Thank You For Sharing

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Some of the thematic content in *Thank You for Sharing* contains discussions of sexual assault and the death of a parent; neither event occurs on the page. For more information, please visit the author's website.

To Patrick. I love you so big.

Chapter 1

"Cohen-Jackson, huh? That's quite the odd combo."

When Liyah looks up, her airplane seatmate is glancing at her full name in script on the cover of her planner before making eye contact. There's a small smile playing at his lips, as if he finds her surname amusing. This reaction is not new to her, but she is simply Not In The Mood.

Liyah nearly missed her flight this morning. She managed to leave for the airport within a reasonable amount of time, an impressive feat for someone raised at the intersection of the Jewish Standard and Colored People time zones, but the fog had other plans. Karl (Neen informed her that the fog in San Francisco has a *name*) usually burns off around mid-morning but was thicker and slower to dissipate today. So she, Neen, and Ringo Starr (her best friend's beloved VW Beetle convertible also has a name) found themselves trapped behind a seven-car pileup, Neen anxiously sticking their head out the window every forty-five seconds to assess the nonexistent movement of traffic.

At the departures' lane, Neen spared Liyah their usual teary goodbye speech. Instead, they wordlessly offered Liyah their right ear, which she met halfway, bumping together the matching star studs in their earlobes. Such had been the pair's secret handshake since a drunken evening in Alien Piercing & Tattoo nearly seven years

prior. Liyah wound up sprinting to her gate and, suffice it to say, she skipped out on the bagel she'd planned to purchase before boarding.

She'd heaved a sigh of relief (she was not out of breath; her body just hated running) when she arrived at her assigned seat and found that her neighbor was someone her age. With her luck, she'd pictured a shrieking toddler or, God forbid, a chatty old man. She thought his presence meant a few hours of peace as she attempted to subsist off a free bag of pretzel mix and ginger ale.

Apparently, she thought wrong.

She gives him a long look, eyes skating over his high cheekbones, the slight bend in the bridge of his nose, burnt honey-colored almond eyes. *He's white and East Asian. Korean*, she guesses, before mentally kicking herself for playing ethnicity detective. She realizes he's just done the same to her, and mentally kicks herself yet again for feeling guilty. Her metaphorical shins are starting to bruise.

Where is he from? Someplace that would give him enough cultural literacy to spot a truth in her last name (Cohen being decidedly Jewish, Jackson being decidedly not) but not enough to remain unfazed or to know he should stifle his shock. Or, at the very least, not to say something to the effect of, "You're quite obviously Black *and* apparently Jewish? How strange!" Never mind that a man his age has probably committed the bulk of Drake's discography to memory.

She checks her watch. They're not due to land at O'Hare for another hour and fifteen minutes. *Maybe he grew up in the Bay Area. Maybe he went to a high school that was majority East Asian where nobody said a damn thing about his name or his parents or so much as looked at him sideways.*

A pang of jealousy accompanies the thought. Regardless, he of all people should know better.

"What an original comment," Liyah starts, voice saccharine. She pointedly looks down at the redwood tree sticker on his laptop before meeting his eyes. "Stanford must be proud to have such an observant alumnus."

The man's smile abruptly falls, and he makes a waving motion with his hands as if to erase his words as he opens his mouth. Liyah, still Not In The Mood, declines his attempt to backtrack.

She purses her lips. "Tell me, then, what is the right way to be biracial? You're normal, but everybody else is a total freak?" He looks down at his hands, stunned. Liyah's lips stretch into a smug smile, pleased that she's hit her mark.

"That's not—" He sighs strongly enough to sag both shoulders, apparently thinking better of what he was about to say. "I'm sorry," he mutters, cheeks deeply flushed.

Liyah nods curtly and slips her planner back into her tote bag. She can no longer remember why she withdrew it in the first place. She turns away from him, the warmth of her anger creeping up her neck. As the minutes pass, her heartbeat slows, and her outburst settles around them. The anger shifts toward shame. She pulls up the shade at the window and looks out. The plane is suspended in a soup of fog, thick and white, all depth and dimension indiscernible. She closes her eyes and imagines herself floating out there, disembodied from her grumbling stomach.

This is so like her. Bored out of her goddamn mind (yet somehow still incomprehensibly busy) at work, she spent the last three weeks counting down the seconds until she could leave for Fourth of July weekend. She isn't even off

the flight home, and she's already miserable again. Must be a new record.

Maybe she should say something. Not because she's in the wrong (she isn't, although her general grumpiness hasn't helped) but because the discomfort in the air is bordering on suffocating. She ventures her gaze over to him. His focus is buried in a *GQ* magazine, a gentle crease formed at his brow. His jaw (sharp, freshly shaven) clenches and releases as he turns the page. The movement causes Liyah's eyes to trail down his arms toward his hands. She spies a bit of ink peeking out from under his rolled sleeves. His fingers are long and sturdy, the littlest one on his left hand adorned with a silver ring.

She averts her eyes before he catches her staring. He's undeniably good-looking. If only he'd waited until they were deplaning to make an asinine comment, she might've been able to spend this final hour of her prison sentence appreciating the way his tongue swipes over his bottom lip as he reads instead of contemplating making use of one of the four emergency exits.

Maybe she should nap. The coffee and ginger ale sloshing in her stomach disagree. At this point, she's not sure whether her need for food or fresh air will win out upon landing. It's quite possible she'll take a later shuttle to economy parking just to pay two dollars more than she should for a caprese sandwich.

She nearly shudders at the thought. Something feels so intrinsically wrong with buying food on the way out of the airport. No, she'll stick it out, and hope her stomach doesn't autocannibalize before she makes it to her apartment.

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Context, Daniel. Context.

He wants to stick his head in one of the overhead bins and shut it. Repeatedly. The second she narrowed her eyes, the whites around her black irises all but disappearing, he realized his mistake. Had they been several other places—a synagogue for the High Holidays, say, or a conference where his neck would be adorned with a name tag reading DANIEL ROSENBERG in bold lettering—she would have at least had a chance to take his attempt at flirting for what it was. As is, he came off as a hypocritical jackass. Which is leagues below a regular jackass.

Staring down at the *GQ* issue he swiped from his college roommate this morning, he tries desperately to ignore the way her eyes periodically bore holes in the side of his head. Momentarily, he wishes he were religious enough to be wearing a yarmulke and tzitzit on this flight. Maybe even some awkwardly straight payes instead of his neatly trimmed sideburns. The desire is fleeting. He'd scarfed down a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich immediately after takeoff and fully intends a repeat performance at a neighborhood café this evening—for Daniel, unkosher breakfast sandwiches are not reserved for any particular time of day.

He had been looking for a conversation starter since the moment he shuffled into the aisle to let her take her seat. Her mass of long, tightly wound curls was pinned back on the side closest to him, revealing her delicate nose and double piercings in her earlobe that seemed to match the set of moles situated high on her cheek. Once seated, she'd looked up at him through dark eyelashes and offered a small smile before turning to look out the window. He was no longer annoyed by the small plane;

the lower ceilings also meant two-person rows, and he got his precious aisle seat with no third party between them.

He's not enough of a lech to know how to go about flirting with a random woman on an airplane, so when she pulled out the notebook, his heart hammered in his chest. He couldn't believe his luck: Jews of color aren't exactly commonplace where he grew up—him, his mother, and his sister being the only ones at his shul in Madison—and there is no non-Jew on the planet with the last name Cohen. Here was a way to establish camaraderie presented on a silver platter, or rather embossed on a leather notebook. He could maybe even find an excuse to see her again.

Now, his luck has run out. He's grateful that he at least shoved his foot in his mouth closer to landing than takeoff. He considers introducing himself—first and last name—or just explaining bluntly that he's a Korean Jew and is excited to have a kindred spirit. That might have worked as an immediate follow-up to his gaffe, but when she looked at him the way his cat, Sweet Potato, stares at a bug she plans to devour, he chickened out. Now, he's waited about thirty minutes too long, and he resigns himself to never entering her number into his phone.

It's probably better this way. Daniel's love life has been dormant for so long that it might be dead. Besides, she might live in San Francisco. He was only in town for the long weekend, successful in his single-minded mission to board his Sunday flight home thoroughly hungover and equally sick of his college suitemates. Aliyah's number would likely never do more than burn a hole in his contacts list. He feels a little odd thinking her name, since she hadn't offered it, but he is unlikely to forget it anytime soon.

When he no longer feels the heat of her gaze—or deathly glare, really—on the side of his face, Daniel risks a glance. Her eyes are closed, eyelashes nearly grazing the moles on her cheek.

Wait, he thinks, panic rising as a scratchy lump in his throat, *I've seen those before.*

No, it couldn't be. Her name was Leah.

He blinks slowly, swallows, feels his blood thicken. Her name was *Liyah*, as in Aliyah. Which means he's officially gone from mildly idiotic to perhaps the unluckiest moron alive. All those years of summer camp, he never saw her name written out.

His memory of her, age thirteen, crystallizes: features softer and less defined, hair in cornrows that reached her collarbone, face lit only by a camping lantern Daniel's father packed him. That look of total trust in her dark eyes. Which morphed into naked contempt the very next day.

She doesn't recognize him, he's sure of it. A touch of insult sinks his stomach. He's a good six inches taller than he had been, and the braces on his teeth and baby fat in his cheeks are long gone, but is he really that forgettable? Then again, every time she looks at him, he gets the sense that it's more about shooting daggers than cataloging his features.

The universe must be conspiring against him. There's no other explanation. Accidentally making a beautiful girl hate you once is one thing—but twice, a decade and a half apart? He's cursed.

A flight attendant stops at their row, offering a chance to give up their trash. Daniel holds his breath as Liyah awkwardly reaches over him to deposit her can-pretzel-bag-cup sandwich into the extended plastic bag. When

she pulls back, her eyes flit across him, irritation plain as ever. But this time, they snag, widening slightly before she whips her head toward the window.

Widening, he decides, in recognition.

Liyah says nothing. But the soft *tap, tap, tap* of her forehead against the windowpane tells Daniel all he needs to know.

Mercifully, the plane lands, the FASTEN SEAT BELT light dinging off a few minutes later. He is a little too quick to his feet, half stumbling out into the aisle, but the past four hours of sitting in a cramped airplane row have rendered his knees nearly as sore as his ego. He opens the overhead bin and slings the strap of his duffel bag over his chest, rushing to make room for Liyah to stretch her legs while the first half of the airplane empties.

She leans up on her tiptoes to get to her small roller suitcase. He tries not to let his gaze linger on the bit of midriff her sweatshirt exposes as it lifts over her olive-green leggings. The suitcase appears to have shifted to the back of the bin, and she grapples with the wheels as she tries to pull it out.

Daniel steps forward and pulls it down for her with ease, depressing the button to raise the handlebar before passing it off to her. He smiles sheepishly, hoping that the convenience of his height has redeemed him slightly.

"I could have gotten it, Rosenberg," she says, making eye contact with him for the first time in the better part of an hour, her murderous look only intensified.

His stomach, along with his smile, plummets. Daniel can almost hear the cartoon whistle and crash as it lands somewhere near his lower intestine. There were three Daniels in their cohort at camp—each mononymously known as Rosenberg, Schwartz, and Gross. But Liyah

had always called him by his first name. Like if *she* said "Daniel," any listener should know prima facie that she was talking about him. On anybody else's lips, "Rosenberg" is a term of familiarity, even endearment. On hers, it means *I know exactly who you are, and you are nothing to me.* Maybe it was better when she didn't remember him. "Liyah—"

"Thank you," she mutters—compulsively, it seems, because she frowns around the words like they're bitter in her mouth. Daniel decides not to risk speaking and nods. The wave of moving passengers reaches them, and she turns to walk away without a second glance.

Daniel waits, motioning for the man in the row across from him to move first. A buffer between them, he finally exits this wretched flight.

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"Neen!" Liyah shouts, elongating the single syllable as she swipes to answer the FaceTime. She bursts with excitement and relief at the sight of them on the patio of their favorite café, almost (but not quite, make no mistake) forgetting about her empty stomach. A cheese quesadilla sizzles in her cast-iron pan, and she props her phone against her kitchen utensils jar so she can tend to it with both hands.

"C-J," they croon back, a clinking sound accompanying the turn of their head. Today, Neen wears hollow plugs in their quarter-inch gauges, hoop earrings threaded through the holes. "I hadn't heard from you since your *I didn't have time to eat before boarding* text. Wanted to make sure you were still alive."

"I am, but barely." Liyah slides the quesadilla onto a plate, nearly moaning at the smell of butter and melted

cheese as she lifts it toward her lips to blow it cool. She taps gingerly with an exploratory finger, then hurriedly sinks her teeth into the crisp tortilla, feeling the warm cheese ooze between her lips. This time, she actually moans.

Neen peers over their vintage 1970s sunglasses at the screen, letting out a laugh. "I don't think I've ever gotten that noise out of someone who was fully clothed."

Liyah goes bug-eyed in mock offense, unable to keep from smiling around her half-full mouth. "Do you have any idea how long four hours feels on an empty stomach? With dead headphones, no less. I was ready to keel over." She stops her tirade to take another bite, which she only mostly chews before swallowing.

"The flight was that bad, huh?"

Liyah blinks her eyes open before she even realizes she closed them. She starts to wonder what gave her away, but she stops herself. Their friendship is counted in decades, plural, despite neither of them having hit thirty. What they have isn't quite telepathy, but it's about as close as it gets. "I don't even know where to start. The person sitting next to me"—she heaves a sigh—"saw my name on something and, y'know, expressed surprise." She catches Neen's wince. She's grown now, so she usually handles it better, but it's always been a bit of a sore spot. "I went off on him, and he was completely terrified. And then I calmed down and spent like thirty minutes wondering if it was overkill. Maybe I was just a bit hangry, it was harmless and came off the wrong way, but then—"

"You? Hangry? Never," Neen interrupts, giggling in response to Liyah's glare.

"As I was saying, I spent the rest of the flight feeling supremely guilty. And hungry—"

"You mentioned that."

Liyah rolls her eyes. "Yes, well. We've established that it's a determining factor of my mood."

"If you're so sure he meant no wrong, why'd it nettle you so much? I'm having trouble imagining that you were enjoying friendly banter up until this point, your extenuating circumstances and all." They pause, lowering their sunglasses and arching a brow as if scanning Liyah's face through the phone. "Ah, he was cute!"

"NO!" Liyah is treated to Neen's expert side-eye. "Well, I mean, yes, but no. That's not why. He was mixed, so he should've known it was a dumb thing to say." Neen is clearly still incredulous. "This isn't even the good part of the story! So, I'm feeling guilty, hungry, etcetera, and then I get this niggling feeling. And maybe it's the way he looked at me, but I'm like *I know this guy from somewhere.*" She takes a deep breath, followed by another bite of quesadilla.

"And?" Neen demands.

Liyah swallows. "And I realized that it was Daniel Rosenberg."

Neen's already round doe eyes widen. When the initial wave of shock rolls over them, they laugh. "Wow, he's Jewish! You must have really done a number on him if he didn't introduce himself right away. I mean, just how hungry…" As Neen trails off, their eyes practically bulge out of their head. "Wait. *Thee* Daniel Rosenberg? Of Jewish sleepaway camp fame?"

"The very one," Liyah affirms tightly.

"Oh, you *are* angry. I thought this"—they circle their hand, palm open, at her—"might have been some sort of sexual frustration. Do you want me to fly to Chicago and punch him for you? I'll do it. He's been on my shit list for fourteen years."

"I don't need you getting an assault charge over something that happened in middle school." Neen gives her a look like *I think we know it's more than that* mixed with *you've done it for me.* Which, to be fair, it is, and she has. But when you're twelve and precocious, you can talk your way out of a suspension. She's not sure her Student of the Month record would help her post their bail. "Besides"—Liyah takes another bite, so she doesn't have to say her next words with any real conviction—"we barely remember each other."

They bring one hand to their chest. "I mean this with my whole heart, C-J: you're a moron. You remember each other perfectly well, or he wouldn't have been so terrified, and you wouldn't have gotten so worked up."

"I am not worked up," she says, and watches Neen's eyes slide to about where her shoulders should be on their screen. Liyah releases them, hoping it passes as a shrug. "And it took me a long time to recognize him. When we were thirteen, he was less… I don't know. He has a tattoo and went to Stanford, apparently."

"Wait, what?" Neen says, jostling the phone as they sit up so straight Liyah thinks they'll shoot out of their chair. "What was the tattoo?"

"I couldn't tell, honestly. It was just the ends of it on his forearm, a bunch of abstract lines, maybe."

They shake their head. "Tentacles. They're jellyfish tentacles. C-J, I *met* him!"

Liyah stops mid-chew. "When? How? Why do you know that?"

"You would, too, if you loved me enough to take off work to get here in time for the pool party!"

"A First of July party is not a real thing, Neen. It did not warrant using my precious time off."

"It is! It definitely is, because Dan—you know, Daniel Tran, my work husband, total lightweight—had his roommate from Stanford staying with him. And the roommate was a half-Asian guy with a jellyfish tattoo who he called Rosenberg. Which would make sense since his name is also Daniel. Because I *met Daniel Rosenberg*." They bring their phone closer to their face, brow furrowing as though searching for something. "C-J, no wonder you didn't recognize him at first. That man did not grow up to be cute. He is *sexy*."

Liyah swallows thickly. She described him with that exact word in a diary that probably still exists in her parents' attic somewhere. And that was when he was barely her height and had braces with rubber bands that required removal before eating and a mop of wavy hair he had no idea what to do with.

"It's him!" Neen says, just as Liyah's phone pings with a screenshot of Daniel Tran's Instagram post. Neen stands in the center of the photo, head thrown back in laughter, the russet tones in their deep brown skin set aglow by the sun. To their left is Dan, red-faced and grinning, jet-black hair tucked behind his ears. And on their right is Daniel Rosenberg, his smile slightly crooked and bright, his full lips a muted pink. Just as Liyah remembers it. He's shirtless, his arm slung around Neen's shoulders, his tattoo on full display. The body of the jellyfish starts where his right shoulder meets his chest, the opening of the bowl shape rippling over his deltoid muscle as if in mid-swim. Its ruffled arms wrap around his bicep, thinner tentacles cascading around them, their ends reaching his forearms. The strokes of ink tangle with his veins, and she is forced to notice the lean muscle beneath his skin. His shape looks

earned rather than worked for, like he's an athlete and not a gym rat.

"He's definitely… tall," she says.

"Tall? That's how you'd describe him?" Neen's jaw hangs slightly ajar. Liyah nods, stubborn. "Fine. But I'm sure he knew it was you immediately. You were a hot child."

"Okay, one: that is an incredibly weird thing to say. And two: it's not even true. He didn't say a word about it. Doesn't exactly seem like the memory is keeping him up at night." Probably because it never meant anything to him in the first place, and we tend to do better at remembering those who've wronged us than those who we've wronged. The thought makes her feel stomach-churningly silly. Here she is, fingernails still hooked into anger at someone to whom she is barely a footnote. Like always.

Neen blows a raspberry. "Tall. I can't believe you said he's tall. He's *fine*, C-J. I'm talking speeding-ticket-in-construction-zone fine."

"Newfound attraction to men?"

"Never. I was under the impression that you had one, though. Did you damage it in the wash?" Neen laughs at their own joke. Liyah rolls her eyes. "Why don't I get his number from Dan? Thirty more minutes in his presence and I bet you'll be having hate sex in the nearest bathroom."

"*What?*" Liyah sputters.

"It's really the perfect plan," they continue. "Get your rocks off and avenge your thirteen-year-old self! Unless he violates some part of your dating rulebook that I can't manage to keep track of?"

Liyah shakes her head. "The rules are so I can *avoid* dating."

"Okay, and? It doesn't get more casual than hooking up with an insanely hot person you dislike."

"Ha ha. I don't want to talk about this anymore." Neen seems to sense that Liyah means it, so they move on to complaining about their new manager at their very West Coast tech company who doesn't even understand the product they're selling.

Liyah sits on the couch with the remainder of her quesadilla as she listens, feeling her blood sugar slowly climb back to a healthy level. She sighs. This time yesterday, she was cuddled up to her best friend on a picnic blanket in the middle of Mission Dolores Park, and it was the best she'd felt in weeks. There, she could almost pretend that she's satisfied spending eight hours a day making minor updates to old exhibitions that barely require her bachelor's degree. That her last friends-with-benefits situation didn't implode the second the girl sent a text beginning with *I'm v drunk and I've been thinking about us.* That Neen was probably only bothering her about every cute person who walked past them (and now, Daniel Rosenberg) because she shut down when they tried to talk to her about said implosion. None of that mattered when her favorite person in the world was wrapped around her and the sun was warming her face. But now, she's home. And as comfortable as her couch is, as much as she's proud of the life she created in this city, she finds herself dreading the week ahead.

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Daniel unlocks his door to a quiet apartment. The low hum of the dishwasher tells him he just missed Alex, his

bartender roommate and the part owner of a speakeasy in River North, leaving for work. Sweet Potato trots over to him, purring almost violently as she walks figure eights around his ankles. "Missed you, too," he murmurs as he bends down to scratch her ears. The purring continues, the cat practically gluing herself to his calf, like she senses his bad mood.

He deposits his duffel in his bedroom, thoughts racing. Daniel spent more nights of eighth grade than he could count imagining what he was going to say to Liyah when he had the chance—half apology, half demand for an explanation—only for her not to show up the next summer. The Julys of his childhood had been blurs of bug bites and sunburns and her braids with star-shaped beads on the ends, and then she was just gone. It's not like he thinks about her often now, but it's not *never*. Especially considering his recent increase in sleepless nights with a highlight reel of his worst memories playing on repeat.

Murphy's Law, right? He finally decides that he's ready to be a half-functioning adult with a social life again and look where it gets him.

Maybe he should google her. How many Aliyah Cohen-Jacksons could there be in Chicago? He'll find her email or her Instagram and draft a message—begin with the apology he knows he owes her, ask to get coffee and explain himself. If it goes well enough, they can catch up and reminisce and then maybe do it the next week. They'll be friends again, and he'll have one less clip for his insomnia shame montage.

Or she'll delete the message unread, and he'll feel even more guilty and embarrassed than he already does.

He thinks back to the look of absolute vitriol she gave him in the airplane aisle as he handed her the suitcase. The

latter outcome seems the likely—or perhaps definite—one.

So, he goes about the rest of his evening, unpacking and making dinner and petting his cat, trying not to replay every moment of the flight this afternoon and the end of that summer fourteen years ago in his mind. And when he fails, his watch reading 2:33 a.m., his only solace is that he'll probably never see Liyah again.