

Girls – by Cathrine Sandmæl

Eli has just moved to a small town outside of Oslo, Norway. Fortunately, she's managed to find a place in a group of girls who love manga and admire her drawing skills.

On her way to school, she listens to music and daydreams about being a superheroine facing off against her archrival, Narissa, dressed in a tight pink outfit and armed with magical powers.

"So you really think you're getting away that easily?" Narissa laughs, trapping Eli in a corner.

"Ha! Got you! I've been looking forward to this! At last—my revenge!"

"Is that so?" Eli replies confidently. "If it's revenge you want, you'll have to fight for it!"

"Less talking, more fighting!" Narissa hisses, but to her great annoyance, Eli pauses the attack and says, "Is that all you've got? Pfft!"

Eli lands a kick. POW! "I'm just getting warmed up. LET'S GO!"

Hey! Emo-Eli! I've got an emo joke for you!"

Eli barely hears it through the music in her earbuds. It's that awful group of boys at school picking on her again.

"Hello? Are you deaf or something?!" Lars sneers.

"She probably wrecked her hearing with all that damn emo music," says one of the others.

As she's walking into the classroom, she catches the last remark:

"Hey, how many emos does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

Ignore them, ignore them, ignore them... Eli thinks. Do they seriously not have anything better to do? Ugh... It didn't even take a month after I moved here before they started calling me 'Emo-Eli.' And they're just as 'creative' as the bullies I had at my last school. Gross...

Eli turns off the music and grabs her schoolbooks from her locker.

There's got to be something else they could call me. Sure, it rhymes...

Suddenly, Eli is nearly tackled by an overly enthusiastic hug from her best friend Vii—well, Victoria.

"Vii, I swear, one day you're going to give me a heart attack!"

"Heehee, it's just how I show love!" Vii laughs, helping Eli back to her feet.

"Oh! I've written a new chapter of my vampire story!" Vii adds excitedly.

"Nice! At this point, math class just isn't the same without it!"

"You *have* to read it!"

"When solving probability equations, it's important to consider all the factors," drones the teacher at the whiteboard. "Yes, this will be on your math test next week... You might think you'll never use this in real life, but actually, you'll use—blah blah blah..."

Eli and Vii have completely tuned out.

"Psst, can you draw a sexy vampire for me?" Vii grins.

"I knew you'd ask," Eli replies, already sketching in her notebook.

“There. With red eyes. Just how you like them.”
“Yeeeeessss!”

“Eli, are you paying attention?” the teacher interrupts. “Can you tell me how you would solve this problem?” She gives Eli a tired look.

“If there are 350 girls and 250 boys in a school with 600 students, what’s the probability a girl will be elected as student council president?”

“Uuuuhhh...” Eli feels herself falling into a mental void.

“We just did this on the board. You can do this, Eli.”

“Uuuuhhh...”

“Wait a minute!” Vii breaks in. “What about the vampires?! This question is discriminatory toward vampires!”

“Vampires?” the teacher sighs. “...You know what? I think this lesson is over.”

“You totally saved me back there. But seriously, I’m going to fail that test.”

Eli and Vii are walking to their next class—but they don’t have it together. Eli’s in B-Base, and Vii is in A-Base.

“No way! You’ll do just fine, promise! Gotta run, but I’ll see you at lunch!” Vii calls.

“Okay, talk soon!”

And then Eli is alone again.

As she looks around the girls in her B-base class, she thinks,
I hate not being in the same class as Vii... it’s just a bunch of normal, preppy girls in my main class. They treat me like ‘that weird new emo girl’ nobody wants to talk to. ‘Why don’t you try to make friends with the other girls?’ Bleh... those preppy girls are just so... different. Just look at them—everything about them is so... perfect. Camilla, for example. She works out, has perfect curves and probably a C-cup... she wears branded jeans, her hair is always super shiny... flawless skin and makeup... and of course, perfect plucked eyebrows.

Eli remembers the one time she tried to pluck her eyebrows and, teary-eyed, told her reflection:
“*This is torture!*”

“*Seriously, I can’t even manage my eyebrows!*” she thinks, ashamed.

“*They’re just so... impossibly pretty.*”

Eli stares at Camilla. Suddenly, Camilla turns around and looks back at her.

“*Shit shit shit shit!*” Eli thinks and yanks her gaze down into a book.

Finally, it’s lunchtime, and Eli anxiously scans the cafeteria for Vii and the others.

“Where are they...”

“ELI!” Vii calls from a table in the corner. “Over here! We saved this seat for you!”

“Thanks!” Eli smiles with relief.

“We got out of class early, so we’ve been here for a while,” says Nina.

“Seriously? Our teachers in B-base aren’t that nice.”

"That's what I'm saying—you should switch to A-base instead."

"Just don't switch to C-base, our class is 90% athletes trying to get into KG," says Frida.

"Mhmm..." Vii murmurs, nose in a book.

"Ha ha, that sounds like my class already. So thanks, but no thanks. As long as I have breaks with you guys, everything's alright." Eli pulls a book from her backpack.

"Oh, Nina, I brought back that manga I borrowed."

"Ah, thanks! Did you like it?"

"Yes! It was so exciting!"

"I thought you would. I brought volume two if you want to borrow it."

"Oh! I'd love to!"

The conversation picks up around the table.

"Are you guys talking about Naruto? I'm so hooked, it's insanely good!" says Frida.

"Yeah, it's almost as funny as *Ranma 1/2*," someone adds.

"Ha ha, totally agree!" laughs Nina.

"Naruto and Sasuke are my new favorite ship. They are so gay for each other!"

"Seriously? They're rivals, they don't even like each other, they can't be a couple!"

"I knoooow, but the way they hate each other is so intense, they must like each other, hehe!"

"Ugh, I don't get this whole 'shipping' thing..."

Eli glances over at Nina, who's reading a book.

"What book is that, Nina?"

"Hm?"

"Is it a manga too?"

"Yeah, it's a really cute yaoi manga I found at Outland in Oslo. It's sooo sweet, I'm totally obsessed! It's called *Lemon Garden* and it's about a rich man who falls in love with his gardener."

"Got it. Can I take a look?" Eli asks, curious, and Nina hands her the book.

"Sure! I finished it during history class earlier, hehe!"

"What? You read that in class? Isn't yaoi basically porn?" someone at the table asks.

"No, it's just a romantic story that happens to include sex," Nina explains.

"...Wow," thinks Eli.

"I like how their relationship develops, it's really sweet."

"Can I see?" asks Trine, pulling out her earbuds.

"I didn't know you read manga, Trine," Eli says, handing her the book.

"No, but I got curious when you said it was kinda dirty."

"Okay, it's a little sexy," Nina says, "but I think the sex part really fits into the romance."

She checks the time. "Oh wow, break's over in two minutes. Let's pack up!"

"Vii, are you coming to the birthday party tomorrow?" Frida asks.

"Of course!" Vii replies. "What about you, Eli? Eli?"

But Eli is far away in her thoughts. That book sounds reeeaaally interesting...

"Eli, are you coming to Frida's birthday too?" Vii asks.

"Ah, sorry, I spaced out."

"My mom's driving—want a ride?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't say no to that!"

"Nice! See you tomorrow, then! Later!" Vii waves enthusiastically at her.

“Bye! See you!” the others chime in.
“Yeah, see you!” Eli waves back.

Eli reluctantly heads back to her class. She looks up at the B-base sign and sighs. Then she pulls herself together and thinks, *Let’s go*.

The last hours of school crawl by. First history: “Some would say the war started because of...” Then PE, and finally music: “Let’s sing! I’m walking in the path of Jesus!”

Almost the weekend, almost the weekend... Eli thinks.

“Yes, finally. Freedom!” Eli is heading out of school.
“Shit, there’s Lars and the guys from class! Maybe if I pretend I’m busy, they’ll leave me alone.”

Eli pulls out her phone and looks down.
Please please don’t notice me. Please please please please please... Yes! I can walk in peace!

Eli exhales in relief. She made it through unnoticed.

On the way home, she slips back into her daydream. Eli has the upper hand as Narissa stumbles backward.

“AGH! Wipe that smirk off your face—this isn’t over!” Narissa growls.
“Really?” superhero-Eli replies. “You can barely stand up.”
“Just wait—next time, I’ll beat you. You hear me? Next time!”
“Yeah, yeah, sure,” Eli says with a crooked grin.

When she gets home, Eli receives a text from her dad:

Dad: I’ll be home late today, working overtime. :(

“Looks like I’ll be home alone for a while,” Eli thinks sadly and heads upstairs to her room.

But there’s her little brother, Martin, already there, playing PlayStation.

“Yo!” he says with a crooked grin.

“Ah, Martin! You scared me! Don’t you usually finish school at 3:30 on Fridays?”

“Yeah, but we had a sub, so we got to leave early.”

“Lucky!”

“I know!”

“But tell me next time you borrow my room, okay?”

“Sorry. I was gonna move the PlayStation to the living room, but I was feeling lazy. Can I just beat the boss before I move?”

Martin flashes a big, pleading smile.

“...Fine.” Eli sits down and watches him play.

“Can we watch some anime tonight? How about *Inuyasha*, maybe?” Martin asks.

“Sure, I just need to download the episodes first.”

“Nice. Do you know when Dad’s coming home?”

“He texted and said he’s working overtime, so dinner’ll be late. I hope it’s tacos. But he probably won’t be later than six.”

“He’s been working a lot of overtime lately,” Martin says while continuing his game.

“Hmm...”

“I hope we’re not having money problems again,” Martin adds with a worried look.

“Hard to say. He’s not exactly the chatty type.”
“Yeah, true...”

“OH SHIT, BOSS FIGHT!!” Martin suddenly yells. “I finally did it! YES!”
“Y-yay...” Eli laughs.
“I’m off to make some noodles. Can you start downloading the episodes?”
“Yup, doing it now,” Eli replies and sits down at the computer.

She starts searching for the episode online and clicks the mouse.
“Let’s see... Does Pirate Bay have the ones we’re missing? They’ve got episode 20, 21, 22... ah, there it is! Episode 23.”

Almost instantly, the computer says: **DOWNLOAD COMPLETED.**
“Huh? That was suspiciously fast...” But when she opens the file, she hears:
‘I DID NOT. HAVE ANY. SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH THAT WOMAN.’
“Ugh, it’s a fake. Of course...”

Eli keeps looking and finds another file.
‘2 YEARS UNTIL COMPL—
2 WEEKS UNT—
2 DA—
2 HOURS UNTIL COMPLETED’

“There we go! If the file’s that big, it must be the real one.”
Eli leans back in her chair, waiting for the download to finish, and starts thinking about the manga series they talked about in the cafeteria.
Hmm... I wonder... I’m kind of curious how much fanart there is of Sasuke and Naruto as a couple, like Kris mentioned at school. Are they really that popular?

She searches—and the screen quickly fills with fanart of the two boys in intimate embraces.
Eli blushes.
“...Whoa.”

Suddenly her brother is standing in the doorway.
“Dad wants to know if we can help with dinner!”

Eli jumps up and yells, “AAAH!” slamming the browser shut in a panic.
“W-wait a sec!”
“Jeez, you get jumpy so easily,” her brother teases with a grin.
“Shut up,” Eli says, half-smiling.

The next day, Vii and her mom pick up Eli on the way to Kris’ birthday party.
At the party, the mood is good, and Eli feels happy to finally be at a real birthday celebration again. Back at her old school, she was never invited to anything.

She walks into the kitchen to get more cake. There, Trine and Nina are sitting, chatting about manga—and how in Japan there are whole genres for gay and lesbian romances called *shounen-ai* and *shoujo-ai*.

Then Trine casually mentions that she’s kissed both girls and boys before.
But girls, she says, are better—because they’re softer.

“You two should try it sometime. Hey, what if we tried it right now?” Trine suggests with a grin. She lines them up and kisses Nina first. Then Eli.

After the kiss, Eli is left sitting there, stunned.
...soft... she thinks, touching her lips.

When the party is over and Eli goes to say goodbye to Trine and Nina, Trine gives her a goodbye kiss.
And so does Nina.

Then something strange happens.
As Nina’s lips touch hers, Eli feels like she’s falling—falling and falling backward into an endless void.

What’s happening?
Am I in love with Nina?
Have I ever been in love with a boy?
How do you even know if you’re in love?

In the days that follow, Eli can’t stop thinking about the kiss.
She realizes she’s queer.
And that she has a *major* crush on Nina.

Eli actually likes having this secret.
A quiet, sweet truth tucked away inside her.
Being queer—and being in love—feels kind of beautiful.
And best of all: she doesn’t have to like boys.

She begins daydreaming more and more.
About kissing.
About girls.

But when she’s about to see Nina at school again, nerves completely take over.
The friend group is sitting at their usual table in the cafeteria, all caught up in something else.

This fall’s big event: **The Autumn Ball.**

And of course... they all have to dress up.
Ugh.
With dresses.

Together, the whole group heads into Oslo.
Nina finds a super cool dress.

Eli blushes and starts sweating—Nina looks so good.
And she smells amazing.

They shop for manga, and Eli helps Nina carry all the bags.
On the way to the train, they walk arm in arm.

And on the train home, they sit side by side, sharing earbuds and listening to music—until Nina falls asleep on Eli’s shoulder.

Vii notices something’s up.
As they get off the train, she pulls Eli aside.

“So... what’s going on?”

Reluctantly, Eli confesses her feelings.
But Vii has to *promise* not to say anything.

Right then—Nina appears behind them.
Did she hear what they were saying?

In the days leading up to the autumn ball, Eli goes back and forth.
Should she tell Nina how she feels?

Her biggest fear is rejection.
Or worse—that everything will get super awkward.
What if it ruins their friendship?
What if Nina doesn’t feel the same?

But when the big night finally arrives, things seem to go *just right* for Eli.
Nina asks if they want to dance.
They walk hand in hand.

Then Trine pulls out her phone and suggests they take some “kissy pics.”
Nina turns to Eli and says,
“Wanna do one with me?”

Eli swallows hard.
She takes the chance—
leans in—
and gently opens her mouth to kiss Nina *for real*.

“STOP!” Nina shouts, pushing Eli away.
Eli stumbles backward.

Stunned.
Devastated.
Ashamed.

She runs from the dance, tears streaming down her cheeks.

She’s crushed.
She kissed someone who didn’t want to be kissed.
So gross.

And now?
What happens to her friend group?
Will Nina ever talk to her again?

This is a funny and heartfelt coming-of-age story about friendship, love, and discovering who you are—both in relation to yourself and to others.