

# SCHOOL OF SILENCE

*Krishna Lander*

My eyes meet those of one of the most popular girls at this highly conservative all-girls school, Nina Parapet. We are both taking part in the weekly disco, which is far too humid for the middle of summer. We smile at each other a bit, and she even starts moving towards me before her friends come and divert her away from me. Although I look for her the hall is so chock full of people and strobing light that I don't see her for the rest of the evening. Although our exchange was so small and meaningless I can't stop thinking about her and thoughts of her take up a permanent residence in my head.

The next morning, which is Monday, we all meet up in the giant square building the teachers use to give the morning notices. I daydream a little about Nina while the teacher drones on, and I even think that I catch a glimpse of her at the front of the room. While we are in the same year and a lot of the same classes we both move in very different social circles and are good at different classes. I question how I remember this and realise that I have always been paying attention to her subconsciously. How can I not, when she is so cool, full of life and, dare I say it, beautiful?

The teacher begins reading out the last notice, and I begin paying attention around halfway through.

"...and for students that are falling behind in subjects they will be paired for tuition with a student who has exemplary grades." I groan inwardly. I know that I have the best grades in multiple classes, and at this school if I resist tutoring someone then I'll get personal evaluation time for weeks. Personal evaluation time is when students showing behaviour outside the norm are forced to sit in a room with no distractions and evaluate their choices.



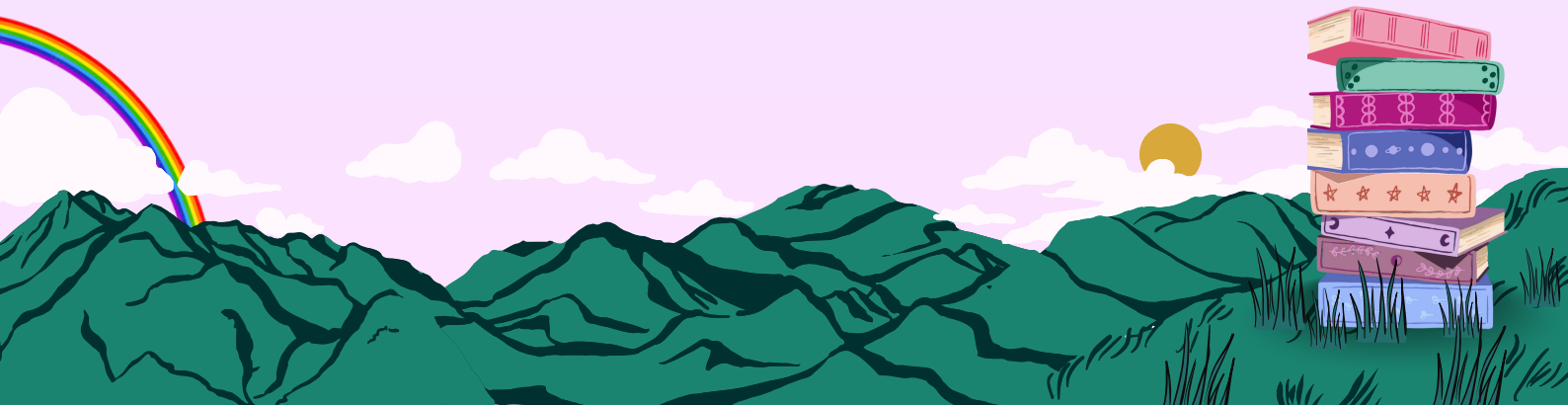
I suddenly perk up with the thought that I might be paired with Nina. The next lesson is PE, and Nina absolutely excels at it. She is at the centre of the action in everything we do, and whatever team she is on is guaranteed to win. After one such win she comes around and high-fives all of the people in her team, including me. When our hands meet I see a glint of recognition in her eyes, but again she is pulled away by her friends before we can converse. *“Nina looks so beautiful.”* I think, and then analyze whether I am developing a crush on her. Subconsciously I know that I am, but if there is one thing that this place has taught me it’s that sometimes you need to hide who you truly are.

Next we have lunch, and after scooping a plastic bowl of lukewarm pasta from the tray I go to check out the list of student pairings. The hallway is pretty crowded, but the well-known fact that I’m the kid who got into a huge argument with a teacher for refusing to take a pride sticker off my computer makes people steer clear of me.

In eager and nervous anticipation I look down the list for my own name. I’m not sure whether I want to be paired with Nina. On the plus side, I want to get to know her better and this would be perfect, but also I might come off as awkward and ruin her perception of me forever. I wouldn’t assume that that perception is too great as it is either. Since I mostly stick to the back of the class I think that I must be mysterious to most of my peers.

All of these heavy thoughts in my mind cause me to miss my own name and I only see it on the second scan. My hopes fall. The name next to mine doesn’t read Nina, but instead Lucy. I haven’t really noticed anyone called Lucy before so I guess it could possibly be interesting to meet them. My hopes are too crushed from the pairing to care and the tutoring sessions become something boring at the end of the week.

The next two days go past very slowly. I feel very unenergetic, and can only think about Nina when I am supposed to be working. In other words, I’ve got it bad.



At last Friday arrives and with it a bit of hope for something interesting. I manage to stop myself from looking at Nina for most of the first two periods, and then after some soggy baked beans in the dining hall, it is time for the tutoring session.

I open the door to the rarely-used classroom and see about half a dozen students milling around in their respective friend groups. Surprisingly, there seem to be a few older students there as well. I immediately spot one that looks a bit like Nina and then shake my head at my own wishful thinking. We all have to mill around looking for the people we are supposed to tutor, and it is a bit of a mess.

When my person does eventually arrive I am very mildly surprised that it is the person who bears a resemblance to Nina.

“Hey, are you Lucy?” She nods with a grimace.

“I’m honestly a bit embarrassed to be tutored by someone younger than me, so please don’t say anything about it.”

“Sure.” I mime zipping my lips.

We sit and I help her work through a few simpler questions before I get onto the hard stuff. After we have been solidly working away for a bit she notices the faded pride sticker on my computer. I brace myself for an insult but instead see a look of awe splayed across her face.

“They really allow you to have that sticker?”

“Not very willingly. You have no idea how much personal reflection time I’ve gotten for refusing to take it off.” She seems really impressed and after this conversation flows between us more easily. After she reveals that she is bi I feel safe enough to reveal that I’m nonbinary. We have to talk in hushed whispers and make it look like we are working when a teacher walks past, but I feel like I have made my first real friend at this school. When the period ends I feel that this is the best possible thing that could come out of today until she says:



“If you come to the disco on Sunday then I’ll introduce you to my sister. I think that you’ll like her a lot. She might even be in your class. Do you have a girl called Nina?” I manage to get over my shock to mumble “Yeah.”

“Oh cool. See you Sunday.” With that we part ways. I am feeling a lot more hopeful about the tutoring sessions and about Nina. Although part of me is very apprehensive I also am too excited to say no.

Saturday goes by in a flash. I catch up on some schoolwork and try to figure out some topics of conversation for when I talk to Nina. I don’t want to sound boring or weird. Throughout all of this I keep trying to reason with myself that I just want to be Nina’s friend, but deep down I know that this is rapidly turning into a borderline obsessive crush.

After tossing and turning for hours trying to get to sleep, I finally wake up. “It’s Sunday!” I think with a burst of happiness. Unfortunately for me the weekly disco is in the afternoon, so I have a long time to wait. I feel like my level of excitement is very high for what is realistically going to be an abysmal failure. “*What if she doesn’t like me? What if I’m really awkward? What if everything goes wrong?*” These thoughts plague me for most of the day until it is finally time for the disco. I rush up to my room and get dressed in the classiest clothes I have. Then I take a deep breath, open my door and begin walking down to the disco.

It is a mess of flashing lights and throbbing noises. As usual, the music is slightly too loud and the drinks get spilt five minutes after the party starts. I’m honestly surprised that the school keeps letting us have these parties, but I guess they figure that we need a way to blow off steam.

As soon as I walk into the hall (and feel the oppressive rise in temperature) Lucy sees me and waves me over. I awkwardly make my way through the pulsating crowd and the combination of vivid lights and wailing music makes everything feel slightly nightmarish. Regardless, I get there and a smiling Lucy steps sideways to reveal her sister. Nina looks beautiful even in the garish light from the overhead disco ball.



“I’ve been wanting to talk to you for ages!” She exclaims, catching me completely off guard. I thought that I was wholly insignificant to her.

“You have?”

“Yeah. Do you mind if we go get some air?”

“Yes please.” We make our way out of the hall and over to a small tree on a small hill that I have often sat under and read. The silence stretches on just long enough for me to deem it awkward.

“You’ve always looked really brave to me.” She blurts out.

“Really? I don’t think that I’ve ever done anything brave in my life.”

“I think that it’s really cool that you fight for what you believe in. I was there on some of those times when they tried to get you to take the pride sticker off your computer.”

“What do you think about the pride sticker? Like, do you support or…”

“Very much so!”

“Cool! Me too, in case that wasn’t clear.” We are quiet for a little while longer, although it isn’t as awkward this time.

“I wonder if I could get a Pansexual sticker for my computer,” Nina Muses. “I am Pan, by the way.”

“Oh that’s really cool! I haven’t really figured much out to do with my sexuality yet, but I know that I’m nonbinary.”

“Nice! The only other person that I’ve had come out to me before is my sister, so I hope that I’m reacting the right way.”

“Oh me neither. I think that what we’ve been saying is good.” Another silence, but not awkward at all this time.

“I know that this might seem crazy since we’ve just started talking, but you seem really cool. I guess what I’m trying to say is would you like to come to one of the secret LGBTQ+ meetings that I host? Me and a few others are all working together to make this school more accepting in any way that we can.” My hopes fall because for a minute I thought she was going to ask me out. They bounce back quickly when I remember that this might be my chance to make a difference for good in this homophobic school.



“I would love to.” I reply, and she smiles.

“I am so glad! The team are going to love you. By the way, the first meeting is scheduled for Wednesday. OMG I am so excited!” Her excitement is contagious, and we dance around excitedly for a few minutes. After that we get down to talking, catching each other up on our lives and soon we feel like we’ve been friends for ages. It is as we sit there, staring up at the stars and I’m feeling her arm around my shoulder and mine around hers, that I know that I am going to be able to change this school for the better so that no-one who comes here ever feels the need to hide who they truly are.

