



image info.

The Circles They Swam In

M. Kaat Toy

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FOR LABOR DAY WEEKEND, GABBY—A thirty-five-year-old central LA librarian/caseworker for the dystopically entangled—is getting together with her childhood friends Lindsay and Lindsay’s older brother, Peter, in Santa Barbara, a Mediterranean-style city on the coast above Los Angeles with picturesque red tile roofs required on all the public buildings and a policy of no growth. Its motto could be taken from a bumper sticker Gabby saw on a black Jaguar there: “We don’t care. We don’t have to.”

From southern California they are rendezvousing at Gabby’s parents’ vacation apartment. Peter and Lindsay tried to get hotel rooms for the long weekend, Lindsay explained when she called, but their usual accommodations were reserved, so she thought it would be fun for the three of them to get together. It sounded more mannered and predictable than spray painting clothes for her barrio yard sale as Gabby had planned. Reluctantly, she told Lindsay where the key was.

WHEN GABBY ARRIVES AT THE APARTMENT late Friday afternoon, she finds a shiny black sports car in the garage. The plate reads “Lin Zs.” She thinks it is a Datsun Z, then sees it is a Porsche. Gabby’s older brother, Geoffrey, was driving a small silver Porsche when he was killed in a car wreck at eighteen. Gabby, ten, was in the apartment with her parents when the highway patrolman arrived and told them he was dead. She went outside, stood on the balcony and screamed, imagining driving a knife into her heart to stop it from beating, to cut off the feeling part of herself so the rest of her could live. Even now she can see blood on the concrete. It was that real.

Upstairs in the living room that has a view of the sea, she finds Lindsay sitting on the couch

reading *Santa Barbara Magazine*. On the cover a model who looks like Lindsay wears a brown leather bikini and cowboy hat.

Gabby remembers Lindsay in their eighth-grade graduation picture as an unremarkable adolescent with a bouffant pageboy tied with a pink satin bow. Now Lindsay is tall, slender, and with the help of artificial implants, perfectly built. Her husband, a surgeon fifteen years older than she, is home on call. Lindsay married him for his money, she freely admits. They are building a custom home in the San Gabriel foothills so Lindsay can keep her thoroughbreds next to the house. Along with money, she has acquired a winning smile—full-lipped but reserved—and a sparkle of success in her narrow green eyes Gabby doesn’t remember being there when Lindsay was a child.

Lindsay hops up and gives Gabby a hard nervous hug, actually trembling so her large diamond pendant earrings and even larger diamond ring shake in the slanting summer light. When they graduated high school, Gabby was considered the smart one, destined for success. Seeing Lindsay adorned with diamonds shocks her into realizing she has officially lost the race. She once had such a head start. Now she can’t even compete.

The newly redecorated apartment features pearlized beach shell accent colors: shades of pale gold, mauve, and blue. It is immaculate with all the warmth of a luxury hotel suite, which is what it was. Gabby looks toward the array of chips, cookies, and foil-wrapped candies from a gourmet food store on the kitchen counter.

“Do you want something to eat?” Lindsay asks. “I bought some stuff.” Lindsay has a speedy metabolism and can eat all day, anything she wants.

Gabby, who has struggled to not be fat since she was three, shakes her head.

They walk to the counter. Lindsay smashes

half an avocado into a bowl while Gabby touches the bright-colored wrappers of the chocolates, reads the labels, and sucks on one until it dissolves in her mouth.

“I thought you’d be getting a tan,” Gabby says.

“I never let the sun get on my face,” Lindsay answers, putting an organic white corn tortilla triangle loaded with pale green guacamole in her mouth.

Gabby nods, surprised at Lindsay’s independence in an era when people pay to lie in hot brightly lit coffins to bake the life out of their skins.

LINDSAY AND GABBY ARE DECIDING WHERE to eat when Peter arrives. Forty-three, tall, energetic, and strategically ingratiating, he has a high-powered publicity job at a major movie studio and parties with the stars. He went to art school in New York and began his career designing book covers. He sometimes sent the books to Lindsay. She didn’t read them, but she liked to show them off. Gabby asked to keep the ones she particularly admired.

In high school Peter and Gabby’s brother, Geoffrey, an artistic duo, dressed their preadolescent sisters in futuristic costumes of surreal colors and asymmetrical shapes, then arranged their bodies in abstract formations in public spaces. While Lindsay got distracted and wandered off, Gabby was fixed on pleasing them. Gabby’s painted image signaling “SWERVE” in a series of flag semaphore poses on The Bridge of Auspicious Improbabilities remains on a downtown Los Angeles freeway wall. She longs for her life to be otherworldly again.

At Lindsay’s evening wedding reception with its Triple Crown motif—fascinators and fedoras requested along with formal dress—Peter and Gabby—wearing paper headgear produced as

a children’s library art project—discussed the writers and illustrators they knew. They slow danced to the country western band, hoping everyone was too drunk to notice the way they rubbed against each other and looked into each other’s eyes. They made out in the parking lot, leaning against Gabby’s car until Peter’s parents came; then, Peter went with them.

Soon Peter moved back to Los Angeles. He took Gabby, who rarely had a boyfriend, to rogue spots like “The Subaltern” and “The Petting Zoo” where he knew the maître d’s and bouncers. Holding his hand, she followed close behind him. In his apartment decorated with framed book jackets and movie posters he had designed, they would begin kissing, unable to stop themselves.

In his bedroom they had sex beneath Geoffrey’s painting *Escapar del Sueño—Escape from the Dream*—of Los Angeles washed up like laundry on the beach. Peter would talk about what Geoffrey would say if he could see them lying together until Peter felt guilty and went to watch TV, leaving Gabby alone. She didn’t feel guilty. She didn’t believe in doing anything she felt guilty about. When she came out and hung on Peter, lonely and frustrated, desperate for attention, he didn’t want to touch her.

They decided not to do that anymore, but whenever they were thrown together—New Year’s Eve, Fourth of July—the attraction was still there. Peter was always seeing someone, but his relationships were increasingly short-lived, even though as he got older—his thin golden hair beginning to go, his skin beginning to sag, his face losing its shape—he wanted more and more to settle down. For Gabby, it was as if Geoffrey had returned, only more unavailable and indifferent to her pain.

“Come on. Let’s go,” Peter says, returning

from the master bedroom where Gabby had him put his suitcase.

Peter’s best friend from art school who now lives in Santa Barbara—Rob—and their dates are waiting at the bar in a hotel down the street, he explains.

Gabby and Lindsay look at each other. This doesn’t sound like much of a treat for them, Gabby thinks.

She needs to brush her teeth and put some color on her face. “I have to go use my products,” she says, thinking she’s being terribly witty, thinking products are what this weekend is about, but Peter and Lindsay are talking and don’t respond.

AS THEY CRUISE THE BAR—PETER LEADING, Lindsay in gold lamé hip-huggers, Gabby in her librarian slacks and blouse—Gabby checks out the men. The one she thinks most attractive—silver-blond crewcut, metal blue eyes, a fair English face, a wide brutish chest—is Rob.

Rob sits at a table with a black-haired woman in a black leather jacket on his lap, a petite hard-looking blonde across from them. They are all over forty, beginning to pucker toward the center and go limp at the edges. Gabby is surprised they dare go out, surprised the waiter serves them, it being Santa Barbara and all.

Peter orders and pays for a round of drinks. Lindsay sits by Peter and his blonde date and tries to participate in the conversation. They talk about movies. That is what they have in common. They all love movies, love keeping up with the gossip, which is one reason they like being around Peter.

Gabby sits on the edge and doesn’t try to keep up. She watches Rob as he orders a plate of steamed asparagus. He offers everyone a piece. She smiles and shakes her head. No one takes one, so he eats them

himself. Something is wrong with him, she thinks. There’s something wrong in his life or he wouldn’t be sucking down a plate of steamed asparagus at a bar; then he paws at and kisses his date.

When the two couples get up to dance, Lindsay and Gabby excuse themselves. They are back at the apartment within an hour of leaving it, still wondering where to eat. They decide there’s no point in including Peter in their plans for the weekend. Peter and Rob have arranged to play golf all day Saturday.

LINDSAY IS ASLEEP IN THE GUEST BEDROOM, and Gabby is lying on the hide-a-bed in the living room reading when Peter comes in. She puts down her book as he sits in a chair near the foot of the mattress and tells her about his evening.

“This dating thing is costing me a fortune,” he complains. After buying drinks for all of them, he bought dinner. In the morning he’s taking Rob and the two women for brunch.

She nods sympathetically. He feels taken advantage of. She understands.

“So what’s Rob’s story?” she asks.

“Oh, jeez.” He shakes his head.

Rob is married to a wonderful woman. They own an interior design business and have two teenage sons. Two years ago Rob met another woman. She was married with two kids. They carried on a long-distance relationship in Palm Springs. At the end of the most romantic weekend of their lives, they decided to give up everything and be together.

When Rob got home he had a phone call from the woman’s husband. She was killed in a traffic accident. That night Rob disappeared. His wife kept calling Peter to find Rob. At the end of six days Rob showed up. That was a year ago. Now he lives in a rooming house and

sleeps on a mattress on the floor. He lost his license for driving under the influence. He can't decide whether to stay married or get divorced.

"That explains it," she says.

"Explains what?"

"Explains why he isn't quite all there. Haven't you noticed?"

He shrugs. "No. I guess I'm used to it."

Gabby's not surprised. Peter survives by ignoring many things.

"So that's why you wanted to come here for the weekend," she says.

"Yeah. I miss him. I used to stay with him and his wife all the time. Now I can't even talk to her because all she wants to do is talk about him."

He stands up, hanging over the bed like an angel waiting to be called upon or sent back.

"I thought you'd be out all night," she says as he comes toward her. She opens her arms and he slips inside them. She holds her head to his chest and moves her hands inside the back of his shirt, his skin as familiar to her as her own. They kiss.

"I'm not going to do this," he says, stroking the back of her neck.

"Neither am I." She doesn't want the rejection that comes after she has sex with him. Besides, Lindsay's asleep in the next room. It wouldn't take much for her to come out and wonder what's going on.

They hold each other, she rubbing his back; then, he gets up and goes to bed. She lies awake, feeling desire roll through her like the waves surging in and out on the dark empty shore.

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON GABBY accompanies Lindsay—wearing a sequin-studded rose-colored satin shirt from her line of cowgirl clothing—on what Lindsay calls a "Celebration of Avarice" house and

garden tour to raise money for the indigent. While Lindsay discusses the black granite kitchen countertops with the homeowner who removed them at a bargain from a home he foreclosed, Gabby thinks of the similar jet slab of finality over Geoffrey's grave. On her eighteenth birthday, without consulting their parents, she paid for his favorite word, "Mutability," to be carved above his name and dates.

For dinner Peter and Rob take Lindsay and Gabby to a sports bar. Over the televised cacophony of metal thunder sheets employed by a war-painted football crowd commemorating another season of domesticated violence, Lindsay enumerates her rescues of her four Jack Russell terriers.

Rob comments, "When I was gone so much, my wife and kids adopted a little dog. It barked every time I tried to pet it. It didn't matter what I did, that little dog didn't like me," and Gabby feels the disparateness of what it must have been like for him in his own home.

He turns to her. "Have you ever been married?"

"No," she responds, dismissing this potential commonality. "It never seemed like a viable plan."

In the bathroom, Lindsay says go for him.

RETURNING TO THE APARTMENT IN THE BACK seat of Peter's car, Gabby listens to Rob's call from his sixteen-year-old ADHD son. Home alone, he needs a ride to a party. Rob can't help him.

Putting his phone away, Rob explains to Gabby he used to help his sons with their homework at night and drive them to school in the morning. Now he reads self-help books at night and breakfasts with a gang of guys at a diner.

She tells him that at her library the children

help their parents who don't speak English, don't read and write, or don't know how to use computers. Often the teenagers work to support their families or take care of chronically ill relatives. One young man she helped apply for college had to drop out to care for his sister with sickle cell anemia while their mother was in the hospital.

"They don't expect to have parents who can help them," she says.

Rob takes her hand as he turns toward his window.

Eventually she stands on the apartment balcony with him. Peter and Lindsay are in their bedrooms sleeping. Rob leans back against the railing and she leans into him, his legs spread out, hers inside his, so as she stands on her tiptoes she can feel a glow where her pubic bone rubs against him. Her ears hum. The stars are like glitter sprinkled by a child on black paper. Below them a Hispanic family comes from a wedding reception dressed in black tuxes and bright party dresses, still bubbling with festivity. Palm leaves rustle and sway in a cool breeze.

"This is paradise," he says. "I can't believe you don't come here all the time."

She shakes her head, afraid he'll lose interest if she explains why she doesn't. They kiss, her body melting into his. She wants to pretend they are in paradise. She has not been there for a long time.

Finally, she pulls back and tells him she knows his story, knows what it is to lose the person you love since she lost her big brother when she was ten. She asks him where he went when he disappeared. He doesn't answer. She pictures him lying in a cave like Jesus Christ, a stone rolled across the entrance, his ghost rising to resume his responsibilities as her ghost has carried on for her.

"When my brother died, there was no one I

could talk to," she says. "No one my age had lost anyone."

"I didn't know it could happen until I was over forty," he admits.

"It must be hard when you're that old." She can feel the shock of it.

"And it must be hard when you're that young," he replies with more compassion than she has ever gotten. She can see the concern on his face, hear it in his voice, and for a moment they are human again. What happened to them mattered. Their eyes cut through each other until their shells lay splintered around them like the husks of insects, and they have to look away.

He takes her hand as they go inside to lie on the hide-a-bed. She feels herself vibrating outside her body as her tongue touches the thin skin above his collarbone, as her fingers skim up and down his thigh, as her lips move over the blue veins of his groin. It is a miracle to her that she has charmed him. He wants to be with her more than he wants to be by himself or with someone else. And unlike her brother, he is not dead. Despite how fragile he is, he is alive. Instead of making love, they hold each other, hearts pressed together, as people after a tragedy do.

Later, when they arrive at his rooming house, he wants to know when he can see her again, as if they can keep the magic up, as if the complicated fabric now woven between them won't unravel into the knots of everyday life.

She looks at his bright aristocratic face, thinks of the generations of good breeding behind it, and doesn't answer. He has a whole life here: the date from two nights before, his wife, his sons, his business. How can he know what this means to her? He can't. And after a few more times, she'll lose interest in him. It always happens. No one can fill her emptiness or divert her as her brother did. ❖