

BILLY MERRELL

VANILLA

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## WHAT IT'S LIKE WITH HUNTER

He calls me Vanilla  
and presses his warm nose to my neck.  
I don't know what to do but laugh  
and let him.

He sniffs and smiles and tells me  
I smell like myself.  
Says it like an inside joke  
until it becomes one.

I feel him there, his touch  
settling against my skin.  
His gentle arms  
circling my shoulders.

It's as if a part of me has come loose,  
but instead of spinning off into space  
it turns back and stares at me  
so sweetly.

“Vanilla,” he says, and I press my smile to his.

He could say anything after,  
and it would seem a compliment.

Like a backward sigh,  
he draws me in. Holds his breath.

## EARLY DAYS

As easy as it feels being Vanilla's boyfriend,  
it was hard being friends at first.  
He'd come over to hang out  
and his eyes would scan my room,  
making their way around  
like a sweeping clock hand.  
And I couldn't help but tense up,  
wondering if he was smart enough  
to figure me out.

When our eyes met again,  
he'd change the subject.  
It was always video games  
he wanted to play, anything  
as long as he didn't have to  
look at me. And if I looked at him,  
he'd ask me, "What?"  
as if I wasn't allowed to look  
without a reason.

One afternoon, after a big test,  
when he'd been too busy  
to see me all week,  
I invited him over  
with something in mind.  
I said, "I'm tired of games."

We were almost teenagers,  
and as many other friends as I had,  
I'd chosen Vanilla to *really* know.  
"Let's talk," I said,  
but it turned into silence.  
"Let's dance, then," I said,  
putting on music.

"You mean, together?" he asked.  
"Yeah," I said. "Get up."

He looked at me like I was crazy.  
So I danced alone, holding back at first,  
then not caring.  
Vanilla tilted back and forth, still sitting,  
an embarrassed metronome.  
His eyes were locked  
on my dresser mirror.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said.  
I pulled him up onto his feet, said,  
"Then it's a good thing you have me!"  
My left hand took his right,  
my right took his left.  
It occurred to me then  
that I was definitely gay.  
And following that thought was the thought  
that I might be in love with my maybe best friend.

Vanilla sighed, then stood taller,  
becoming comfortable  
with my hands in his.  
"You make it look so easy," he said,  
watching my feet.  
"It is easy," I said. "It's the easiest  
once you let go and ride the music."

He turned to face the mirror,  
letting go of my hands.  
I told him not to be self-conscious.  
"I'm intimidated," he said,  
and I took his honesty as a good sign.  
"Don't be," I told him. "I dance in here all the time."  
"Practice makes perfect," he said,  
calling me perfect.

His back to me, I looked in the mirror to see him  
closing his eyes, committing to the dance.  
The diva was breaking it down, losing herself  
as if she didn't care about hitting the notes at all.  
But Vanilla was still wiggling, tense,  
trying to make a wave  
instead of riding one.

"I think it helps to pair some part of your body  
with some part of the song," I offered.  
I put my hands on his shoulders,  
pulsing the blips and bleeps into his bloodstream.  
Vanilla stomped his feet to the swelling beat.

"Yeah!" I encouraged, and he clapped.  
It was a bit off,  
but at least he was smiling.  
The song had a snare drum,  
and Vanilla rocked  
back and forth to its hiss,  
opening his eyes,

catching my appraisal  
in the reflection.

"You're not dancing?" he said,  
and I realized I'd stopped.

Without missing a beat, I threw my hands up,  
and matched my steps to his.  
I threw my head side to side as the vocals intensified,  
not knowing if he was watching,  
but hoping he was.

As the song wrapped up, Vanilla asked for another.  
So I skipped to an old favorite.  
I mouthed the opening lines, pointing straight at him,  
willing him to be comfortable.  
I figured if I made myself the bigger fool,

Vanilla might follow me all the way  
into oblivion.

"Nice," he said, copying my moves.  
The song was winding down,  
and I suddenly wished I'd played something longer.  
"See?" I said. "You're a natural."

"Thanks to you," he told me,  
dancing a little closer,  
boyfriend distance, not friend distance.  
I guess it startled me, because he apologized.  
"No," I told him. "It's okay."  
But we stayed apart as the song ended.

"Do you know other ways to dance?"  
Vanilla was looking through the songs on the playlist.  
"Like slow stuff?"  
I watched his finger scroll.  
"Pick a song and I'll happily dance to it," I said.

When he did, it was a crooner.  
I swayed like a sea, like underwater leaves,  
and Vanilla swam around me like a fish, making fun.  
When we were face-to-face,  
he took my hands again,  
my right in his left,  
his left in my right.  
"Like this," he said. "Teach me."

I put my hand on his waist, like I'd been taught,  
and moved his up to my shoulder. He looked down,  
his eyes tracing my arm to his waist.  
Then we both stared at our socks  
as we felt, together, for the beat.

## OUR SECRET LANGUAGE

“You’re burning up,” I said,  
the first time we danced,

because he was blushing so hard  
that I knew

what we were doing  
was worth being done.

I could barely name it,  
but it felt good,

nagging deep inside  
like a kinship.

I didn’t want to tell him  
I saw him blushing,

because if he stopped dancing,  
a part of me would stop

right on with it.  
So,

“You’re burning up,” I said.  
And to this day, if we’re at a dance

or walking  
or even standing still

and I want him suddenly  
to spin me,

I only need to say those words.