

## IF THE BRA FITS

by Brian Farrey-Latz

James was *pretty sure* no one had ever said ‘no’ to Malik in his life. He was beautiful. He was charm and confidence personified. Though born and raised in the U.S., he still spoke with just a hint of his parents’ Middle Eastern accent (which, James suspected, was an act to seem sophisticated...and it worked). He dated both boys and girls and when he inevitably broke-up with his current infatuation, it was always amicable. Everybody loved Malik.

Which was why the answer to Malik’s question last week, “Would you read my short story and tell me what you think?”—a question that, at any other time asked by any other classmate, would have resulted in the most negative of negatives—was a stammering ‘yes.’

Even now, sitting directly across the cafeteria table from everyone’s favorite track team member (not track *star*—no, colleges wouldn’t be throwing any athletic scholarship money Malik’s way anytime soon), James could feel the charm tugging at him with magnetic persistence. Malik’s smile practically came with invisible fish hooks jutting out in every direction.

*He’s flirting*, James thought. Malik flirted with everyone. There was nothing sexual about it. But he was definitely alluring in a way that anyone who experienced it wanted to be part of. Or, at least James wanted to be a part of.

“I know you’ve won some writing competitions,” Malik said, smiling slyly. “So, like, I really respect your opinion and all that.”

James gnawed on his lower lip, nodded, and said, “Mmm-hm.” He didn’t dare bring himself to look into Malik’s brown eyes. It would all be over then.

Who was he kidding? It was already over. He'd already agreed to read it and offer his thoughts. He'd already read it. And even without looking into Malik's eyes, he knew there was no way he could say what he truly thought.

"I didn't even know you were interested in writing," James said, stalling. If he was honest with himself—which, in and of itself, was a pretty rare thing—he wasn't delaying the inevitable of being forced to give his opinion. He was still trying to figure out how to make this work. How to tell Malik everything that was wrong with the story—which was, well, *everything*—but still keep their dialogue going.

Malik leaned back and shrugged. "I dunno, man. It just hit me, you know. I'm really good at making shit up."

James nodded. "Mm-hm. And you're applying...?"

"To the Iowa Writing School."

"The Iowa Writers Workshop?"

"Yeah, I guess. They're the best, right? Hey, did you apply there? I bet you got in. Smart guy like you. Maybe I'll see you on campus."

James couldn't bring himself to correct any of the multitude of things wrong with that statement. It had been browbeaten into him. *You can't be the first person in the history of, well, the world, to say 'no' to Malik*, his neighbor, Ollie, had told him. James had filled Ollie in on the dilemma: how do you tell the senior class golden boy that he has the writing skills of a malnourished turnip? The answer—Ollie's answer—was: you don't. Which was what James had wanted to hear. No, he *wouldn't* be the first one to say 'no' to Malik. Especially because his whole goal was to get to 'yes.'

*Yes, James, I see now that maybe my very first attempt at writing a short story might not have resulted in a product of the best quality. Yes, James, I would really appreciate your help in honing my writing skills. Yes, James, I'd love to grab some coffee and talk about Margaret Atwood and Annie Proulx.*

At this point, James was pretty sure he was the only gay guy in the senior class that Malik hadn't gone out with at least once. But that was all about to change.

James pulled Malik's short story from his backpack and laid it on the table between them. The way Malik's eyes lit up, James might have thought he'd placed Malik's first born child out on display.

"So, what did you think? Be honest. This has to be good to get into Iowa Writing whatever."

"Mm-hmm."

James had spent an hour—an entire hour—crafting a twenty word opening sentence to his critique that was tactful, supportive, and hopeful when three words would have summed up his thoughts nicely: *It's misogynistic crap*. Those twenty words were just one sentence. Malik had written a twelve page short story. Overall, James had fifty pages of single spaced notes that had taken days and oceans full of diplomacy to write.

"So," James said slowly, "you've written a parody—"

"Reboot," Malik interrupted, like an auteur boasting about his technique.

"Right, reboot. A reboot of the Cinderella story. And instead of running from the prince and leaving her glass slipper behind on the steps of the palace—"

“They do it, right there on the palace steps.” Malik was seated but James could still tell he was doing subtle hip thrusts under the table. “As the clock strikes midnight, she grabs her clothes and runs, leaving her bra behind.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Neil Gaiman does that. He puts sex in fairy tales that don’t normally have sex. I’m like a teen Neil Gaiman.”

“Mm-hmm. And the prince spends the story trying to find the one maiden in the kingdom who fits into the bra.”

Malik grinned. “If the bra fits, wear it.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“It’s like....what do you call it? ‘Social satire.’”

*This is sick*, James told himself. Was he really about to barter for a date? Was he going to massage Malik’s ego—make him think he might be able to write something worthy of entrance to any writing program, let alone the Iowa Writers Workshop—just on the off chance that one night out would lead to more? And more? And by ‘more,’ of course, he meant sex. Was he going to stoop that low?

Of course he was. As low as he had to. Because it wasn’t just that he’d already imagined a long and totally healthy relationship together—where they weathered the tough years apart at different colleges for exactly two years until Malik decided to surprise him by transferring to James’ school at the start of junior year—it was that he knew Malik would see the value of everything James had to offer.

He was going to fix Malik. He was going to make him a writer. He was going to get Malik to see and appreciate and love everything about him. Never mind that they’d never spoken

two words to each other in four years of high school together. Never mind that Malik was clearly using him only because he knew James was an accomplished writer. None of that would matter once Malik heard James' brilliant notes on how to make the story better. (Abridged version: scrap it and start over.)

James took a deep breath. "There are....so many good things to talk about here. The pagination, for instance..."

"The what?"

James' confidence faltered for only a moment. He'd spent all of last night convincing himself that even bad sex with Malik was worth any kind of mire he had to wade through to get there. Even stupid mire. "I think you've latched on to some...really nice qualities here. To start with."

Malik's trademark smile—the one that made straight girls and gay boys moist from three different counties away—nearly slid off his chin, reminding James of the melting Nazi from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. His brow furrowed. Then, as if he'd convinced himself he'd heard it wrong—or maybe that James was joking—he asked, "What?"

*You will not be the first person to tell him 'no,' you idiot.* "What I mean is...." Track metaphor, track metaphor... Why didn't he know any track metaphors? "The first time you ran hurdles, did you knock any down?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so. But I was just a kid."

"Right. But you were doing something new for the first time. This is kind of the same thing. You put in so much effort with this—that's really obvious—but maybe you knocked down a hurdle or two." *Or, you know, every hurdle between you and the finish line. And maybe you*

*crossed lanes and knocked over everybody else's hurdles too. Then maybe you got on a bus and went to a rival school's track and started kicking down their hurdles—*

Malik looked like he understood. Or rather, it was the look you give someone who thinks they're trying to help but they *obviously* don't what they're talking about. "So, you're saying I've got to fix the spelling, right? It was never my strong point. I bet they're pretty picky about that at writer school. But you can help with that, right?"

James had to slam his hand down on his own knee to keep his leg from spasming with joy. "Help. Yes. Help. I can help. Spelling, sure, that's one thing we could fix. And, maybe, some other stuff too."

Malik's melty face—droopy eyes, molten frown—was in danger of pooling at their feet. James had been watching Malik from afar for years and he'd never seen anything but absolute glee on the guy's face. Until now.

"What other stuff?"

James shrugged. "Maybe flesh things out a bit. Or tighten them up. Fleshing and tightening. You know. Writer stuff." Then he lowered his eyes, as if finding a new and sudden interest in the atrocity to the history of storytelling that lay before him. And he said quietly, "Maybe we could do some work together on this."

When James finally dared to glance up, Malik was back to his old self. He grinned so widely his jaw might have been in danger of detaching fully from his skull.

"Look, I know what this is about. I've seen you looking at me in social studies. I'm flattered but... no." He looked James up and down, gave a little laugh, and said again, "Just. No."

James felt his face flush, getting hotter and hotter each time Malik shook his head. He fought the urge to tell Malik he was a phony. That he was a shitty writer. That he wouldn't sleep with Malik if it was the only way to get the Pulitzer Prize. He deserved to hear it all. He deserved to know that he wasn't the hot shot everyone thought he was. And, in his own vile words, if the bra fits....

*You can't be the first person in the history of, well, the world, to say 'no' to Malik.*

James had promised Ollie that he wouldn't say no to Malik. And he intended to keep that promise.

"Look, no hard feelings, right? Just tell me: is it any good? Is it going to get me into Iowa?"

James slid the twelve pages down on the table and hit Malik back with the same caliber smile that had wormed its way into the hearts of everyone at school. "What you did on the page here, Malik... I could never do that."

Malik pumped his fist. "That's what I thought."

James stood, only a little sad he wouldn't be there when Malik was finally told 'no,' but still glad to be the architect of the moment. "Send it to Iowa. Today."