Social Abdication by Danielle Gorman

It’s the first day of school. The smell of bleach is overpowering. Tan-lines, mini-skirts and new haircuts are everywhere. Summer stories range from sky-diving to couch-potatoing. Students either look excited or petrified. My friends are instantly recognizable, from their dyed blonde hair to their Gucci pumps. The unfortunate kids that aren’t allowed to be friends with me are just as obvious. They sit against the lockers, manga books open in their laps, hair long and stringy, and faces so pockmarked with zit scars that you’d think they were suffering from the plague. I hardly spare a glance, except to watch them out of the corner of my eye and keep a respectable distance. Geek is fairly easy to catch, or so I’m told. It’s a more potent disease than Ebola—and I know all about Ebola, thanks to *The Hot Zone* in English Lit last year. Thankfully, I’m saved from thinking about the geeks and Ebola (Honestly, I think I’d take the Ebola) because I see my best friend Katelyn at her locker, surrounded by girls who wish they were her.

Katelyn sees me from the corner of her eye and she grins, her teeth approximately the same shade of white as the concrete walls surrounding us. It has generally been known that a hive only has one Queen Bee. Just one. But at Lincoln High, there are two. Katelyn waves; I return the favor. A girl, whose name I don’t know, appears at my side and asks if I plan on going to the party at Jason Baxtar’s tonight. *There’s bound to be booze*! I mentally applaud her use of alliteration. I flip my hair over my shoulder but don’t answer; it isn’t worth my dignity. There’s no chance that I will be attending *that* party; being hung over isn’t as fun as they make it look in the movies. Even *I* have standards.

People stare at me as I walk by—or maybe they’re staring at my new nose job, still healing; and still extremely sore. It was a deep purple, like the color of Barney if someone decided to slow-cook him. Katelyn air-kisses my cheeks, the ones I was born with. She saw them do it on America’s Next Top Model, which means it must be cool and chic. We don’t share summer stories, because that isn’t cool and chic. I have no doubt that Katelyn spent most of her summer days by the pool, continuously working on the awesome tan she’s got, even if it looks a little orange. She lives in a veritable mansion on the edge of town, surrounded by acres of land her lawyer father owns. It’s a shame that my dad only makes a six-figure salary. It’s truly unfair. Have you seen the prices Gucci and Chanel charge? It’s *outrageous*.

I see a couple making out, and my hands get clammy. I haven’t had a boyfriend since Chicken-breath Jake, who I broke up with at the end of last year. It’s still a touchy subject with me and Katelyn; she doesn’t approve, because he was hot, and there was no good reason to dump him. But dump him I did, and I haven’t had a boyfriend since. And—honestly?—I really miss the kissing, and handholding, and movie-night-snuggling. I haven’t made out with someone in *months*. I feel celibate.

By the time I get to English Lit, I’m craving food; really, anything edible will do. I’m sitting in class, my mind dwelling on french fries, not *Hamlet*. I can feel the bubbles in my stomach popping angrily for want of food. Soon, the grumbling becomes audible to others. Damon, the Shakespeare enthusiast I’ve unfortunately been placed next to in the seating chart (seriously, he makes comments on every play we read. It’s annoying), keeps glancing over at me every few minutes.

After the third look, I can’t help but snap at him, just loud enough that only he will hear.

“Stop it!”

I don’t expect him to respond. I’ve known Damon since fourth grade, and he’s never spoken a word to me in all the time I’ve known him.

“Stop what?” He asks innocently.

I blink at him, unnerved by his answer, and just the fact that he answered at all. I frown. “Looking at me.”

“Who said I was looking at you?”

“I said so.”

“And your word is law now?”

I look away, at the front of the room, angry at his defiance. Mr. Knowles is scribbling unintelligible words about Shakespeare’s life on the blackboard. Every ‘S’ he writes he finishes it off with a flourish, the chalk shrieking against the board. Who does Damon think he is? I’m Amy Johnson, for goodness sake!

“Just because you’re Amy Johnson, that doesn’t mean I can’t talk to you like I would anybody else.”

I jump, staring open-mouthed at him.

“How’s the nose doing, by the way? Looks like it hurts.”

My mouth snaps shut. “Don’t talk to me anymore.”

At the end of class, Mr. Knowles licks his finger slowly and peels the first research topic off of the stack. Along with this, he calls out pairs in which students will work on these papers.

“Damon and Amy.”

I groan, and Damon laughs at me. He swings his backpack over his shoulder, his parting words, “Meet me in the library after school,” ringing in my ears, like an unnaturally persistent fly.

“You’re late.”

“Some of us have friends.”

“Just sit down, will ya?”

I immediately sit, but not because he tells me to; my legs are tired. The table is plastic linoleum, old yellow, though maybe it was once white, and it looks like it’s been there since Reagan was president.

“So,” I say, after a long pause, where I mentally dare him to talk first, but he doesn’t. “Let’s get this paper over and done with.”

“Why? You have a hot date or something?”

“Maybe. I just don’t want to spend more time with you than I have to.” I smile cheekily.

“Very funny. What do you know about *Hamlet*?”

“Only that he’s a super-rich prince, and he goes completely crazy after Ophelia spurns him.”

“Well that’s…that’s one way to look at it. I actually meant Hamlet the story, not the character.”

“What else is there to it? It’s just—”

“Please,” Damon rubs his eyes. “Don’t say it’s just Shakespeare.”

“Then what is it?”

Pause. “You have absolutely no appreciation for art.”

“It’s a play, not a painting.”

Pause. “You really are the most infuriating person, did you know that?”

“Well then, for goodness sake, teach me!”

Damon pulls out his notes, multi-colored and illegible, and a well-worn copy of *Hamlet*. Pages are dog-eared and yellowing. The top corner of the cover looks as if it has been torn off by some sort of small animal. The skull on the cover is smiling, perhaps in the act of laughing—laughing at me, I suppose, because of my ignorance of the story itself. Well, my apparent ignorance. Damon doesn’t have to know that I’ve read *Hamlet* a dozen times, or that I watch the Laurence Olivier version every year on my birthday, even if it doesn’t do the play justice. There’s just something about the stark contrast of light and darkness in an old black-and-white film; it gives a unique depth to the characters.

“You know, if you’re just going to daydream, I have better things to do.”

“What?” I blink; Damon’s voice tears me from my badly timed reverie. “Sorry. I was…thinking.”

“Well, try not to hurt yourself, princess.”

“Can we just get on with it?”

“Fine by me. What aspect of the play do you want to write the paper on?”

“Feminism.” I lean back in my seat, a satisfied smirk gracing my face. “Ophelia has a bad rep, no thanks to Hamlet. If he hadn’t dumped her right before she was going to dump him, she would have never gone crazy in the first place.”

Damon scoffs. “That’s ridiculous. Also, I’m not sure that I can write a paper on feminism. I’m not a girl. How about we write it about the dishonesty and fickleness of women?”

“Oh, *really*…”

“Okay, okay…” Damon holds his hand out to me and I stare at it like I would a live snake. “Truce? Or we’re never going to finish this paper.”

I grudgingly take his hand. His grip is stronger than I expect from someone who, I imagine, reads Shakespeare for fun. My face burns and I rip my hand from his grasp. He’s suddenly sitting too close, breathing too close, existing too close to me. It’s disconcerting, alarming…*Oh, no, Amy, don’t even go down that road*…*that road has thieves, murderers, and all other sorts of things that would really suck if they happened to you…like if you…are… attracted…to—*

“Amy?”

*Woah, Amy, attraction is not an option. Damon is off-limits, and in the worst possible way. For goodness sake, his notes are color-coded. He quotes Shakespeare to himself, under his breath. What more of a geekful sign do you need?*

“Amy!”

“Sorry?” I reply weakly.

“I said: what if we take the stance that Claudius deserved to die, because he was an unrepentant murderer and adulterer—?”

“No, no, no, we can’t do that.” I’ve placed one hand on Damon’s arm to stop him from continuing, “In the scene where Hamlet considers killing Claudius the first time, we get this really *deep* glimpse into Claudius’ feelings about his actions, and we see that he really does feel sorry for what he’s done, because he sees that it’s hurting Gertrude, and he really loves her. Sorry, I just said ‘really’ half a dozen times. Anyway…” I look to Damon for his thoughts, but he isn’t looking at me; he’s looking at my hand, still resting on his forearm. When he does look up at me, I see that his eyes are blue, like mine, but a prettier shade of blue, with longer lashes. *Well, geez, that’s not fair*. I belatedly pull away, the mood much different now than it was when it started. My face feels warm and my hands are clammy again.

“You’re blushing.” His tone is incredulous.

“No, I’m not.” I pull my compact mirror out of my purse and examine my—*pink*—cheeks. They clash with the purple of my nose.

Damon’s ridiculously amazingly colored eyes are wide and staring right at me. “Oh, yes you are.”

“Are we going to write this paper, or what?” I’m standing. I didn’t even realize it, but I know that I stood to release myself from the confines of my chair, placed so near Ted’s—six inches away? Seven? Close enough to make me uncomfortable. “Because I have better things to do than sit here and be accused of—of—”

The librarian saves me from answering the horrible truth. *Pssst!* She shushes me, so I unwillingly take my seat once more. The tension between Damon and I has taken a tangible form, so incredibly palpable that I could cut through it easily, like a hot chain-saw through butter.

“Why are you staring at me?”

“Did you know,” I start hesitantly, ignoring his question as I wipe my damp palms on my ninety dollar jeans, “that I‘ve read Hamlet a dozen times and I watch the 1930’s version every year on my birthday, because I can’t get enough of the story and Laurence Olivier? Damon, I…I…”

“And this is relevant how?”

“Do you mind if I try something?”

I place my hands on either side of his face and concentrate on his mouth. Damon’s eyes are wide, and he looks genuinely afraid of what I’m doing. I’m leaning towards him, but he pulls away. “Stay still!” I command him. I’m genuinely interested in what he will taste like. My last boyfriend always tasted like fried chicken, and just remembering this makes me want to gag. But as my mouth closes over Damon’s, I taste Double-Bubble on his tongue. I want to giggle, but my mouth is otherwise occupied. I haven’t had Double-Bubble since the fourth grade, when Chicken-breath Jake stuck it in my hair and I gave it up. My feelings towards Double-Bubble make a one-eighty degree turn, and I find the taste irresistible. I turn my head to deepen the kiss when my nose scrunches painfully against his. I hiss against his lip, pain shooting through my face. Damon pulls away at the sound, and I fill my lungs with oxygen, hoping that some of those red blood cells will carry it to my heart which is beating frantically, like a caged circus monkey.

“Oh…*boy*...” I’m rubbing my nose and avoiding eye contact with him.

“Wh—why did you just do that?”

*I’m attracted to a geek. My life is over.* I think about Katelyn, and I picture her face the way it was in April when I told her I had broken up with Chicken-Breath Jake. She’s disappointed in me, just like she’ll be disappointed in me when I tell her I’ve got a crush on the geek in my English class. Jake was the quarterback last year, a senior about to leave for Texas State on a football scholarship, full ride. I gave up my one-way ticket to the easy, fun-filled, drunken-partier life, according to Katelyn. A life I never told her that I didn’t want. Hangovers and girls losing their virginity right and left? *That’s not the college experience I want. I want an actual education. I want to get my degree—I don’t even know what in, but I want to amount to something higher than your everyday skank. Because if that’s what my social life is going to amount to, then I don’t want it.*

Does that mean it’s okay if my *social* life is over? A life that, to be honest, has been grating on me like those air kisses and sweltering days by the pool at Katelyn’s house (Seriously, I’ve never been so sunburned in my life)? I glance down at my perfectly manicured nails, and one of them is chipped—the ring finger on my left hand. *Who cares?* Katelyn doesn’t know that I watch Hamlet every year on my birthday; Damon does. Katelyn doesn’t know that I think her summer tan looks fake; Damon could care less about my (nonexistent) tan. Katelyn doesn’t know that I just kissed Damon, the Shakespearean fanatic I sit next to in English Lit; Damon…could be worth the abdication of my social throne. Katelyn doesn’t know that I really want to kiss Damon again, and again, and again; Damon’s about to find out.

He’s looking at me expectantly, and probably measuring the distance between our table and the nearest exit. “Sorry about that.” I say matter-of-factly, as if I bumped his arm and didn’t just kiss him out of the blue. “I just wanted to see how that would feel.”

“And your assessment?” He snaps sarcastically, offended that I’ve probably stolen the virginity of his lips.

I grin evilly. “I might have to try again to provide a proper evaluation.” He gulps. My hands are still resting on his cheeks, and my right thumb is gently rubbing the skin beside his eye as my other hand pushes his bangs away from his face. “This is going to sound really strange, I mean, look at me? But…are you busy after this?”

“No.” He looks afraid, but I can discern the slightest trace of excitement and curiosity in his sharp blue eyes which don’t miss a thing, from the line Romeo says over Juliet’s dying body to the meter in Macbeth’s witches’ speech. And I can’t help but notice that the faint crow’s feet around those eyes only make them more attractive.