

## Too bright to see / [Book]

Kyle Lukoff.

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Lukoff, Kyle.

### Too bright to see

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Book

### OVERVIEW

In the summer before middle school, eleven-year-old Bug must contend with best friend Moira suddenly caring about clothes, makeup, and boys; a ghost haunting; and the truth about Bug's gender identity.

## nineteen

The next morning I wake up from a normal dream, fleeting shards of barely memory, and look around my room. Nothing has visited it in the night, nothing's different. But inside of me, everything is different.

I have to tell Moira. The way she reacted to my haircut is a good sign, she clearly understood that there was something bigger going on. I don't think she'll suddenly hate me, or think that I'm crazy, but after I call to invite her along on a mall trip I rehearse some answers to questions she might ask. The pamphlets under Uncle Roderick's bed come in handy.

She bikes over a couple hours later, and before we leave Mom gives us some space. I sit Moira down at the kitchen table with a glass of lemonade.

"Something's going on," she says. "You've never asked me to go shopping with you before. What is it? Are you moving? Redecorating your room?"

I grin. She has no idea. "I'm a boy," I tell her. Best to just barrel ahead, get it all out at once. "The word for that is transgender. You can still call me Bug for now, but I'm going to choose a new name and might start going by that before the first day of school. Or I might wait till later, I'm not sure yet." No matter what her response is, just saying it makes me feel powerful. Awake. Like everything before this has been a dream that I'm just waking up from.

She chokes on her lemonade and starts coughing. I laugh. "Sorry, should have waited for you to swallow."

She swats at me, her face beet red. "You really should have!" she strangles out. "Way to practically kill your best friend." She takes another sip, and slowly her color returns to normal.

Whatever anxiety I felt subsides when she calls herself my best friend. "Do you have any questions?" I ask her seriously. "About what it means to be transgender, or anything? It's okay if you do."

## Too Bright to See- Lukoff

Some concerns: Found in elementary libraries, child questioning gender, transgender/gender identity, confusing mature topics including LGBTQ+ that should be discussed at home with parents, medically/factually inaccurate and confusing to children.

shirt rides up just a bit. For a second I can see an expanse of skin above his shorts line. It's smooth and flat with a tiny bit of fuzz around his belly button, and suddenly I'm so, so jealous, but I don't know of what. We're about the same size, I've never really felt like I had to lose or gain weight, but suddenly I want to wear shorts and a T-shirt and have it look like that. Not like they do on me. Similar, but unnameably different. My stomach flips itself over again, like it did yesterday, and I don't want to ruin what a nice day we had by leaving in a weird, anxious, uncomfortable rush.

Luckily, it's about time I head home anyway. We finish our lemonade, dissecting the different kinds of spirits we might have sensed, which ones we think they are—actual presences, bursts of energy, or just memories held by a space. We talk about hanging out again, maybe me showing him around my house, and I get on my bike and point it toward home.

It was a relief to be around unfamiliar ghosts that weren't trying to tell me something. That weren't remnants of someone I love. As my bike careens down the dirt roads my mind is pulled back to the box under Uncle Roderick's bed.

I had read some of the stories in there, in different pamphlets and things, and they weren't what I had expected. For some reason I thought that being trans was all about your . . . you know, private parts. Like, knowing that they're wrong, and that you should have the other kind. But that almost never came up. A lot of the trans people telling their stories talked more about a general feeling of not-rightness. Like people looking at you through a frosted glass window, guessing at what they were seeing.

But that just sounds normal to me. It must be more of a human thing. I'm not trans, but I always feel like people are looking at me and seeing something wrong. Everything that's wrong with me, I mean. Even though none of it is anything that can be easily described. I look okay on the outside, but every piece of me just adds up to something not quite right.

And sure, that *could* mean that I'm trans too, but I know that it doesn't. Another thing all those articles were clear on is that trans people really are the genders they identify with. That arguments saying otherwise are transphobic, pure and simple. Like, a phrase I kept seeing repeated over and over again was "trans men are men" and "trans women are women." A sure, unshakeable truth. But I don't think that I *am* a boy. I don't feel like a boy that everyone thinks is a girl. I just feel like an uncomfortable, misshapen, squishy



titled "Local Resources for LGBTQ Youth." The one underneath is called "Our Stories," and it's a few pages stapled together. I skim through it, and it looks like stories of gay and lesbian and trans teenagers talking about themselves.

The rest of the box is filled with papers like this. Lots of newspaper and magazine articles, some about gay and lesbian people, but mostly about transgender people. There's an entire *Time* magazine, with an actress named Laverne Cox on the cover. And an issue of *National Geographic* with another trans person, this one a kid, on the front. There are some brochures and flyers and even some books jammed in there.

I know what "transgender" means. It means that someone is born one way, a girl or a boy, but that doesn't feel right to them, so they change. Maybe they take medicine or get different surgeries. I don't remember learning about it specifically, but Mom and Uncle Roderick would talk about it sometimes. I know they both had trans friends when they lived in the city, and sometimes those friends would visit. I remember being surprised when I found out that most kids lived with their mom and dad, because I hadn't figured out that having a father was normal. But people being LGBTQ was something I always knew about.

## Author's note

Your friend: "Ooh, that book looks good! What's it about?"

You, maybe: "It's a ghost story! It's about a kid named Bug, her uncle—I mean, his uncle—uh, wait, so, their uncle—um."

If you're having a hard time figuring out how to refer to Bug, or Tommy, and how to talk about his story, that's okay. I'm not always sure how to talk about it either!

When people talk about my childhood, I want them to refer to me as he: "When Kyle was little his family lived in Chicago," even though when we lived in Chicago everyone still thought I was a girl, even me. Most trans people I know want to be talked about the same way. But Bug doesn't know that about himself, for most of this book, so it's also okay that people in the story are calling him "she" and "her."

But if you've just finished this book, and want to tell your friend to read it, you probably don't want to call Bug she/her, because you know better. But referring to Bug as he/him might feel like taking away your friend's chance to fully experience the story.

Here's what I do: When people ask what my book is about, I say, "It's about a kid being haunted by the ghost of their dead uncle into figuring out something important!" Bug never uses they/them pronouns, but I hope that if I say it quickly enough, the person I'm talking to won't really notice. If the person asks for more details I might say that it's kind of a scary story, and also a sad story but with a mostly happy ending, and that it's about figuring out how to make friends, being who you are, and letting go of someone you love.

If you're talking about the book with a friend who's also read it, of course you can call Bug he/him the whole time (and I hope you do). But I also trust you to describe it to someone who hasn't read it yet, in whatever way feels right to you, so long as you hold the truth of who Bug is in your heart. Thank you for joining him along the way.

ever restroom is most comfortable, and that his teachers will be asked to refer to him exclusively as 'Bug,' instead of his legal name, and with male pronouns."

I kept a close eye on Mrs. Campbell during Mom's little speech. We had agreed that she would start the conversation, so the principal would know for sure that she was on my side. I could answer questions and talk about what I wanted too, but we thought it was a good idea for Mom to introduce me.

The older woman's face didn't change at all. The same warm smile, the same concerned eyes. She looked back and forth between me and Mom, but I didn't get the sense that she was staring at me or avoiding me. When Mom finished and steeped her hands on the desk, Mrs. Campbell took a deep breath, and seemed to organize her thoughts before speaking.

"First, let me say thank you for being so proactive. I can tell that Bug has a strong network of support, and that is the key to success in middle school."

"Second, as far as I know, Bug will be our first transgender student. But the administration and teaching staff operate under the assumption that any child could be transgender, or identify in some other way that they haven't shared with us. Some of our restrooms are gender-segregated, but we have five single-stall restrooms evenly spaced throughout the building. Bug can use whichever ones he thinks are best. I'll make sure the name 'Bug' appears on the attendance charts, and in case his legal name is also on there, I'll let his teachers know to keep that confidential."

I stared at her, my mouth open. I had let myself hope that this meeting wouldn't be terrible, but was also prepared to fight. I didn't want to argue about how real and valid my identity was, but knew I might have to. I wasn't expecting her to be so ready. Nothing that I read had prepared me for this.

The pause hung in the air. I guessed it was my turn to say something. "Um, thank you, Mrs. Campbell. That all sounds very... good." Great, I thought, way to show her you can speak for yourself. I came up with something serious to ask. "My mom mentioned an anti-bullying policy, do you think that's something I'll have to worry about? You talked a lot about the teachers but not much about the kids." My birthday party with Chelsey and Chloe and Hypatia gave me a good first impression of this place, but I was still nervous about meeting hundreds of new people.

turning our home into something else, hover above our heads like another kind of specter. "What were you looking at?" she asks.

I'm glad she's changing the subject. "I found these papers," I tell her. "Just wondering where they all came from."

She picks up a few, flips through them. "I mean, I know where the magazines and books came from," I explain. "But all the brochures and stuff? They're about, like, LGBTQ people. But I don't know where he could have picked them up."

"I recognize a lot of these," she says. "Some of them are old keepsakes from groups he was involved with in the city. And he liked to pick up information whenever we were somewhere with an LGBTQ center. Not because he needed it, I think, just because he liked the physical materials. Like a little archive, or museum."

I feel a sharp pain rise in my chest. I never knew these were here. I wish he had shared them with me. I don't want to look through them with Mom, but I don't know why. She knows that Uncle Roderick was gay, of course. She knows more about his life than I ever will. But this still feels like something between him and me. He wanted me to find these. There's something here he wants me to understand.

I put everything back in the bin, try to put them in orderly stacks. Mom adds the few she picked up to the pile, and I shove the bin back under the bed.

My uncle isn't resting in peace, and these papers are related, somehow. I just know it.



## Epilogue

Uncle Roderick and I are by the creek. It's a sunny day, and we're having a picnic. My old baby blanket, tattered into a rag years ago, is suddenly a wide and plush quilt spread out across the dream-scape. I'm eating cotton candy; it tastes like stars and clouds and rain. Uncle Roderick is eating from a jar of pickled okra. The sun is hot, making my eyes squint. I can't see him clearly—he keeps flickering in and out of my vision. But I know he's smiling.

"You did it, Bug."

"What did I do?"

"Figured it out. Figured yourself out."

"You helped." I look down at my body. My legs are strong. My arms are toned and tanned. My chest is flat, my shorts sit easily around my waist.

"I wish I could help more. You have the rest of your life to live with this. I don't. But I wish I could tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"How to be. How to be yourself. How to embrace the trials. How to use the triumphs. How to fight and play and win and lose."

"You got me this far. I'd have to find out for myself anyway." I still can't open my eyes all the way, but the taste of rain is still sweet on my tongue. I feel arms around me and I know it's Uncle Roderick hugging me.

"Thank you," I tell him. He kisses me on the cheek. The tightness of his embrace fades away. His middle name was Thomas, I remember. Tommy. That's a good name. I can live with that.

humanoid, and sure, maybe if I got to look like a boy and everyone thought I was a boy, that would make me feel better. Like if I looked more like Griffin, if my clothes fit like his did, if people looked at us and saw two boys together, I mean, of course I'd like that. But trans people are their genders. I just . . . want. Something. Which is different.

I wonder what it must be like to know something like that about yourself, know it clearly and truly, but not be able to live it, and then my legs go limp and rubbery and I almost fall off my bike at the side of the road. Suddenly, I'm sitting on the dirt crying, because the truth hits me all at once and it's so, so awful.

Uncle Roderick was transgender. I'm sure of it. That's what he wanted me to know. About being yourself. How he wasn't. Couldn't be. Why else would he have gathered all that information? Why else would he keep it under his bed? He knew, and he never told us.

Maybe he had a whole different name we should have been using this whole time. Maybe he—she? Maybe this was something that . . . they? Had wanted to do before dying. Oh no. With "Roderick" written on all those condolence cards. And all of our memories. Is this it?

Did this death come without anyone really knowing what was inside the person we all loved so much? I can't imagine anything worse, and it makes me want to break apart.

belly, pull up the bed skirt, and immediately sneeze from the dust that puffs up around me. It settles around the clear plastic storage boxes lurking under his bed. I pull them out, one by one. It's hard to believe that there could be deep dark secrets about Uncle Roderick's life concealed in such plain, boring containers, but maybe that makes them the best hiding places.

I pull the lid off the first one, and it's full of random costume pieces. Lots of necklaces and bracelets and earrings. Some of them are pretty ugly and are probably jokes. Clunky huge plastic and wood, bright colors and gaudy tassels and rhinestones. Some of them might be nice, but I don't know much about jewelry, so maybe all of it is actually terrible. Or maybe all of it is beautiful. There are a few wigs scrunched up in a corner, random scraps of fabric. The next one is full of his makeup collection, painstakingly gathered over the years, still looking bright and brand-new.

A sudden flash of memory hits me. We're in his bedroom, sitting on the floor. I'm five years old, or somewhere around there, and we're playing dress-up. I remember draping necklace after necklace on him, and he's wearing a ridiculous tiara. I'm wearing one of his hats, a top hat, a tall and fancy thing made for a man from a hundred years ago. I tell him he looks beautiful. He tells me I look handsome. And I remember a glow deep inside my chest, like he was right, like he saw who I was going to be.

I jerk my head again, this time to shake out the memory. Someday I'll be ready to remember Uncle Roderick, but not today. Today I have to focus on what he's doing right now, and what I need to do. And I don't think this box is what he's guiding me toward.

I open the next box. This one is full of papers. One stack is all medical forms, and I flip through them quickly, avoiding any specific information about his diagnosis, treatment, prognosis. Another looks like random documents, IRS stamped in the corner, so probably tax stuff.

But most of the papers are something else. There's a big folder with the letters PFLAG blazing across the front. Written in curly type underneath are the words "Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays."

I've heard about PFLAG before. It's a support group, I think? But Uncle Roderick never needed any support. He had us. I flip open the folder.

The first piece of paper is bright yellow, with the words "Transgender 101" written across the top. The one beneath it is green,