

## A Love Letter to TA 10 by Kayla Gonzalez

**TW/CW: Sexual Assault**

Dear Eugene,

I recently visited you in Las Vegas for the second time since we graduated from Vassar. After spending a few more days back home in Los Angeles, I now find myself on a flight back to New York, drinking a prosecco and missing the home we once shared.

But before our home, before we knew we would leave an indelible mark on each other's lives— a mark so painfully joyful like a collection of all the laughs and tears and moments of pure existence we shared— years before any of that, the only moment we could point to that was purely ours was running across Juarez International Airport, desperately trying to not miss a flight to Merida.

It was March 2018, and we were just starting a two week trip through Mexico with 28 other classmates. We had a layover in Mexico City before our first location on the Yucatán Peninsula. You have family in DF, and your aunt came to the airport to visit you during our layover. To meet her, you had to exit the gate and re-enter through security. You didn't take your bag to make the re-entry process easier. A couple people of color in the class had started a group chat, and we were all sitting around munching on airport enchiladas when we got a message from you explaining that you had forgotten your passport in your backpack. Before this moment, I knew you because we shared the same identities: mexican, first-generation, low-income, queers. At a place like Vassar, sharing those identities instantly bonds you and ensures recurring interaction with one other through identity orgs and the like. Although we had a mutual respect and affinity for one another, we were not in the same class year and had yet to ever hang out one on one and get to know each other beyond those core identities. Despite this, I volunteered to be the one to exit the airport and bring you your passport, making sure to bring my own with me.

When I met you outside the gate, you thanked me endlessly and we re-entered the security line, where a man explained to us that we were at the international departures entrance and needed to go to the domestic departures area across the biggest airport in Mexico. At just that moment, we received a text message from our professor that we were meeting at our gate to get ready to board. Struck with panic, we started running. I'm not even sure we were confident we were running in the right direction— at least I wasn't confident, but we ran and weaved through people, all the while begging our POC allies in our group chat to distract our professors before they did their headcount.

Out of breath, we made it to the domestic departures security line, where to our relief, there was only a short line of travelers ahead of us. Once we made it to the gate and found our class, which wasn't difficult since our group of 30 stood out everywhere we went, you continued to thank me for saving you. This moment of solidarity and generosity would color the unexpected route of our friendship years later. But at that moment, we boarded the plane, spent two weeks cringing at our wealthy classmates, and returned to Vassar to go on our separate paths. I would end up taking a year off and during that time, you would go abroad to Spain. We would not keep in touch, we would not get to know more about each other. Our friendship was expected to end there.

And then around a year later, I scrolled through Instagram at the right time to see that you were looking for housemates for your senior year. Having taken time off before my senior year, I was beyond anxious to return to Vassar and graduate with a class I did not matriculate with. I had not formed deep bonds with anybody in this new class, and I had fully expected to spend that year alone in a single room. But when I saw your post, I remembered running alongside you in Mexico and saw this as your version of extending a hand to me— a chance to not be alone.

Hien and Katherine also saw your post, and so the four of us agreed to live together. I also knew Hien from Transitions, but like you, I had never shared a moment with them beyond group gatherings. Katherine, on the other hand, I had never crossed paths with at all— my

first introduction to her being the group chat we created. Our final housemate was Karly. Although it was only a 4 person house, Karly's presence in our home happened even before we moved in. You and Karly were close friends, had even studied abroad together. And although she was living off campus that year with her boyfriend Jorge, I instantly knew she would become part of our home.

When we finally moved in together, we all started using the kitchen almost instantly. If there were awkward weeks of tiptoeing around each other as we got used to the kitchen, I don't remember them. Instead, I remember the food: Katherine's hot pot. Hiên's vermicelli noodles served with vietnamese three color dessert. Even Karly would come over to cook moro de guandules or a new recipe she had stumbled across during the week. She would show up on a Saturday afternoon with extra pots, utensils, and ingredients, ready to hunker down for the day in our home. When Katherine had to take a leave during the spring semester, Rhiannon moved in, and she taught me how to make the best bowl of oatmeal, the breakfast my mom now requests everyday when I'm visiting. At one point, Hien trekked to the city in search of pig's blood for an art project. They returned home without the pig's blood, but instead with a bounty of taro that they lovingly boiled for us. While everyone cooked, I baked. It started with banana bread, probably inspired by leftover Express bananas about to be thrown out. Then carrot cake. Lots of cookies. One attempt at a chocolate soufflé. For the ALANA night market, I made three choco flans in one afternoon. I made brie and puff pastry and we would sit around it on the carpet of the living room and slice into it with wheat thins. Sometimes I tried to cook, attempting to make pozole or anything else that felt comforting in the moment. And while I scurried around the kitchen stress baking, you, Eugene, were always present to lend a helping hand. Whether it was chopping or peeling or washing or whisking, you never missed an opportunity to extend a hand to me. And when I didn't need help, you'd sit in the living room and just be present, softly playing one of your impeccable spotify playlists and always listening, nodding, laughing, and genuinely caring. You were the self proclaimed house cat of TA 10, ready to eat around the edges of an undercooked banana bread and help me pack up leftovers.

Over these meals, we created our home, our door always unlocked and open to anybody wanting company. When I think about TA 10, I don't think about my bedroom. In fact, I don't even miss that part of the house. What I miss are the spaces we shared, those are the spaces where I grew, where we gathered and imparted generosity and joy and unintentional lessons upon each other.

I credit Karly and Hien for increasing my spice tolerance. I credit Katherine for strengthening my thick skin every time she pointed out my banana bread was undercooked or stating that preferred a different recipe. I credit Rhiannon for my increased appreciation of fresh fruit and nature.

Our home was light in every sense of the word, but even in the moments of complete heaviness, we faced them together.

There was a party one night early in the spring semester. The three of us (you, me and Hien) went as a group, stayed close to one another through the games of rage cage and cup pong. We danced next to each other. We noticed the same things. In particular, we noticed a very intoxicated neighbor and a guy I had had an unfortunate hook up with in the fall. Every time the girl backed away from the guy or clinged to a friend, he followed her, trying to isolate her and suggesting they leave the party. The three of us stared at each other and wordlessly stepped into action. Having taken a class with the girl, you walked up to her casually as ever and introduced us as your housemates. As the guy kept trying to slink in, grabbing hold of her and trying to inch her away, we moved wherever they moved in the room. We told her about the chocolate soufflé I had attempted to bake earlier in the evening and asked if she wanted to come to our house to hang out and eat. She gave an enthusiastic yes, but the guy followed, entering our home as well. It was the first time that our home felt dark. Eventually, he lost interest and left, and we offered to walk her back to her home. As we walked her back, the guy kept calling her, her phone a nonstop buzz of light in the now drizzling night full of music and laughter pouring out of the windows around us. The rain was picking up as we got to her house and explained to her housemates what was happening. They promised us they would take care of her. The three of us stood outside her

house, just a quick walk from ours, but the now pounding rain added one last hurdle to overcome before we could retire to our living room, wrap blankets around ourselves, and maybe squeeze in a quick episode of H2O.

We decided to make a run for it, and as we ran through the rain, everything we had been holding in came out in laughter. We ran into our home, pausing to take off our shoes and catch our breath, and as we climbed the stairs, my laughter started morphing into tears. When we reached the top of the stairs, not even reaching the living room, I paused on the landing and turned into Hiên's arms, suddenly sobbing. You both eased me into a sitting position on the floor, Hien and I leaning against the wall, you sitting on the top step, as I let out sobs and screams into Hiens shoulder, while you held my own.

I was filled with so much anger for having that guy enter our home once again. I was filled with sadness for the girl, who thankfully was now safe amongst her own chosen housemates. and I felt heartache remembering the moments in my life when I wished people had intervened and protected me. It felt like all the rain that had blanketed us as we ran home was now streaming out of me. I couldn't form a proper sentence, but neither of you asked for an explanation. You simply understood.

The semester went on, and the idea of graduation became more and more real. We started making plans, envisioning what that moment could look like. During one facetime with your parents, we all planned a carne asada for the block we lived on. We talked endlessly about the food we would eat that week, Hien promising that their mom would insist on cooking elaborate meals for us in our small kitchen, the same way we had all year.

Right before spring break, the Latinx Student Union had their annual quinceañera, and Karly and I volunteered to be the honorees. It was Karly's birthday weekend, so her dad was visiting and was going to be her chambelan. When I asked you to mine, you said yes without hesitation, and that night you proudly placed a plastic crown on my head, fulfilling a moment I had secretly longed for since high school.

Spring break came and in the span of just a few days, the world shut down at the outbreak of COVID-19 and all of our visions of what the rest of the semester would look like hung in the air. When Vassar officially announced that the campus would shut down, we were faced with two options: hastily pack up our home and return to our respective cities or apply to stay on campus. For me, it was not much of an option, I knew I would have to stay on campus, so I applied and was approved. Rhiannon decided to head to Tennessee and departed within a few days. Karly, who lived off campus, would stay there through the end of her lease. Hien was already home in Orlando, having flown there for spring break, but they wanted to return. Unfortunately, their application was denied. You were the last person to make a decision. I hated the thought of being alone in our home, in a place so vibrant but suddenly so silent.

I don't think I'll ever be able to fully thank you for choosing to stay on campus. You could have gone home. In fact, if your application to stay wasn't approved, you offered to take me home to Vegas with you, your parents already making the preparations to welcome me. Whatever the outcome was, you wouldn't leave me alone. This was undoubtedly the biggest act of generosity I'd ever received. And so for 10 weeks, we quarantined together in our home, together feeling the emptiness of campus, not able to deny the emptiness in our home since Hien was not there, their stuff staying unmoved in their room, the door always open, as if they had dashed out in a hurry, late to class or to meet a friend, and always intended to return.

And I can say with certainty that during those months we were quarantined, I never felt alone. I definitely felt other emotions and anxieties, but I knew you were there.

We took on different approaches to quarantine life— you adhered to a daily routine, or at least a solid outline for each day. I, however, veered in the opposite direction, following every whim and avoiding every responsibility. Now, you and I joke about our polar opposite coping mechanisms. We laugh at my days spent watching degrassi nonstop, updating you on character developments every hour that you earnestly listened to. We share the story of me, for absolutely no reason, rearranging my room to look like the reception area of an

office. During that time, you taught me how to skateboard. You taught me a lot of things, always with patience, and I wonder what I could have taught you in those moments.

Sometimes Karly would come over and make toast with ricotta and jam. She would pop in as the self-proclaimed Kimmy Granger to my DJ Tanner, a constant reminder that a world existed beyond our living room. She was the one who finally got me out of bed when I faced a job rejection. She introduced me to Yumi's Cells, Dominican food, and Long Island politics. At night, we would Netflix party with Hien and watch Avatar, my first time ever watching the show. and when I would go to sleep, I would feel the emptiness of the rooms below me, missing Hien wrapping me in their soft blankets, missing Katherine's infection laugh, missing brewing water for tea time with Rhiannon. But I was grateful to know you were always on the other side of the wall, probably thinking about the same empty rooms.

We graduated from our living room, and a few days later, Karly drove us to JFK, where you waited with me at my gate until it was time to board our separate planes, so far from that initial moment in Mexico City.

This story is a love letter for my housemates. Eugene, Hien, Katherine, Rhiannon, and Karly. And possibly the fish Eugene and I rescued during quarantine from an abandoned TA that I refused to name because I didn't want to get emotionally attached. This letter is a resting place. An extension of a hand, a plate, a seat, a cup of tea. A friend.