



## SLQ Young Writers Award 2013 – Winner

### *Lingerie*

by Kahli Scott

You tell one person, 'That girl collects boys like she collects bras in different shades of purple.' You share a laugh and it feels good, really good, to have someone laugh at a joke you made. But as the joke wafts around the school like the sickly smell of wattle on a windy day, you feel your stomach twist, and you remember when you used to be friends, you and the girl who collects boys like she collects bras in different shades of purple.

You saw them once, spilling out of the top drawer of her chipped white dresser—lilac lace, indigo cotton, mulberry satin and more. You waited until she had gone to brush her teeth and then you picked them up with the tips of your fingers, pressed the padded cups to see the material spring back, unsnapped the removable strap from one just so you could have a direct effect on the collection.

Your own body was just starting to be beautiful, back then at age fourteen, but you didn't see that because you only wanted things that other people had. You wanted a collection of bras in different shades of purple and a portfolio of boys to present them to. You wanted real jewelry made of cloudy silver and dusty gemstones handed down from a grandmother you knew only from a sepia photograph. You wanted a soft giggle instead of a sharp laugh. You wanted a distant memory of growing up in a cold place where darkness fell in the early afternoon and the summers brought a midnight sun. Other girls were so interesting. You hated most of them for it.

When she returned from brushing her teeth you were already hiding under the covers. You didn't want her to see your body. Hers wasn't perfect either—she bought padded bras for a reason and the cheeks of her bottom, peeking out from a pair of tiny cotton shorts, were mottled and a little too soft. But she stuck them both out anyway and walked like a nymph, so the boys found her completely perfect. You listened as she told you about the teacher's son she had kissed down by the creek after he found a tick crawling in her hair, and about the summer job at the farm produce store she worked every year. 'I kind of love getting dirty at work,' she confessed to you, and you thought, 'Of course you do.'

She tried to tell you your skin was lovely as she opened a beauty magazine—not the glossy seven dollar kind from the newsagent that all the other girls read, but the thick papery imported kind with long articles and models that looked like extraterrestrials. She pointed to one of the models, a gangly creature from a distant moon, and said, 'I think you look like her!' You pulled your blanket up to your chin and whispered, 'But she's ugly.' This made her laugh and laugh and she told you you were *crazy* for thinking that. You weren't crazy, though. You'd have been more interesting if you were.

After she shut off the lamp, you stared up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on her ceiling and bet yourself that she knew nothing practical about astronomy. Your eyes were just starting to close when she asked, in a whisper, if there were any boys you were currently interested in. It bothered you that she wanted your secrets. Didn't she already have enough?

'There's more to life than boys, you know,' you snapped.

You felt her rustle beside you, wrapping her arms around her chest.

'Yes,' she agreed. 'But they are wonderful, aren't they?'

That, three years later, would come to be known as her worst crime.

'She does!' your classmates laughed when they heard what you had said. 'She *does* collect boys like she collects bras in different shades of purple!'

'How many do you think it is now?'

‘You definitely can’t count it on your fingers. Maybe not even your toes.’

‘My Mum warned me about her, you know. But it’s my *brother* she should be warning.’

‘She’s not even that pretty.’

‘I know. Hasn’t anyone told her purple doesn’t match her skin tone anyway?’

You stopped being friends when you were fifteen. There wasn’t any great reason for it. All the social circles got shuffled that year like a deck of cards, though the cards must have been slightly wet because a lot of the obvious combinations stuck together. She stayed with the bold girls who tanned their legs on the oval at lunchtime and you drifted toward the safe girls with respectable grades and well-organised iPods and tightly-tied shoelaces. Your contact with her reduced to the odd occasion when you would end up sitting near her in class and catch a wink of purple as she leant down to pick up a dropped pen.

When you got your first boyfriend, you deliberately sat right next to her in Biology, wanting to tell her, wanting to ask her the right way to do these things. But no, you realised, as the teacher stumbled over the word ‘organism’ and the class froze. No, you didn’t want to be like her. You wanted to be better.

You thought about her when that boyfriend broke up with you. You lay under the covers on a hot hot night, clammy and crying, hating yourself. ‘There’s more to life than boys, you know,’ you had told her two years earlier. But yes, they were wonderful; she had been right. They were wonderful and vicious. She had never mentioned that part. She had never mentioned the feeling of someone else’s hand inside your chest, digging their fingernails in. Maybe that ache was one thing, finally, that you had and she didn’t. The best girls have their hearts broken, you decided, and the worst girls break them.

At the school formal, you finally got to see one of them in the flesh—her lucky date, an olive-skinned boy from *a different continent*. He wore a silk lavender tie to match her dress, which was Grecian style with a strip of gold braid around the middle. She looked perfect, but you watched him instead. He had clever eyes that saw many things at once—the décor, the

DJ, the bored faculty, the table settings...everything but other girls. You heard him make a wry joke to one of the other dates and you hated hated *hated* that he wasn't stupid.

But a month later, you hear that he's back across the ocean and a new boyfriend is on the scene. And that's when it happens. You tell one person, 'That girl collects boys like she collects bras in different shades of purple.' It only feels good for a few minutes. Then you find yourself wishing you could reel your words back in like you can with a fishing rod, unhook the slimy bait and put it back in your bucket, leaving the bright-scaled fish free to the sea, free to do whatever the hell they want.

At a big winter backyard party that weekend, she comes to find you. You're wearing an enormous jumper, drinking warm wine and starting to feel like a lumpy cloud. When she corners you by the back fence, you wish you could just float away.

Her breath smells sharp and sweet; fruits and vodka. You haven't been this close to her face for years and you notice that she's wearing very little make-up—just a light berry lipstick that matches her breath and the shade under her eyes and probably one of her bras. You watch her lips as she says, 'Let me tell you something about the boys I collect.'

If only you could just float away.

'There have been eleven,' she continues. 'Eleven boys, since I was thirteen. And they all taught me something. I know about tennis, motorbikes, Lithuanian food, herpetology—that's the study of reptiles—Jason Statham movies, sex, World War Two, post-hard-core music, ADHD, AFL, NASA, FHM, Ireland, marijuana, SEX, Marc Jacobs, depression, dairy farming, King Henry VIII, dinosaurs and yoga. I know how to change a tire and walk away when someone's making me upset. I know that I don't really look ugly in the mornings.'

You raise your cup to your lips and you drink and drink and drink until your throat burns and you cough on her bare feet.

'I know I don't need a boy to be happy. I know I don't need to hate boys to be happy. I know there will always be people who don't want me to be happy.'

She leans against the fence, but she's not drunk, you realise. She's tired and out of breath and disappointed. Not disappointed in herself, like you wanted to believe. Disappointed in you.

'I'm sorry,' you say, as you feel a burp rising up your throat. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry.'

You let the burp out.

She leans over double. She's suddenly laughing. You can see down her loose blouse to her cleavage and the crisp top of a white bra. Clean white cotton, unpadded. Your breasts are much bigger than hers, you realise. It doesn't matter, you realise.

'You're excused,' she says as she straightens up.

Later, when you're throwing up in the laundry sink, it's her and her long-legged friend who hold your hair back and feed you chewy peppermints. The bass of the music from the other room feels like it's inside you and it's hot and it stings and you want it out. She wets her hand and rubs it over your forehead, singing along to the thumping chorus.

'It's okay,' she tells you. 'We've all been there.'

The girl who collects boys like she collects bras in different shades of purple waits outside with you until your Mum comes to pick you up. You sit in the gutter of the dark cul-de-sac and look up at the starless sky, veiled by cloud cover and city fog. The clouds float on to better things but they must miss out on an awful lot. Your body feels heavy but your chest feels light.

You're aware of a boy with dimples like knife points smoking a cigarette by the mailbox. He seems to be counting the seconds until you're gone so that he can be alone with her. But it's okay—he's probably wonderful. She knows how to walk away when she's upset. She knows how to be happy. You're getting closer.