



Luster
a novel

Raven Leilani



Luster

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For my mother

1

The first time we have sex, we are both fully clothed, at our desks during working hours, bathed in blue computer light. He is uptown processing a new bundle of microfiche and I am downtown handling corrections for a new Labrador detective manuscript. He tells me what he ate for lunch and asks if I can manage to take off my underwear in my cubicle without anyone noticing. His messages come with impeccable punctuation. He is fond of words like *taste* and *spread*. The empty text field is full of possibilities. Of course I worry about IT remoting into my computer, or my internet history warranting yet another disciplinary meeting with HR. But the risk. The thrill of a third pair of unseen eyes. The idea that someone in the office, with that sweet, post-lunch-break optimism, might come across the thread and see how tenderly Eric and I have built this private world.

In his first message, he points out a few typos in my online profile and tells me he has an open marriage. His profile pictures are candid and loose—a grainy photo of him asleep in the sand, a photo of him shaving, taken from behind. It is this last photo that moves me. The dirty tile and the soft recession of steam. His face in the mirror, stern with quiet scrutiny. I save the photo to my phone so I can look at it on the train. Women look over my shoulder and smile, and I let them believe he is mine.

Otherwise, I have not had much success with men. This is not a statement of self-pity. This is just a statement of the facts. Here's a fact: I have great breasts, which have warped my spine. More facts: My salary is very low. I have trouble making friends, and men lose interest in me when I talk. It always goes well initially, but then I talk too explicitly about my ovarian torsion or my rent. Eric is different. Two weeks into our correspondence, he tells me about the cancer that ravaged half of his maternal family. He tells me about an aunt he loved who made potions with fox hair and hemp. How she was buried with a corn husk doll she'd

made of herself. Still, he describes his childhood home lovingly, the digressions of farmland between Milwaukee and Appleton, the yellow-breasted chats and tundra swans that would appear in his yard, looking for seed. When I talk about my childhood, I only talk about the happy parts. The VHS of *Spice World* I received for my fifth birthday, the Barbie I melted in the microwave when no one was home. Of course, the context of my childhood—the boy bands, the Lunchables, the impeachment of Bill Clinton—only emphasizes our generational gap. Eric is sensitive about his age and about mine, and he makes a considerable effort to manage the twenty-three-year discrepancy. He follows me on Instagram and leaves lengthy comments on my posts. Retired internet slang interspersed with earnest remarks about how the light falls on my face. Compared to the inscrutable advances of younger men, it is a relief.

★ ★ ★

We talk for a month before our schedules align. We try to meet earlier, but things always come up. This is just one way his life is different from mine. There are people who count on him, and sometimes they need him urgently. Between his abrupt cancellations, I realize that I need him, too. In a way that makes my dreams delirious expressions of thirst—long stretches of yellow desert, cathedrals hemmed in dripping moss. By the time we set our first real date, I would've done anything. He wanted to go to Six Flags.

★ ★ ★

We decide to go on a Tuesday. When he rolls up in his white Volvo, I have only made it to the part of my pre-date routine where I try to find the most appropriate laugh. I put on three dresses before I find the right one. I tie up my braids and line my eyes. There are dishes in the sink and a pervasive salmon smell in the apartment, and I don't want him to think it has anything to do with me. I put on a complex pair of underwear that is not so much underwear as a bundle of string, and I stand before the mirror. I think to myself, *You are a desirable woman. You are not a dozen gerbils in a skin casing.*

★ ★ ★

Outside, he is double-parked. He leans against the car and remains like this as I come out, his eyes bright and still. His hair is darker than I expected, a black so

opaque it looks blue. His face is almost obscenely symmetrical, though one of his eyebrows is higher than the other, and it makes his smile seem a little smug. It is the second day of summer and all the city's powers have no sway over him. I reach for his hand, trying not to swallow my tongue, and something feels strange. Of course there are nerves. In person he is a total daddy, his face alert and hard, softened only by the slight recession of his hair. But this strange feeling has nothing to do with that, nothing to do with me looking past his sensuous mouth and slightly askew nose for any indication that he is as nervous as I am. It is that it is 8:15 a.m. and I feel happy. I am not on the L, smelling someone's lukewarm pickles, wishing I were dead.

"Edie," I say, extending my hand.

"I know," he says, his long fingers settling between mine, too gently. I wanted to be more forward, to fold him into an easy, extroverted hug. But what happens is this limp handshake, this aversion of my eyes, this unsurprising and immediate surrender of power. And then the worst part of meeting a man in broad daylight, the part where you see him seeing you, deciding in this split second whether any future cunnilingus will be enthusiastic or perfunctory. He opens the door, and there is a fluffy blue die hanging from the rearview mirror. A half-eaten bag of Jolly Ranchers in the passenger seat. His correspondence online has been honest, full of his stuttering sincerity. However, as we have already told the stories you might tell on a first date, it is harder to begin. He brings up the weather and then we are talking about climate change. After a while of talking generally about burning to death, we pull into the park.

★ ★ ★

It's hard not to be aware of an age discrepancy when you are surrounded by the most rococo trappings of childhood. The Tweety Bird balloons, the plastic, soulless eyes of the Taz mascot, the Dippin' Dots. As we enter the gates, I feel the high-fructose sun of the park like an insult. This is a place for children. He has taken me to a place for children. I watch his face for any indication that this might be a joke or a telling manifestation of his anxiety about the mere twenty-three years I've spent on earth.

★ ★ ★

The age discrepancy doesn't bother me. Beyond the fact of older men having more stable finances and a different understanding of the clitoris, there is the potent drug

of a keen power imbalance. Of being caught in the excruciating limbo between their disinterest and expertise. Their panic at the world's growing indifference. Their rage and adult failure, funneled into the reduction of your body into gleaming, elastic parts.

★ ★ ★

Except, for him, this seems to be new territory. Not simply to be out on a date with someone who is not his wife and decades younger, but to be out with a girl who happens to be black. I can feel it in how cautiously he says *African American*. How he absolutely refuses to say the word *black*. As a rule, I try to avoid popping that dusky cherry. I cannot be the first black girl a white man dates. I cannot endure the nervous renditions of backpacker rap, the conspicuous effort to be colloquial, or the smugness of pink men in kente cloth. As we make our way over to the lockers, a father and son are vomiting behind a Bugs Bunny standee. I open my locker and there is a diaper inside. Eric sees it and calls over a janitor. Eric says he's sorry, and the apology feels like it is not about only the diaper, but more how this choice of location is turning out. I feel bad about that. I feel bad that my first instinct is to manage his feelings, instead of suggesting somewhere else to go. That we will both have to endure my attempt to prove over the course of this date that I am Having a Good Time! and that This Is Not Your Fault!

★ ★ ★

A month is too long to talk online. In the time we have been talking, my imagination has run wild. Based on his liberal use of the semicolon, I just assumed this date would go well. But everything is different IRL. For one thing, I am not as quick on my feet. There is no time to consider my words or to craft a clever response in iOS Notes. There is also the fact of body heat. The inarticulable parts of being close to a man, the sweet, feral thing underneath their cologne, the way it sometimes feels as if there are no whites to their eyes. A man's profound, adrenal craziness, the tenuousness of his restraint. I feel it on me and inside me, like I am being possessed. When we talked online, we both did some work to fill in the blanks. We filled them in optimistically, with the kind of yearning that brightens and distorts. We had elaborate, hypothetical dinners and we talked about the doctor's appointments we were afraid to make. Now there are no blanks, and when he rubs sunblock on my back, it is both too little and too much.

"Is this okay?" he asks, his breath hot on the back of my neck.

“Uh-huh,” I say, trying not to make the contact into more than it is. However, his hands are excellent. They are warm and wide and soft, and I have not been laid in months. For a moment, I’m sure I’m going to cry, which is not unusual, because I cry often and everywhere, and most especially because of this one Olive Garden commercial. I excuse myself and run to the bathroom, where I look into the mirror and reassure myself that there are bigger things than the moment I am in. Gerrymandering. Genealogy conglomerates selling my cheek swabs to the state.

★ ★ ★

Of course, there is still the business of trying to look sexy while hurtling across the sky. Like most white people who eat beans in the woods undeterred by the fresh fecal evidence of hungry bears, Eric finds his mortality and soft meaty body a petty, incidental thing. I, on the other hand, am acutely aware of all the ways I might die. So when the sighing teenage park associate slaps my harness down and slogs over to the levers, I think of all my unfinished business—the quart of pistachio gelato in my freezer, the 1.5 wanks left in my half-dead vibrator, my *Mister Rogers* box set.

★ ★ ★

Eric’s enthusiasm is infectious. After the first two rides, I am enjoying myself, and not just because dying means I won’t have to pay my student loans. He laces his fingers into mine and drags me to the front, apparently serious enough about his park experience to have paid the extra fee to skip the line. I go to tie my shoelaces and return to find him talking to the Porky Pig mascot about entry-level positions at the archive.

“We always need quality customer service,” he says, pressing his phone number into Porky’s pink felt mitt. We board the highest coaster in the park for the third time and he screams like it is the first. He really, truly screams. At first it is off-putting, but as we scale the last track, I realize that I like it. I like it a lot. I can’t decide if it’s the dissonance, the girliness of this inclination compared to his mass, or my envy of his wonder—the glee in his terror, the willingness to experience anew what is familiar. His joy is raw in a way that makes me feel like I can unzip my skin suit and show him all the ooze inside. But not yet. There is a sadness about his fervor, the way it feels slightly put on, as if he has something to prove. He looks over at me when we reach the top. The wind cards through his hair. Behind his eyes, I see myself fractured into pieces. Suddenly it feels painful to be

this ordinary, to be this open to him, as he looks at me and pretends I am not just a cheaper version of a fast Italian car.

“I wish every day could be like this,” he says when we reach the most terrifying part of the ride, when they hold you in midair and force you to anticipate the drop. Below us, the park is turning on its lights. All I want is for him to have what he wants. I want to be uncomplicated and undemanding. I want no friction between his fantasy and the person I actually am. I want all that and I want none of it. I want the sex to be familiar and tepid, for him to be unable to get it up, for me to be too open about my IBS, so that we are bonded in mutual consolation. I want us to fight in public. And when we fight in private, I want him to maybe accidentally punch me. I want us to have a long, fruitful bird-watching career, and then I want us to find out we have cancer at exactly the same time. Then I remember his wife, the coaster eases downward, and we fall.

★ ★ ★

Despite myself, I have been thinking about his wife all day. I find myself hoping she is a vocal participant in her neighborhood watch. It would also be reassuring if she lies completely still during sex. There is the possibility that she might be cool. She might truly be fine with her husband going out on a date with a girl who has sixteen times more viable eggs. She might be limber, keyed into Venus retrograde, and inclined to use natural deodorant. A woman so unthreatened by all of New York’s women that she has given this nubile horde a wholesale blessing to fuck her husband.

★ ★ ★

After a few more rounds, Eric and I head to a faux saloon with a surprising abundance of wicker. It is the one restaurant in the park allowed to sell alcohol, and above the bar is a neon rendition of Yosemite Sam’s handlebar mustache. A waitress wearing a ten-gallon hat tosses a couple of sticky menus on the table. She tells us the specials in such a way that we know our sole responsibility as patrons in her section is to just go right ahead and fuck ourselves. Up until this moment, we have been riding through the day side by side. I look at him directly and it almost hurts. His undivided attention is like a focused point of heat.

“Are you having a good time?” he asks.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Because I have to be honest, I’m having trouble reading you, and I’m usually great at that kind of thing.” I finish my beer and try not to show how overjoyed I am that none of my need and loathing have come across. “You’re kind of aloof,” he says, and all the kids stacked underneath my trench coat rejoice. Aloof is a casual lean, a choice. It is not a girl in Bushwick, licking clean a can of tuna.

“I’m an open book,” I say, thinking of all the men who have found it illegible. I made mistakes with these men. I dove for their legs as they tried to leave my house. I chased them down the hall with a bottle of Listerine, saying, *I can be a beach read, I can get rid of all these clauses, please, I’ll just revise.*

★ ★ ★

So I do my best to be unimpressed. For as long as I can, I try to make it look like my silence is discerning, as opposed to being fearful of what embarrassing thing I might say.

“Are you dating anyone else?” he asks.

“No. Does that make you want me less?”

“No, does me being married make you want me less?”

“It makes me want you more,” I say, wondering if I’m beginning to say too much, if it was a mistake to tell him that he is the only one. No one wants what no one wants. There is a pervasive weed-bathroom-popcorn smell in the air, and a man at the bar is quietly crying next to a giant teddy bear. For the first time it occurs to me that Eric might’ve chosen this location to ensure that we didn’t run into anyone he knows in the city. “I liked it when you asked if I was having a good time,” I say.

“Why?” He frowns, and I realize I have seen this one before, that after a few hours his facial expressions are already becoming familiar to me. When I think of how we will only move forward from here, how we will never return to the relative anonymity of the internet, I want to fold myself into a ball. I hate the idea that I have repeated an action, that he has looked at me, discerned a pattern, and silently decided whether it is something he can bear to see again. There is nothing I can do to level the playing field. Some men at least have the decency to guide you immediately to all the things that are wrong with them. But everything I’ve seen of Eric, I want to see again. Like this vaguely paternal old man frown, his gentle disapproval.

“Because I felt you were really waiting for my answer, that it wasn’t one of those questions you ask because you expect the answer to be yes,” I say.

“Give me an example of a question like that.”

“Here’s one: Did you come?”

“And so you say yes, even if the answer is no?”

“Of course.”

“Well, you’re just a little liar, aren’t you?” he says, and I want to say, *Yes. Yes, I am.*

“You don’t ever lie to spare feelings?”

“Never.”

“Interesting,” I say. Of course, it is not interesting that he has been allowed to live candidly. It is not interesting that he cannot conceive of anything else. He has equated his range of motion with mine. He hasn’t considered the lies you tell to survive, the kindness of pretend, which I illustrate now, as I eat this bacterial hot dog. This is the first time I sort of understand him. He thinks we’re alike. He has no idea how hard I’m trying.

“You can be yourself with me, you know,” he says, and it’s all I can do not to laugh right in his face.

“Thanks,” I say, but I know he doesn’t mean it. He wants me to be myself like a leopard might be herself in a city zoo. Inert, waiting to be fed. Not out in the wild, with tendon in her teeth.

“Also, if I don’t make you come, I want you to tell me,” he says, motioning for the check.

“So we’re going to have sex? This is going well?”

“Don’t you think so?”

★ ★ ★

On our way back to the car, it begins to rain. The rain is light but unexpected, and the park is already halfway through the closing fireworks. We stand in the lot and wait for the finale. He drapes his arm around me as they start to send up the white dahlias. I press my face into his shirt, and it is damp with sweat and chlorine. All day it has been impossible to get dry. He touches the back of my neck and his fingers stick.

★ ★ ★

When we get in the car, the windows are wet on our side of the glass. He turns on the wipers and removes his shirt. He has this smile as he does it that gives me the impression he is aware of himself, and it makes me want to sit on his face. I have prepared for this. I wore this dress because it is easy to take off. But then he puts

the car in drive and we are on the road. I sit and watch the roadside lights strobe across his face. The route from Jersey to the city is unusually clear. He hangs his arm out of the window and sings along to the radio in a soft, confident voice. The song on the radio is Idris Muhammad's "Could Heaven Ever Be Like This." It came out in 1977, three years after Eric was born. I sing along in the least weird way I can manage, which is still pretty weird.

"How do you know this?" he says, and I want to be cool. I want to say that I found the record in a shop, misplaced behind some goblin prog. Not that I heard it sampled by two separate songs and spent 2003–2006 on crude message boards, trying to seek it out. I want to tell him that Donna Summer's "Spring Affair" is the only thing that got me through 2004, but I have omitted the events of this year from our correspondence.

"I love disco," I say, and he smiles and turns up the music. This is how we travel into the city, aloft on the late seventies. He drives at a mellow clip with one hand on the wheel, and I know I am almost home when the air begins to stink. When we pull up to the curb, he turns down the music and asks again if I had a good time.

"Yes," I say, my ears still full of the highway wind.

"You better not be lying to me," he says, and then his hand is on my thigh. Wrapped around the back of my neck. There is no discernible pattern to his touch and he is so silent I can't even hear him breathing. Otherwise, I am aware of every atmospheric fluctuation inside the car: the lost radio channel and low FM fuzz, half in half out, so that against the lazy circles of his fingers a voice occasionally emerges from the speaker with oily DJ verve and says *you're listening to*; the dome light; the dim halo around his head; his eyes large and bright.

"I want you to suck my fingers," he says.

"Okay," I say, and take one finger into my mouth. And then two. And then three. And then suddenly, he hooks his fingers and pulls me toward him by the bottom row of my teeth.

"You fucking slut," he says, and then releases me.

"Come up."

"Not tonight. Let me take you out on Thursday."

"Sure," I say, but I am embarrassed. All day I have been waiting to take him apart. I cleaned my room and bought three boxes of Plan B. I get out of the car and wave as he drives away. As I climb the stairs to my apartment, I have already resolved to call out of work tomorrow and spend all night furiously masturbating to *Top Chef*.

★ ★ ★

Unfortunately, my vibrator is dead. I scrounge around for some batteries, but none of the ones I find are double-A. I try to use my fingers, but a roach crawls across the ceiling when I'm getting close. When I look in the mirror, one of my falsies is gone. I hope this has happened recently, and I have not been walking around all day with one sad, glue-drenched eye. Everything I've done to prepare for his visit feels embarrassing. The extra toothbrush, the eggs and LaCroix I bought for our postcoital brunch. I make an omelet and eat it in the dark. I think of the look on his face when he had his fingers in my mouth. His sneer, suspended in the blue-dark.

★ ★ ★

I look for my paints, and when I find them, they are mostly congealed. It has been two years since I painted anything, but I have optimistically kept a bag of art supplies on hand. There is a dead mouse in the bag, and I have no idea how long it's been in there. Because for two years I have slowly moved all my art supplies out of view. I have woken up from dreams where my hands are slick with oil and turpentine and lost the inspiration by the time I brushed my teeth. The last time I painted, I was twenty-one. The president was black. I had more serotonin and I was less afraid of men. Now the cyan and yellow come out hard. I need hot water to make them mix. I work with the paint, let the acrylic dry, and when it isn't right I rework it again. I remain as faithful as I can to scale. I mix thirteen shades of green, five shades of purple I don't need. My palette knife breaks in two. When it is almost 5:00 a.m., I have a passable replication of Eric's face. The slope of his nose in the soft red light of the dash. I rinse my brushes and watch dawn come in its smoky metropolitan form. Somewhere in Essex County, Eric is in bed with his wife. It's not that I want exactly this, to have a husband or home security system that, for the length of our marriage, never goes off. It's that there are gray, anonymous hours like this. Hours when I am desperate, when I am ravenous, when I know how a star becomes a void.