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# JULES OF THE RED LIPS BY NORAH VAWTER

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In the beginning, it was just another hospital stay. Brisk nurses. Tired doctors. Rude orderlies. A locked ward. I was familiar with the dynamic, and I was eleven days into it – eleven days taking my meds like a good girl. Eleven days of my mind going fast, fast, fast, of my body sitting and sitting and sitting. Toes tapping. Eleven days of boredom. I had peaked already; I was slowing down, and the worst of it was I was losing my way. That's what they don't tell you about being manic. Manic people know everything, they think the rest of the world is crazy. We are not just on top of the world: we are the world at small. We hold the secrets of the universe. I'd been exotic when the police had dragged me into Western State. I'd been a lady who could fly to Paris just for fun, who could dazzle men with the flicker of my hair, who was on first name basis with God. They'd confiscated my halter-top and mini skirt (too sexy) and my six-inch stilettos (possibly weaponry). And now I was dressed in yellow-gray sweats the nurse had found in her endless pile of shitty clothes, I went where I was told, and I kept thinking about a picture book my dad had read to me called the *Maggie B.*, about a little girl who made a wish and ended up sailing on the open seas. I had never sailed, and for eleven days I'd only seen the outside on smoke breaks.

Back in my life, I was just a waitress.

I remember the morning when there was a change. Did a window open? Did the fates whisper? All I know is that I've spent years in and out of hospitals. Sanity followed by insanity followed by sanity. This was a moment of change.

And it was time for group.

The room was painted bright yellow, because this was the Yellow Group, the group of patients in my ward who could talk and make sense talking, who didn't scream when asked to "share," who told interesting stories, took their meds, and sometimes looked out for one another. It was also the group where people had most of their teeth left, and both feet on the earth, not in the grave or flying around the sky. A little part of me had come alive when I finally saw my name on the board under the word YELLOW. Even if I still didn't know exactly why my boyfriend had called the cops on me, when I had been so beautiful. Some day, when we were older, he might tell me what had happened, over Chinese takeout. But for now this was small a victory, a promotion, not Pink anymore, the group where people shouted nonsense, but Yellow the color of sunshine and the insides of daisies. I could be a daisy, in another life.

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“Miss Conalee,” said a smooth, heavily accented voice.

I swiveled in my chair towards old Dr. Iriani. He was standing at the doorway of the yellow room. “I’m all dead inside,” I said in a rush, “you’ve gotta change the medicine, I mean it’s like a zombie-like-a-dead-woman. Like I’m staring out at everybody from a cave. I mean look at my eyes—like glass! I drool if I’m not careful!”

I thought he was listening, but after a minute his eyes glazed over and he started talking in a soothing voice. “You are talking too fast.” I was sick of hearing this. “Just keep with the medicine. It’s working.” Soon he nodded curtly and walked away. I wanted to run after him, because he should use my goddamned first name and take care of me like I was his child. His stooped shoulders and his gray hair made me gasp with an epiphany. I was out of my chair and yelling.

“You’re everybody’s father here! We’re all your sons-and-daughters and you have to take care of us and you have to be gentle, be sweet. Who else will?”

Dr. Iriani squinted at me in confusion.

The nurse came rushing in with 2 mg of Ativan. “It’ll calm you down, dear,” she said. I glared at the doctor and swallowed the pills, only to feel like I’d gone to the beach. More people came in. The ones who smiled too much we called robots. Slumped in the corner were the lost souls. Then there were visionaries, groupies, loners. Most had been in for a while, some were ready to leave, and you’d be surprised at how sane mental patients can be after the drugs start to kick in. The real crazies weren’t in this group.

Right when we started, there was a scuffle in the hallway. I figured the cops must have brought someone new in. I couldn’t hear what the nurse was saying, just her calming voice. A woman yelled from the hall, “My father is one of the three thousand river gods, and they will all be angry if you don’t unhand me.” We all started laughing.

Greg the facilitator, a nervous guy straight out of grad school, frowned and told us that it wasn’t funny. Then she cried out again. “Would you show me to your king?”

“There’s no king here,” the tired nurse said. “This is Western State Hospital.”

“Then perhaps your queen or regent.”

“What’s your name, dear?”

“Daphne,” said the woman.

“Daphne what?”

“Daughter of Peneus. Daughter of the river.”

“Well that won’t do at all,” the nurse said. “I’ll put you down as Daphne Smith, dear, for now, until you can tell us your real name.”

I glanced around at all the other bipolars, schitzos, depressives, and personality disorderlies. A few people were grinning almost as gleefully as I was. I loved eccentrics and I loved weirdos and I loved storytellers. Best thing about being on a psych ward. This was the sort of day that made me never want to leave.

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I saw her that afternoon, during art therapy. If they were drowned by the Man, people painted birdhouses or strung beads. I was sitting with the sanest group of bipolars, Ricky, Damien, and Mollygirl, trading war stories. I had just started drawing, in charcoal, a girl flying towards the sun when the art therapist, a plump woman in her forties who thought I had talent, leaned over my shoulder and whispered, "Nothing too dark, Jules. I don't want to see anyone dead." I rolled my eyes, drew the girl smiling maniacally. It was Maggie, from the story, and she'd gotten tired of the sailboat.

Then Daphne came in, dressed in a hospital gown, her long brown hair tangled like she hadn't brushed it in years. She was lovely, slender, and young. "Eighteen?" Ricky whispered to me.

"Barely," I whispered back. "Sucks to be her." Somehow, I didn't feel like laughing at her anymore.

"Over here!" I called before I could stop myself. "Daphne, over here!" She looked grateful as she came to sit next to me. Daphne stared at the birdhouse Mrs. F. had given her to paint. She had large brown eyes and had supposedly arrived naked, wrapped in a police blanket. She made me think of swimming amongst seaweed, of shooting stars and moonlit picnics and my father. After a few minutes I managed to say, "So, you're a-Greek-goddess."

"Nymph. My father's a river god." Of course, I'd read the stories – my father'd brought me up on them – I knew the difference. I was just so nervous saying it.

"Did you call him to spring you out?" asked Ricky.

"On that telephone contraption? I never saw one before, and I don't think my father uses a telephone. This is a strange palace you have."

"It's not a palace," I told her as gently as I could. "It's a hospital, and we're in Virginia, you know the USA, land of opportunity, American dream, no palaces."

Mollygirl giggled. "You schitzo or what?" The poor girl just stared with wide eyes.

"She wouldn't tell you if she was," Ricky chided her. "That's the thing with schitzos. I swear you never learn, girlie-girl. How many times have I seen you here, and how many times have you asked that ridiculous question?" Damien suggested that she might be manic, but Ricky was sure she was talking too slowly to be, and the three of them went on arguing like that for the rest of art therapy. Daphne looked scared to death, but that was normal. She carried herself like a grown woman, rich, used to getting what she wanted, but she had that deer-in-the-headlights look that little children get watching a horror movie. Was she here because I was here? Maybe I wanted her to be a nymph so I wouldn't be bored. But she didn't look schitzo to me.

I couldn't sleep that night. They made us lie down on uncomfortable, flame retardant mattresses, in case some joker set himself on fire. The lights were out, and the air conditioner was going so hard that I was cold beneath my blanket. I huddled on the bed and thought about Daphne running from Apollo. Had he really chased her across continents, across an ocean, so she could turn up in Virginia? I still remembered my Ovid. "The wind laid bare her body and her clothes fluttered as she ran and her hair streamed out behind her."

I knew something about running.

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Whenever I was in the hospital, which was more often than not lately, I tried not to think about the summer when I had first lost my mind. But now, as I rubbed my hands all over my body, trying to warm myself, I thought of the way I'd walked that hot summer. I was eighteen, doing summer school after almost failing my freshman year of college. My father, who'd always been gentle, who'd read me the Greek myths and the Grimm fairy tales and later the texts of Aristotle and Plato and Voltaire, was furious. He'd taken to calling me every night, badgering me about my homework.

"I didn't get to go to college," he said over and over. "You don't get to waste it." He was a portly man, a traveling salesman, with black hair the color of shoe polish. He'd raised me after my mother ran off on us, and he was fierce in his love for me.

But I'd discovered sex and marijuana. And more and more lately I couldn't sit still. And more and more lately, my thoughts were like poetry and my voice was like music. My professors were in slow motion, their voices dragged out like records on the wrong speed. I tried to go to class. I would sit at the back of a lecture hall, at attention, my pencil poised, but there was nothing to write down. They talked for hours and said nothing useful. I often walked out mid-lecture. Sometimes I heard the professor sigh as I swung open the door and it swung shut.

One night in July I was trying to study for Chemistry and listen to Pink Floyd and write a letter to my father explaining everything I was thinking. At the same time. I was getting angry at him for not listening to me. But then something clicked in my head, and I had to get out of there. I thought I might explode if I kept writing that letter.

I lived on campus, in the middle of a tiny Virginia town. I didn't know where I was walking, but after a while I ended up on the main street. I walked past busy restaurants, gas stations, bed and breakfasts. The air. I wish I could recreate the air that night. It started to crackle. I could see sparks. How long had it been since I slept? Three days, four, five? I'd lost count. I didn't want to sleep and miss anything. And I remember thinking to myself, thank God I'm here. Yes, this has to be God, the real, honest-to-God God. Who else could make the air sparkle like this?

I walked all night. The cops picked me up on the side of the highway two days later, and my father kissed both my cheeks when he visited me in that first hospital. But he never looked at me the same. I was no longer the girl he'd read stories to, or taken out for dinner to celebrate winning an art prize at school. No longer the ten year-old who'd painted her bedroom walls red, against his wishes, and made him cringe as he walked in. No longer the owner of a lemonade stand and a pink bike and rollerblades.

I'd felt something break inside me when he'd left me in that hospital, that first hospital. And now here I was, twenty-five, and my father didn't know I was here, and maybe my life since then had been one long footrace in a mythical forest.

**"Jules** of the red lips."

I looked up from my painting in surprise. I'd been hiding out in the art room, painting Daphne turning into a tree, not like that Renaissance painting I'd seen in a book once, where she was wearing a dress and her arms were supposedly turning to branches but really it just looked like she was holding a bunch of leaves. My Daphne was thick strokes of white on black paper with tiny red nipples, red eyes. Her legs had turned into a sturdy tree trunk. Only her torso was human.

And now here was the girl who called herself Daphne. This was awkward. She'd brushed her hair, she had a headband to hold it out of her eyes, and she wore a flannel shirt and

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sweatpants. I tried to hide my art, but she was too quick. "Interesting," she said.

"Why did you call me that? Crazy name. I'm not crazy," I said.

"Jules of the red lips? Your lips are red."

"What?"

"More than other mortals. They stand out against your pale face and your black hair."

I stared at her.

I had read about Apollo and Daphne with my father. I used to read a page. Then he would read a page. He liked me to read like both the story and I meant something. I remember wondering how it would feel to turn into a tree. Could you think if you were a tree? Could you cry? Could you move your branches to tousle someone's hair? That's why I'd been painting the damned picture in the first place.

"I looked nothing like that. I did not know what was happening, but I could feel my father working his magic, saving me. He thought he was saving me," Daphne was saying. "And Apollo was scratching at my skin as I transformed. The rogue."

Now something clicked in my head.

"Do you know what really happened? I mean the whole truth, the whole..."

She raised her right eyebrow. Even in the flannel and sweats, she looked like a princess.

"It wasn't his fault, it was Cupid. Or Eros, I think that was his Greek name, are you supposed to be Greek or Roman? If you're you, I mean."

She frowned at me.

"Cupid shot a golden arrow at Apollo. And a lead one at you. He fell into love. You fell into hate. That's what happened. Apollo wasn't a rogue."

Daphne sat down next to me and started fiddling with a birdhouse someone had been painting. Red paint came off on her fingers. "I would have felt an arrow pierce me," she muttered.

"That's the thing. Nobody felt Cupid's arrows. Haven't you heard of him?"

"I met him once. As Eros. He was an arrogant fool."

"I always wondered what would have happened if Daphne and Apollo had just met at a party and Cupid had never existed. And whether you'd have martinis."

The girl who called herself Daphne laid her head on the table, and ran her fingers through her hair, getting paint all over herself. She looked deflated.

Later that day I was still thinking about her, about how I shouldn't have said anything, when Steve turned up in the visitor's room. The man-boy with the blond hair longer than mine, the eyes like handcuffs, the arms that had held me down and called the police, the incarnation of

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the reason I was here. Was Apollo a man-boy too? I raised my eyebrows, he smiled small, and the nurse left us.

“Jules, you look better,” he said after we’d sat on opposite sides of the room.

“Yeah, no handcuffs, no police, do-you-know-how-much-that-hurts?, but of course you don’t know that, you’re an upstanding citizen, no problems with the law. And I’m not raving and spitting at you. You deserve it.”

“But I came to visit before.”

“No.” This couldn’t be. He hadn’t been here.

“The first two days you were real bad. You practically fell asleep on my lap. I was going to faint from worrying.” I didn’t remember this, and his voice made me sullen as he told me how drugged out I’d been, how he’d waited to come when I was better. His voice, always low-pitched, started to sound like a bulldozer or a battering ram.

So I said instead, “You’re a bastard.”

“You cheated on me,” he fired back.

“I was sick. I was in Paris. It seemed like a good idea.”

“Yeah! You flew to Paris without telling me and then you cheated on me.”

*“I was sick.”*

And so we were arguing again about whose fault it was, and he thought it was mine because I’d flushed my medicine down the toilet and started this whole adventure, and I thought it was his because he was a prick and he never listened to me and he was a slob. I was sick of explaining the symptoms of bipolar disorder to him, sick of telling him that sexual promiscuity and rash decisions and talking too fast and thinking too fast and even psychosis weren’t my fault. Flushing my meds, yeah, that was all me, but he didn’t know how they made me feel. No happiness, no sadness, and my doctor didn’t listen. I was a lab rat prisoner. I was boring.

“You should have put me in a laurel tree,” was the last thing I said to him.

I emerged to find Daphne staring out the window, looking wild. Her hair was messy, and still streaked with red. I laid my hand on her shoulder. She shook it away.

“Jules of the red lips,” she whispered. “You have spoken the truth.”

I gulped. “I just read it in a book,” was all I could say.

“I can tell when things are true. That is true.” She turned to look at me. Her eyes were daggers. Then she turned back to the window and screamed. Either it was in a language I didn’t know or it was not a language at all. It sounded like pain.

Nurses came rushing up. I backed away. A young nurse grabbed Daphne’s hands and started talking to her in a low urgent voice. Eventually Daphne just hung her head.

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Jerry the social worker, a crisp Englishman, came to take over. He motioned for me to leave, but I stayed close enough to overhear.

“Why on earth would you scream like that, my girl?” he wanted to know.

Daphne, head still down, said, “Apollo and Eros. I was crying at them.”

“The more secrets you hold inside, the longer you’ll be inside here. Now you’re a sweet girl. You can get out of the Pink Group. Just tell me the truth.”

“I’m a nymph.”

“Yeah, well, perhaps you should think about it as a metaphor. Maybe you just like the water, do you like to swim perhaps, and that’s made you think –“

“I AM A NYMPH! And when the three thousand river gods come calling, you’ll be drowning in the water they bring.”

Jerry took that as a threat, and Daphne ended up in isolation for three hours. It smelled like piss in that room. She didn’t seem to have any superpowers to get her out.

**Weeks** passed.

As I was watching Daphne, I was quieter, and the doctor seemed to think that I was calmer. Daphne gave me something to think about, weird thoughts that weren’t my own and somehow not as crazy. So they took me off a bunch of the damned Risperidol, an atypical antipsychotic I wished had never been invented. I felt like a circus in my brain was wrapping up its show, like the lion tamer drugs were making friends with the lion.

**One** night I was dreaming about the trip my father and I had taken to Mexico when I was a kid, which turned into him and me fighting the last time I’d seen him, and I woke up crying so hard I couldn’t stop. I tried to hide in the bathroom, but the night nurse was banging on the door, telling me to shut up or he’d put me in isolation.

“I’m grieving!” I yelled at him.

“You’re making animal sounds,” he yelled back. “You’re gonna wake everybody up and then there’s gonna be howling from every corner. Now I got some pills for you, and you better get a lot quieter really fast, or I’m sticking you in the room.”

I looked at myself in the mirror. My black hair was a mess around my face. I was pale and plain and nothing like Daphne, but I stared at my red lips, and I tried to stop howling. You can do this, I told myself. You don’t want isolation, it smells like piss in there, and it means you stay here longer. I opened the door, only whimpering now.

“There’s a good girl,” the nurse said. He held out a cup of pills and a cup of water. 2 mg Ativan and 1 mg Risperidol. I wanted to tell him that crying in the middle of the night didn’t make me psychotic, but instead I downed the pills in one mouthful. Pretty soon my head was fuzzy, I was in the uncomfortable bed, and I was dreaming of Daphne.

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The next evening she and I hung out in the art therapy room and made origami. Daphne said she needed something to do with her hands because she'd held a bow and arrows for a few thousand years. My head was feeling clearer than it had for a while, and I laughed when she told me that they'd taken her bow away from her on entrance, explaining that she could pick it up when she was discharged.

"I loved the hunt," she told me. "I used to roast the deer I caught over a fire. Once Artemis even joined me. She didn't eat, of course, but I did. If Apollo hadn't been pierced by that arrow, I'd be chasing a boar through the forest right now."

I sighed. "I wish I could believe you. It's the most goddamned beautiful story since my father used to tell me bedtime stories."

"It's more than a story. And I wish I knew where my father is. In his river I suppose. I just don't understand how he could have left me in that tree this whole time."

"Well, you're not going to get out of here telling them that story. Me, I tell them exactly what they want to hear. How I'm really sorry, and I'll never fly to Paris again while I'm manic, like I did this last time, and I'll never give my boyfriend cause to call the cops again, and I'll be a good girl."

"I can't believe you did that. And you still have to explain what an airplane does."

I laughed. "I can't believe you turned yourself into a laurel tree."

"My father did that," she said, reproachful. "But what are you going to do, when you've told them everything they want to hear and they let you go home?"

"My boyfriend's still really mad at me," I told her, "I haven't talked to him in a while, but I think he'll let me come back to the apartment if he can supervise my meds and make sure I'm not flushing them down the toilet. And I'll get another job."

"You mean like you told me about bringing people trays of food?" she asked. I nodded. "And live with that awful guy again, who never does the dishes? That's all?"

"What do you mean?"

"That's what you wanted when you were a little girl and your father told you beautiful stories?" she asked me.

I stared at her, wishing I was Medusa and could turn her to stone.

"I thought you wanted to be an artist?"

I tried to explain to Daphne, once again, that being the best artist in the ward at Western State was not the same thing as having real talent, but she thought I was good.

"And what about this school you told me about, this college?"

"I flunked out."

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“But surely you could find some other school and not tell them about the first.”

“I’m a waitress!” I almost yelled at her. This argument was starting to make me feel like shit. And just today I’d gotten outside privileges, so I could take a supervised walk in the sunshine. I didn’t yell because I wanted to go on that fucking walk tomorrow.

“*You are not,*” Daphne said in an icy voice, full of authority.

I paused, then turned back to my origami.

“I hate this palace,” she was saying. “It shrinks everybody, makes you all want less than you should want, makes you glad that they let you smoke cigarettes and give you chocolate cake on Saturdays and prizes during that stupid BINGO game. I’ve never played it before but I don’t think everybody’s supposed to win.”

I tried to drown her out. All of a sudden I didn’t want her to be a nymph anymore.

A few days later, Daphne was called out of Yellow Group, which she’d finally gotten into by being quieter about her story. I heard the nurse talking to her in the hall and then Daphne screamed, “Apollo, you bastard!”

“Arthur,” a man said. “Call me Arthur.” Then as if he was talking to the nurse he said, “She always gets my name mixed up.”

A few minutes later, I snuck out of Group by claiming I needed the bathroom. In the foyer a skinny man with short-cropped blond hair was sitting on the bench. Daphne was standing in front of him, her arms crossed. The nurse was looking on, amused.

“I will not come with you,” Daphne said sullenly. “I will not.”

“But I love you.” I could see that his suit cost three thousand dollars, easily.

“Haven’t you heard my words? It was a golden arrow. That’s all.”

“But I remember how it felt to love you so much that my heart was bursting out.”

“Apollo.”

“*Arthur.*” I wondered who he was, if maybe this was Apollo answering her cry of weeks before.

When she wouldn’t go with him, he argued with the doctor. At the end of the day the hospital all but threw Daphne out. Apollo/Arthur held the door for her as she carried her bundle of art projects in a plastic bag and gave me one last confused glance.

**That** afternoon during free time I borrowed Ricky’s phone card and called my father. I sat on the cold, tiled floor while the phone rang and rang, thinking he’d never pick up. But he did. I hadn’t talked to him in five years, since I dropped out of college and he’d told me I was making a horrible mistake and that my boyfriend at the time was the devil incarnate. It turned out he was right about the boyfriend. For a long time I just babbled at him, telling him everything I could

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remember that I'd done since I'd seen him last. I felt old.

Finally he interrupted me, "Julia, what do you want?"

The directness of his question shocked me. I had almost forgotten him. "I want to come home. I want to say I'm sorry. I don't want to ever see Steve again. I want to draw pictures for you. I want to talk about ideas and words. I want you to love me again."

"Julia." He paused. "It's hard to know whether to trust you. If you need me though, I'll think about it." And that was all I got from him.

They were letting me out soon; I could just feel it. When you've been in hospitals enough, you can tell. I didn't want to get ahead of myself. Maybe he wouldn't come. But maybe he'd come and take me to a real sit-down restaurant. I could almost taste a real hamburger, not the kind they served lukewarm on a tray at dinner, but the flame-grilled kind with lots of mayonnaise and fresh tomatoes. Would my father smile at me across the table, raise his glass of Coca Cola and say a toast to me? The new-old me. When I got home I imagined myself reading the modernists and learning to oil paint. I wondered if they'd give me back my stilettos and my halter-top, like they'd said they would. Had they given Daphne back her bow and arrows? Had there been a bow and arrows? If my father came, I wondered if I would tell him about Daphne. Or about my new name. Jules of the red lips.

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