roots of violence, a bit as if it was a question of finding the right code. A code that could fix this.

Why would a young man beat his wife? He hadn't shown any signs of violence before the wedding.

Unathi said, it's the pressure. There is always someone who tells a man what he has to do, what he has to achieve, how strong he has to be. Anything else would be weakness, would be less than a real man. And then at home, he takes his frustration out on his wife.

No one can endure constant pressure.

'We could ask for an initiative where men come together and search for the roots of their anger and aggression,' Unathi suggested. 'I think there's a connection between pressure, failure, sex and violence. If we solve this puzzle, maybe we can find something that helps.'

They made a note for the initiative.

They told Alice about it yesterday. She green-lighted it.

Only — time had already run out for Ayanda.

Karabou said: ‘Mothers beating their sons. Sons beating their wives. That’s a problem too. With beating your child you make violence acceptable. You teach that beating is an option.’

Had Nku been beaten as a child?

Lesedi said: ‘Maybe married life needs to be redefined. What if you grew up with the perception that as a man, you always have to be superior, always better and stronger? What if you feel the need to prove your strength by belittling your wife, by insisting that she obey, and by punishing her if she doesn’t?’

‘Maybe. But how can that be changed?’ Karabou said and added: ‘Ayanda is such a beautiful soul. I’m sure she still dreams of seeing the world and of studying to become a teacher.’

But now— now she was just dead.

REFERENCE

I was working on the South Africa chapter for book 2 when I saw the headlines about violence against women in South Africa. This inspired Ayanda's story.

The Guardian: Thousands protest in South Africa over rising violence against women

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/05/thousands-protest-in-south-africa-over-rising-violence-against-women>





**So, what are we going to do about beauty?’
‘The same thing we should probably do about sex.’
‘And that is?’
‘Relax.’**

book 2/1, travelling, Australia





sex talk, volume 2

quotes





Alice leaned back and closed her eyes, pondering.

*Where do things go wrong
between women and men?*

And why?

About an hour later, Alice felt a rush of excitement.

Could this be an explanation? Of sorts?

She had to talk to someone. But who? Who would be open enough to even think about this?

Alice stared at the screen in front of her, then back at the notepad she had been scribbling on.

Leo. Of course. Leo.

Alice picked up the headset, connected her phone to the secure line, and dialled Leo's number. The phone rang five or six times before a tired voice answered: 'Alice? Are you okay?'

'Oh, bloody hell. I forgot to look up the time. Sorry, I didn't want to wake you up. And yes, I'm fine. What's the time in London?'

Leo seemed to be turning in his bed. 'Half past one. Only just dropped off. No problem. What's so important?'

'I could call you back later.'

'Yeah. No. I can hear that you really want to talk.'

'All right. And thanks. Look, I'll get straight to the point.'

'Sure,' Leo said, stifling a yawn.

'I've been thinking about domestic violence, and how it comes about.'

'OK?'

'Well, eventually I asked myself a few questions about the male body and in particular about the penis.'

'What?' Leo exclaimed, suddenly sounding a lot more awake. 'How would you even do that? You don't have a male body, and in particular not a penis.'

'Yes, I noticed.'





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‘Do you want to dissolve the traditional family?’

‘My personal experiences with the idea of a traditional family are limited. But some things seem to be important: firstly, make clear that no one has to marry. There are far too many couples who are only together because they’re afraid of being alone, or because they think they have to be with someone, or because they think marriage is a necessity. And mismatched couples are much more likely to experience domestic violence and chronic unhappiness. Secondly, no one should feel bound to live with someone they hate or disrespect, only because they’re married. Thirdly, roles at home should be free for grabs, and chores equally distributed. I’d like to encourage people to choose for themselves which part to play within a union without feeling bad about it. The gender shouldn’t be a determining factor. Who someone is, and what they feel comfortable with should guide them. But the really important thing for me is that each parent takes equal responsibility for the child they brought into this world. Maybe we get lucky and come up with an approach that works for all parties involved: children, men and women. Relationships seem to be important for the well-being of humans, therefore exploring why so many relationships turn sour, and why so many children experience a screwed up childhood, will be part of our experiment.’







Jack smiled at Prince Narseh, settled down on a silk cushion, accepted a cold drink from Prince Piling — ice cubes clinking, lemon slices winking — and dived back into entertaining his princes. With panache, he hoped.

Nah, he knew.

Not much later, Prince Nima smashed the jovial atmosphere when he asked reproachfully: ‘Why do you talk about sex in public? Sex is private. And it is shameful to discuss it in the presence of women.’

All princes held their breath.

Jack cocked his head and countered playfully: ‘I agree. Sex is a private matter. But since this private matter has led to abuse and to chronic unhappiness, we need to talk about it. Once sex is a happy undertaking again, devoid of abuse and dissatisfaction, it can all go back to being private.’

Only yesterday, he read this remark in one of Fran’s emails, and in his mind, he sent a little thank you her way.

Prince Al-Amin slapped Prince Nima on the back. ‘Leave it, brother. We don’t want to bore our guest with politics.’



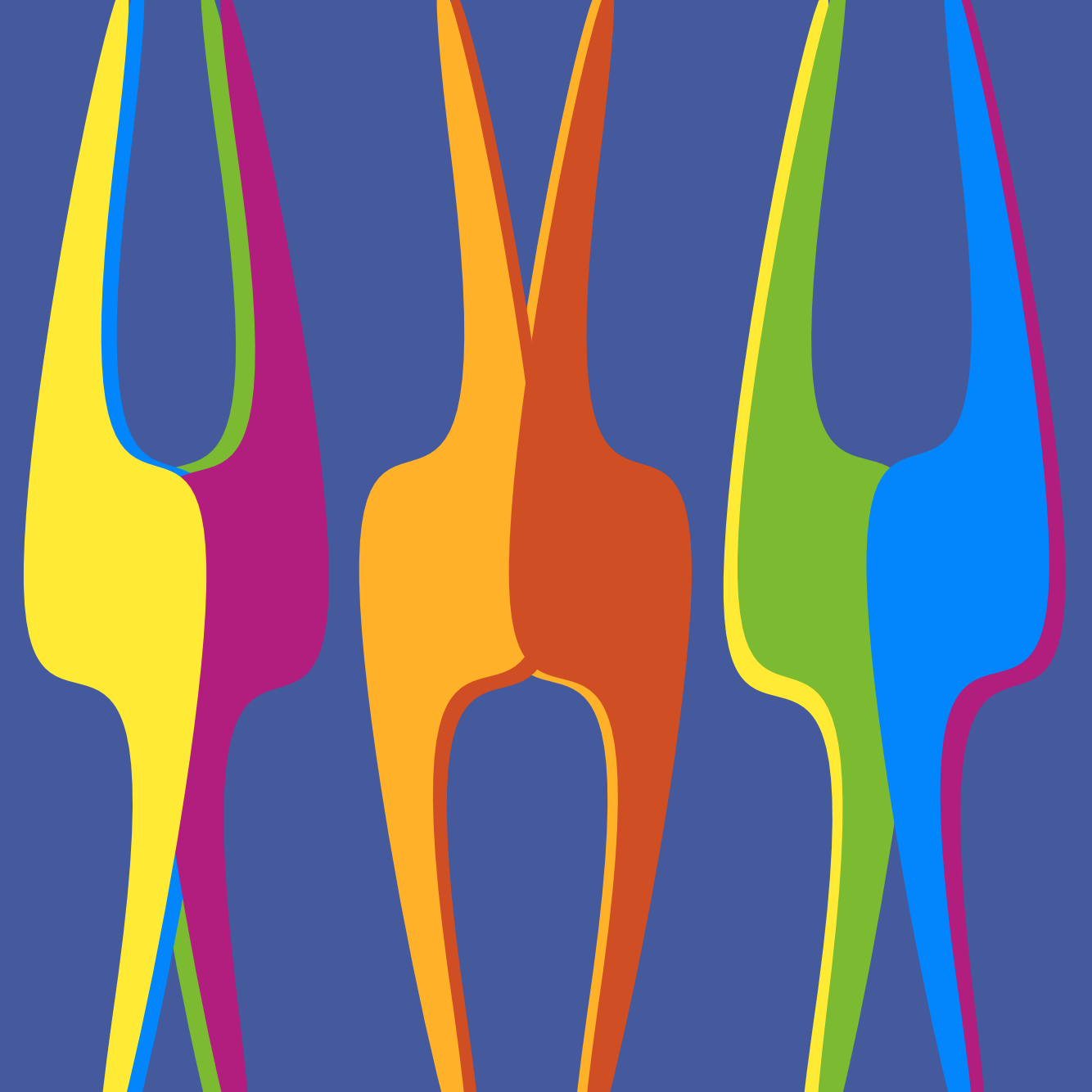


‘On the poles you have female and male, men and women. At the centre, you have the Mo. The perfect balance between female and male. However, most of my people lean towards one of the poles. I lean towards the male pole, therefore you can address me as Mafem, instead of Mr or Ms, while you can address those leaning towards the female pole as Femma. You can also address both as Mo, assuming that on a warm sunny day, a balance between male and female might be achieved by quite a few of us. When it comes to pronouns, you can use they or them. However, some prefer the usage of re, res, rem. Or to be more precise, she, re, he, it—’

‘WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?’

book 2/2, travelling, Romania









In one half of the ballroom, Greek style pillars formed a circle around the dance floor. In the other half, twelve sculptures of Greek gods were scattered around.

The elegant guests assembled around the gods, greeting each other and constantly discovering more acquaintances. The number of people waving to other people, was truly funny. (...)

Andy smiled back half-heartedly. He wished Alice would pay Filip and Natasha some attention too.

But Alice only had eyes for the almost naked sculpture of a god with a helmet and a shield, and a negligible something in front of his private parts.

‘Who is it?’ Andy asked a little jealous.

‘It’s Ares,’ Natasha replied, patting Andy’s arm as if she sensed how strange he felt in this glittering world. ‘The god of courage and war.’

‘It’s interesting that he’s naked,’ Alice said. ‘And his face is rather feminine.’

‘He doesn’t have a six-pack,’ Filip remarked. ‘Today, Ares would have a six-pack.’

Alice chuckled. ‘I don’t understand today’s obsession with six-packs. It looks so unnatural. Anyway, it seems the Greek weren’t afraid of showing the naked human in almost all their glory. I wonder why that changed. What made people afraid of the naked body or—?’

In this moment, their hosts Jekaterina Volcova and Fyodor Volcov stepped in front of the orchestra and opened the evening with a speech.

The speech was followed by a brief silence. It was as if even the grandeur of the moment needed to take a deep breath before it would sweep across the dance floor.







‘I’m not that happy with anyone making out in public,’ Devery said.

‘What?’ Hachiro exclaimed, spilling water on the table. ‘You are French. The French invented making out. How come I ended up at a table full of prudish dudass, dudes and dudus?’

Everyone chuckled and Adeola said: ‘Because you’re such a tolerant guy? And you still have hope for us?’

‘Yeah. You’re right. It’s too early to give up on you lot. But seriously. It’s no big deal. Kissing is great. No matter who kisses who, or who kisses you.’

‘I’ll toast to that — despite some reservations,’ Devery said, raising his glass.

‘There’s hope for you.’ Hachiro laughed. ‘A toast to the magic of kissing.’

Chuckles and clinking glasses.





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This was

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