

BOOK PEOPLE

by Jessica Taylor

Every time Luke thrusts into me from behind, my face digs into the row of novels and I can smell their old pages. The scent is pulpy, and reminds me of the mead coveted by my roaming clan. If the books leave the impression of their bindings on my cheek, it will look as if I just awoke from an afternoon nap on a pile of paperbacks in a meadow with no bones or dead cars in sight. I've never seen this many books in one place, but now I'm so close I could stick my tongue out and taste one.

Luke tortures me in the sweetest way by pulling his dick slowly from my cunt—a word he just taught me—and letting it hover at my soft entrance until I beg. Though I'm well read, I'm illiterate in his genre of expertise. As he shifts his weight backward onto his heels, I look up at his arm resting on the bookshelf above me. Sweat gathers on his tan skin and the coppery hair is matted by perspiration.

"Please, oh my gods, please—"

"What is the word I just taught you?" Luke demands.

"Fuck me?"

I must be correct because Luke pushes his length back into me. The books surrounding us muffle the words I moan.

"I fucking love your cock," I say with a smile, enthused with my fresh vocabulary.

I become confident and rub ovals around my swollen clit with new courage. He just read aloud a passage of a character doing the same. It's a direction for me, an explanation.

His lips rustle against my ear.

"Maeva," he threatens, "if you don't stop talking, if you don't stop screaming, then I can't teach you new words. I can't read to you."

I smile and consider complying as he cups my breast and then rubs the flat of his palm over my nipple. Our heavy breaths sing in the air as the skin of his thighs repetitiously smack against my ass. Books thump into the wall before my face. He grabs a new one. Holding it above me, he wedges his thumb between its pages, splaying it open spread eagle.

"On a foggy night, Sandro crosses the Pont Neuf in Paris to meet the long legged vixen..."

Luke was born in New Orleans, so he speaks slowly. His accent is so thick and lazy that I originally mistook it as a sign of incompetence. When I showed him the bones two days ago, just after we set out on this journey, he seemed so simple

because of his slow cadence. We had just departed on horseback from my clan's band of wagons that rested in a field of pastel wildflowers. It was maybe another seven or eight miles to our destination, to the place where this richness awaited us. I forced myself to hold back from cantering off and leaving Luke in the parting wake of the field.

As we rode across that first field, I licked my lips and imagined the scent of antique books, fresh and like a diluted bouquet of green flowers. When I envisioned the yellowed pages fluttering before me like a fan, my breast trembled. And all of those black words, some having already faded to grey. There would be so many new ones to read. Some of them, I planned to say aloud.

Before I travelled to an old bookstore or a library to scavenge, to which my family alone carries the treasure maps, I was excited and restless for days. This time, they sent me forward alone for the first time to collect a new cache of supplies. They made me bring Luke, who had joined our caravan just a few weeks before.

Maybe my parents had set this up all along, like the arranged marriages I read about in my brother's novels. They must have trusted Luke and his family because they were book people too. Now, I surmise they wanted me to make this discovery on my own. When we first met his tiny community holed up in the jungly French Quarter, I was under the impression he'd never seen a horse before,

or even more than three books at once. I'm not sure why he kept his secrets from me these past few weeks.

We stopped when we reached the highway populated by hundreds of miles of silent cars. Spirits alone are their passengers now. Luke wore a gathered skirt of thick canvas. I'd seen him fashioning it the past few weeks from a beat up wagon cover the caravan didn't use anymore. I'd covertly watched him sew it, surprised that every prick he'd made with the needle was calculated, intense as it plunged through the material. There was a word for it...a kilt. It was like the kilts I'd seen in my father's history books.

"See this, Luke? It's from a female," I said.

The yellowed bone in my hand had a few mud splotches on its shaft. We found it in the driver's seat of a rusted out car whose faded green doors were already open, inviting us to spectate the past. We could have chosen any car in the long, ghostly parade before us and we would have found the same. Luke leaned in next to me after I picked up the bone. Wildflowers erupted between the cracks of the old highway and swayed between his muscled calves.

"Can you see it in other bones, Maeva, or just in the pelvis?" He asked.

"Only in the pelvis."

His finger alighted into the air, but stopped just in front of the wide brim of the hips. I grabbed his wrist, and set the massive bone into his hand. I took his

other hand and set it into the U shaped depression at the base. "This is the sciatic notch. It's much narrower in a female."

Taking his other hand, I swept his fingers around the large oval inside the bone. "The pelvic outlet is much more prominent in the female."

"I'm aware," he said.

I raised my eyebrows, but he had already looked away toward the horizon, out to where the highway of dead cars and piles of bones sliced through the land and led like a river into the city. It was an exodus at one point, when the virus starting breaking out in city centers and crowds of people tried to drive away from it at once. There was no place to run though.

I picked up the femur bone next, which dangled from the lumpy, decomposing seat of the car. I waved it in the air, using it as a pointer to show him the other features of the pelvis that displayed sexual dimorphism. Since we'd picked up Luke, this is how it had gone. I introduced him to the countryside, to my open world. But he offered nothing to me, no new insight into life or the landscape we inhabited.

My clan roams about the spread out remains of these parts, lending books. The old world fractured about a decade after books stopped being printed all together. The people had opted for digital libraries, e-tablets, and e-readers.

We can only carry so many books at a time now piled up in the wagons. I showed Luke which could be lent out and which were too precious to chance never seeing again. Though I enjoyed the concept of a new companion, I started to wonder what Luke had to show me, what he had to offer. He made no mention of his own familiarity with our treasures.

Luke placed the pelvis back on the seat, adjusting it to the position we'd found it in. I tossed the femur over my shoulder. We walked away, back towards our grazing horses. It's important to remember, of course; I'm first generation, so it's easier for me. I'm not so sentimental about the world around me. The ruins aren't a sign of devastation or loss, like they are for my parents and my grandparents, who remember the old ways of electricity and cars that sped along by the combustion of petrol. This slow world illumined only by fire, the sun, and the stars is simply my home. After the bone landed with a dull thud, Luke looked over to me. For the first time, I noticed something special about him. In that light, near dusk, his eyes were so blue that I thought of a deep eddy where I'd swam naked.

It could've gone either way at that point.

His smile started small. It unfurled like the frond of a fern erupting from the ground. In the end, he had his elbows on his knees and was laughing so hard I could see the muscles around his ribs contract.

Twilight settled over us a short time later. Then the stars glowed above. Some people say that light pollution dulled their light in the time before. I always wondered what it would have looked like, how the starlight could possibly be eclipsed.

"So Maeva, how do you know all that? About the bones."

"My grandmother keeps those books."

* * *

Luke recites lines from the glossy erotica anthology he holds above my back in the store. I've never read some of these words before, let alone heard them spoken. I can guess what each one means though as he narrates in his drawl, which I just today came to find brilliant when he opened his mouth to read aloud. When he announces "cunt," my own lights up, as if it's being called to its new name. When he reads "tits," he lays a hand on mine, and I understand he's providing me with definitions. I've touched my own breast before, but it's never felt as good as when he touched them after reading the sentence, "I rubbed my cock between the hollow of her tits, and then blew my white hot load over them."

From my upturned eyes I catch the name of the book he holds, *Best Erotica 2030*. They were still printing some books in the early '30s. I'm sure I knew that.

Luke runs his hand up and down my spine. The light outside is beginning to fade, and I wonder how much longer he'll be able to see.

In this position, I realize we're making love the way I've seen the horses do. Over the past few weeks, I've made Luke ride a short, piebald mare named Wendy. He's too tall for her. The length of his lower leg from the calf down dangles in the air around the horse's belly when he's astride her.

"Riding is in your seat, not in your hands, Luke. Don't you know?" I said to him yesterday after riding away from the camp we made near the bones.

"No, Maeve, I don't know."

"That's why she's always throwing her head around, Luke. Your hands. They're too heavy."

In response, he just smiled. He didn't seem to mind my constant observations over the weeks that we'd known one another. Simultaneously, he never seemed surprised at what I said either.

His auburn hair sparkled in the sun. The shape of his bold eyebrows reminded me of overturned parentheses. The mare tossed her white poll every five or six steps, shoving off the tension of his hands. Each time she did it, it made his head bob, sending sparks of light shooting off his shoulder length locks. I begrudged that I found him attractive, still under the impression that he was illiterate.

The skyline of the small city stuck up into the sky before us, our destination embedded somewhere within its borders. The city is located in the middle of a state that was called Texas, when such delineations still mattered.

The ruins loomed as we rode towards them, crumbling in some areas but half covered in green in other parts. Metal cranes stood intermittently through the buildings. The population was growing exponentially before the virus spilled out of its vial. It killed almost the entire planet of people. No one knows how many people there are now.

"Your family," Luke began. "They all have a specialty?"

"Yes, they do."

"What's yours?"

My stallion, Foster, snorted and his ears perked forward in anticipation. Maybe an unseen rabbit ran through the tall grass or a deer was about to burst forth out of a broken down petrol station. My hips followed the tall horse smoothly, as if my body sprouted out of him. I recalled that the old world wrote about a mythical creature, half-horse and half-human. *Think, think*. When I can't remember their words, I disappoint myself. There aren't enough of us left for me to have the luxury of forgetting a word.

"So, Maeva. What's yours?"

"I don't have one yet."

With the slightest inflection of my leg, I trotted forward. My eyes focused on the disintegration in the horizon. I considered Wendy, his mare, and so I dropped to a walk. Troupes of birds cackled and the cicadas sawed an orchestra. I'd never been in that particular area before, and the smell was so sweet. It reminded me of honey melted for too long over an open fire.

Luke's horse caught up with mine.

"If you don't know yet, there's still a lot of opportunity," Luke said. He pushed a hand through his hair. "No shame in that. The world is still an oyster."

He smiled at me. He did that a lot, smile at me for no reason, and at the very least I appreciated the symmetry of his face.

"That's not the way you say it. You say, 'The world is *your* oyster.'" I repeated for him, "*Your* oyster."

"Your mother has the sciences. Your father does history. Your brother collects literature. How will you know what your specialty is going to be?"

I made a noise not unlike Foster's defiant snort when he's pulled from a patch of coastal grass. "My mother has the *physical* sciences. My father does *British* history. My brother purveys *Russian* literature."

"Maybe you could do animal husbandry."

I didn't stop to consider how he would know such a term.

"Excuse me. My grandmother was a *doctor* back then. I'm descended from *doctors* and even *surgeons*."

"Well, genetics is a very intellectual field. That's what I'm saying. You could really help people."

Wendy did a bumpy little jig, which made me smile, because Luke dropped her reins. She bucked twice, rather noncommittally, as if the heat was too much to really care about unseating him.

"And you?" I inquired. "What's your specialty? What do you have to offer?"

In one hand, I gathered up the reins hanging to the side of his horse's front shoulder. As I did, my leg brushed his. Luke's thigh looked thick and heavy with muscle. If for some reason I had wanted to lift it from the side of the horse, it looked like it would take effort. It looked as if it could crush me.

When I handed the reins back to him, a silver snap coursed from my hand to his. Except it was me—not Luke or the horses—that startled, as if I'd never seen electricity in such form.

"Lightning," I said.

"It must be brewing," Luke answered.

* * *

Luke turns me around so that I'm facing him now. He looks down at me with his dark blue eyes. The top of my head doesn't even reach his shoulders. Our skin

is sweaty and ruddy with lust. His dick presses into my belly and it glistens with all the wetness of my sex. He kisses the top of my head and I catch my breath. He bends forward and runs his nose down my cheek. The book rests on the shelf leaving him empty handed.

"Maeva, I know you've got a lot to show me," he looks around at the sections surrounding us. *Medical Reference* and *Science Fiction* are closest. As I look up at him, he rubs my dark, short nipples between his thumb and finger. "But I have a few more things to show you first."

He told me this same thing for the first time last night.

"I think we should make camp," he said as the sun was hanging at the edge of the western horizon.

I thought to argue with him, to keep pushing forward into the dense foliage overtaking the city's homes. However, I imagined fumbling about in the dark to start the fire and then hobbling the horses by feel alone. Besides, if we stopped there was enough time to still read before dark.

Luke left with a quiver of arrows to hunt squirrel and rabbit. He had an instinct for it, a facility even. I watched him go, bare-chested, and the muscles of his back clenched each time he stepped. I gathered wood with which to cook. I let the horses into the back yard of a fenced home to graze. I cleared a spot beneath its window for our camp. Then I stopped to peer into the house, into what once was.

I love roaming the countryside, lending books to people and then picking them back up the next season and seeing what the borrower learned. However, I'm curious, always, about the world that was so recently in existence. Thirty years now it must be. My grandmother lived in one of these homes, half her life full of the things I read about: food that won't spoil, indoor climate control, running water, cafes, and university.

Darkness crept above us after we skinned and cooked our rabbits. I noticed clouds accruing and then obfuscating the stars. The fire danced. The horses made long snores as they slept standing, the cannons of their legs bound with a braided sequence of knots.

"Tell me about your family. How did they make it?"

"My grandmother is from this city. They boarded themselves up in their house when it started."

"It seems like so many people that survived did it that way, they went into seclusion and waited the illness out," he said.

"The crazy thing is," I told him, "my grandmother got sick. She was a doctor, and she caught it. But the illness was only mild. For a month, she locked herself in one room of their house and talked through the wall to my grandfather and my mom."

"Must have only been a half percent of the population that had some sort of immunity."

Population and immunity. I hadn't heard Luke use such technical words before. Had he not said them before or had I simply not heard him through the accent?

He continued, plucking a clump of rabbit fur from my hair. "You're very special." He laughed, "I'm sure you know."

I stood then and looked in the window of the house. Before me sat a family of skeletons at a table. The children? Impossible to tell if they were boy or girl from their bones.

"Look at them." I placed my finger on the window. "They sat down to dinner and one of them sneezed."

Luke stood beside me, his kilt making shadows of the firelight. "Then it was all done before the meal was over." He pushed his finger over mine, and I let him.

"And your father?" he asked.

"His people were horse breeders. They lived outside the city, on a secluded ranch. His whole family made it."

"And The Library? How did it come to be?" He asked.

"My grandparents had gone digital like everyone else by the 40s. They only had e-readers. Except for the anatomy books, the Netter atlases. My grandmother

says those pictures aren't replicable on a tablet. There wasn't a book left in the house but the Netters. My grandparents missed reading. I think they wanted adventure. So they took up with The Library when it stopped near them one summer."

"Do you know where The Library came from?" Luke asks.

"Of course not. *No one* knows that."

As it started to rain, Luke disappeared to my left. Then he was in front of me, lifting the window. Soundlessly, he had broken into the house. Perhaps he did have some skills to contribute, I conceded, as he reached through the window and lifted me inside. We ignored the skeletons at the table, and passed through the house to huddle on the floor of a bedroom. Next to the bed was an e-reader, still plugged into the wall. The lightning illuminated the room every few seconds. My hair hung down my back and Luke's clung to his shoulders.

He picked up the tablet. "This is the culprit, huh, why it's so difficult to scavenge books."

"Yes, yes you're right," I said.

"How many books do you think are on here?" He asked, turning it over in his hands.

"20,000?" I guessed.

"Not as many as up here." He tapped my head. "When we get to the bookstore, I have some special ones to show you."

I became curious, and my belly began to warm as did my vagina—the only word I had known for it. Then he leaned down and I let his soft lips kiss mine. His tongue tasted like rainwater collected in my favorite glass, sweet and fresh.

I didn't sleep tucked into him that night. I still hadn't decided yet about him. I lay across the room from him, curled in a corner on the hard floor. I listened to the pattern of his breathing, how content it sounded. The rain beat on the windows above me like a litany of staccato words. I suppressed the urge to touch myself, fearing he would hear me when I moaned. I didn't want to awaken him to what might seem like an invitation.

The next morning we departed for the bookstore, the only one remaining in this city. Thunder rumbled half-heartedly above us. Luke trailed behind me on his mare.

"Your grandmother gave you the map to this bookstore?"

"Yes. I'm almost nineteen. It's a good time to make choices, my grandmother says. In the old days, that's when a person chose a university and could vote."

"You're eighteen?" he asked.

"How old did you think I was?"

"I thought you were older than me, maybe twenty."

"How old are you?" I asked him, genuinely curious.

"Same."

I let his horse catch up with mine. "Odd. It seems like I'm more experienced too."

The sound of thunder spread in a dull way above us. After it trailed off, Luke's laugh began, powerful and fierce.

"You're a real bit of work, Maeva," he said.

"It's a piece of work. I'm a real piece of work."

Our horses' hooves clacked rhythmically along the paved streets as we got closer to our destination. There were broken out windows in the shops, though it was nothing I hadn't seen before. The shards glittered as we marched forward, as if we traveled down a brick road flanked with diamonds. I halted Foster in front of a wooden door.

"This is it," I told him, my hair falling over my shoulders and my eyes growing wide.

"The Book People," Luke announced, though there was no sign.

"How did you know that?"

"This place is a legend, among my people." His smile looked so sly that I wondered if he'd been letting me think I was leading this whole time. He

dismounted the horse, for the first time gracefully. He clucked her forward and hitched her near some puddles.

"What did your people do?" I'd assumed they were just some new kind of peasant, uneducated and unskilled.

"My family," he said, "owned a chain of stores in the French Quarter in the old time. They were *adult* stores. They were known for their antique erotica book collections, first editions only."

"Oh," I replied, blinking into the hazy sun that stood just over him in the horizon. I wasn't familiar with the genre, and didn't want to say so. An *adult* store? I tried to recall if I'd seen such a thing in any of the cities we'd visited.

The stained wood door of the building appeared weathered in some parts and there was splintering on the frame and the wood near the doorknob. I tried the door. Still locked. It might take me hours to get inside now.

"Why didn't you say so, Luke?" I gasped, partly furious and partly frustrated. I rammed the door with my shoulder.

Luke stepped up. Though he is tall, and can lift far more than me, he used a pin he pulled from his kilt. He made a few twitches with his hand. The door swung forward as the cool air inside came out to greet us.

He shrugged. "I was worried you wouldn't consider it literature or real writing."

The stairs descended underground. My confusion over his revelation dissipated with each step that creaked under my step. Luke walked soundlessly behind me.

On the landing about six feet from the ground, the store spread before us like a field of bookshelves, neat and orderly. How did this place survive the chaos and looting that my family remembers after the outbreak?

Luke stood beside me as I leaned forward onto the rail of the landing. The iron pushed my breath out of me, and I smiled. Silently we stared out towards it together. Then I was giggling, jumping down the stairs and running through the aisles and sections. And I wasn't alone.

"A Brief History of Time," I called out.

"Picasso's Early Works," he answered.

"America's 46th President: A Biography," I screamed.

"Canning For A New Generation."

"Canning?" I stopped in my tracks.

"Yes, *canning*, Maeva. Have you not heard of it?"

For a moment I didn't respond. Then he peeked around the corner at me. My laughter erupted like a blooming cactus I'd seen along the highway. It was perhaps the first time I had laughed since meeting him.

Silence followed for a long time as each of us explored. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder, pushing the waves over toward my neck. He leaned down towards me, and whispered, "I found what I wanted to show you." Then he laid a kiss there, where he swept away my hair, and I felt as if my neck had caught fire.

I let him take my hand. I let him lead me first through *World History* and then through *Romance* and finally through a section called *New Age*.

Hidden in the back corner of Book People was a section with which I was unfamiliar. It was his section. *Erotica* was printed in big white letters on the black sign. I knew most of the words in the titles, but not in their new context: flogged, spanked, dominance, edging, coming. I felt like I was standing in the middle of a mystery and my body had the clues to figure it out. I bit my lip and grew warmer inside, like a spring day was erupting in my pelvis. I looked over to Luke, who looked excited but unsurprised. This is what he had known for much longer than me.

I stared up at him. He'd pulled his coppery hair back in a leather wrap. He smelled masculine, like a freshly sliced tuber dressed in bay leaves sitting next to an open fire. I thought back over the few weeks I'd known him, and I wondered why he'd tolerated me. Maybe because there aren't that many of us left. Maybe because there simply weren't other options. Or perhaps he simply sensed something in me, and was willing to take a chance.

I grabbed a book titled *Erotic Tales of Transatlantic Travel*. The book was smooth in my palms. My hand trembled. I wanted my life to change in that moment because of these new words and definitions.

Pushing the book into Luke's chest, I said, "Read to me. Show me."

"Show you what?" he asked as if leading me on, teasing me.

"What the words mean."

He pulled me into him, and wrapped one arm around my shoulders. Then he opened the book to a random page.

"When the gentleman on the train slipped his hand between my legs, I was already wet. I was seduced by the look of him standing there in his black tuxedo with my red lipstick on his face and collar."

My body pulsed and expanded with every word he read. So by the time Luke turned me towards the wall of books and slid the straps of my linen dress off my shoulders, the honeyed scent of my arousal was already mixing with the musty one of the bookstore. My sex was pulsing and aching for his touch.

He stopped reading just before he slid a finger into my cunt. I leaned forward at the waist and bent in front of him, so he could press deeper inside me. He started reading to me again when he hit three fingers, which was exactly what the characters in the story were doing. When he eventually pressed his dick to the

opening of my sex, I was backing into him, rooting around for him so that he could touch me even deeper.

When he pushed himself into me, that's when I started to moan and erupt like the thunder outside had been doing all morning. Luke tried to read louder than me then as he fucked me from behind, but in the end he started laughing angelically at my nonsensical vocalizations.

"Maeva, if you don't stop talking, if you don't stop screaming, then I can't teach you new words. I can't read to you."

Luke reads now from a story called "Coming Home."

"Her cunt wound tight and she felt like a river ready to break a damn."

I tighten, waiting for something that I've felt a few times before. It hadn't meant anything then. It wasn't this strong before, this passionate. Now there is clarity as I hear all of these glorious words and listen to these erotic tales.

"Taylor begged him to fuck her harder," Luke reads.

"Fuck me harder, Luke."

He complies and I feel some place inside myself soften and release. I feel as if I glitter in the sun like the glass on the road outside. Though I've been repeating words back to him this whole time, as I come they filter through my brain quietly. It goes on for minutes that feel like days.

Luke feels it too, because he stops reading. He becomes the in and out motion of his breath. His hand on my spine infuses into me when he comes.

As we lay in the corner together afterwards, he holds me in his arms. Like this, with him, I feel transformable. I'm malleable.

"So Maeva," he says after a while. "I think you found your specialty."

"Yes, you may be right."

I smile as I imagine us purveying this gift, our gift, across the land.

Luke wraps his leg over mine and pulls me in closer to him. His sticky cock grows hard again on my back. He kisses my cheek.

"It will be very good for population growth," I say.

Luke laughs, the sound dulled by the soft books surrounding us. "You're a real piece of work."

"No, we're a real bit of work," I answer, and reach around behind me to stroke him again.