

# DRAMA AND **LIKES** IN HIGH SCHOOL



**SECRETS**

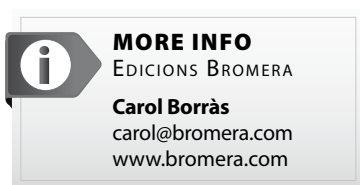
Gemma Pasqual i Escrivà

Translated from the Catalan by Andrew McDougall

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## JUST ALOMA. ME.

Let's see, where should I begin? Perhaps with my name. Everyone, absolutely everyone, thinks I'm named Aloma after the novel by Mercè Rodoreda. Everyone except my parents, of course, who are responsible for this cultural misunderstanding. Whenever someone says to me, *Oh, Aloma, like the Rodoreda novel!* I don't know what's more tiring: explaining to them that that's not the case, or seeing their blank expressions when I tell them the truth.

The name comes from my grandfather, my mum's dad, a man who, they say, was quite a character. The story goes like this: when my mum was pregnant with me, everyone was sure I was going to be a boy, and that I would be called Roger, like him, but when they found out I was a girl, they didn't have a plan B. That's when my grandad decided that this wasn't going to be a problem. *You'll call her Aloma*, he decreed, as if he were a king choosing the name of an earldom. *It's a pretty name and a girl should have a pretty name.* Just like that. But there was also a second reason: my grandad was a fan of Ramon Llull, while he had never read Rodoreda. For him, Aloma came from the character in Llull's novel *Blanquerna*. And said and done, they called me Aloma.



So that's how my story began. A name with literary origins and a family that seemed straight out of a work of fiction. However, the truth is that life is not like a Netflix series. Either that or someone decided to improvise with my plot. Because, honestly, if my life were a series, I think it would be one of those comedies full of family farces, minor teen dramas and scenes where the protagonist – which is to say, me – makes a fool of themselves. The difference is that, in series, there's always a cool soundtrack in the background. In my life, there's just the shouts of my little brother, Roger (yes, he's named after my grandad), trying to get my attention. How can I describe him? It's as if someone had bottled an earthquake in a six-year-old human body. Inexhaustible energy, destructive capacity and the constant need to turn everything upside down. One time, he decided to check if my phone was water resistant. Spoiler: it wasn't. It ended up in the toilet and I was crying on the floor while he looked at me with his little angel face.

Roger has a strange hobby: asking absurd questions. The other day he left me open-mouthed when he asked me if birds do peepee. Obviously, I had to Google it because I had no idea. And no, I found out that birds don't do peepee like us because they excrete everything all together...but I didn't tell him that because I didn't want him to try doing experiments on the pigeons in the park.

Also, Roger had another great skill: dirtying everything he touched. It's as if he had a secret power where any clean thing he touched became filthy in a matter of seconds.



However, despite everything, for some reason I still I can't quite understand, I love him. It's as if fraternal love were some kind of irrational magic, because look at all the things he does to me, but I can't stay mad for long. Maybe it's because, underneath that tornado, there is a little Roger who just wants a bit of attention. Or maybe it's because fraternal love just doesn't make sense. And that's okay.

Then there's my parents. And, honestly, I don't know how they do it. My mum is a nursing assistant and my dad is a taxi driver. Between shifts, standbys and a thousand other things, it seems like they never stop. When my dad has a night shift, mum is on call. When mum gets home, dad is already starting his car to leave. It's as if they were the leads in a complex choreography that only they understood.

I admire them. They do all they can and more. However, of course, in this corner of organised chaos, it sometimes falls to me to maintain order, especially with Roger. This being a full-time babysitter, while trying to survive adolescence, is is no mean feat.

My mum is a practical woman. If anything in the house breaks, don't waste your time looking for a specialist, because she'll already have the screwdriver in her hand before you can call for help. She's like a lighthouse in the midst of a storm: resolute, determined and, let's be honest, bossy. But, of course, you can't say anything to her because Hiro Hamada from *Big Hero 6* is always right. Always.

My dad, on the other hand, is one of those people who are always in a rush but never stop smiling. Thanks to the taxi,



he knows the whole city and if you ask him where anywhere is, he'll give you better directions than even Google Maps. However, that said, when he gets home, the taxi driver stays outside and the star chef comes in. Truly, he's incredible. He makes dishes that look straight out of a fancy restaurant, with the presentation and everything. If there was a family edition of *Masterchef*, he would win hands down: spectacular food and impeccable service.

The two of them are a curious couple. But, as disorganised as everything might seem, they always end up making everything work.

As for me, I'm not exactly the most popular girl in school, nor the most brilliant student, nor the sportiest. I'm the one who tries to go unnoticed and, with a bit of luck, make it to the end of term without major disasters. Why? Because I have a golden rule: the less they know about you, the better.

Joan is my best friend, the person who makes me laugh even when it seems like the world is about to end. He's the kind of friend who carries your rucksack when you've decided to check out half the library while also giving you a hard time over it, as if he were making a heroic sacrifice. *Aloma, this weighs almost as much as me*, he always says, as if he wasn't all skin and bones. Oh, and he always carries his camera round his neck. He seems to have discovered that his camera is the best shield with which to maintain a safe distance with the world. Joan is a like one of those books that hook you from the first page: full of interesting chapters, moments that make you laugh out loud, others



that make you think, and some which make you cry out: *but how can he be so patient?* Yes, because if there's one thing Joan needs, it's patience. Especially, with people at school.

Joan is adopted and of Vietnamese origin. But he's never been to Vietnam. Although that doesn't stop our classmates assigning him the role of *official representative of the whole of Asia*. Distinguishing different countries isn't everyone's strong point, I know, but at our school it's as if someone made geography illegal.

The other day, our classmate Martí decided to enlighten us with his wisdom. He turned to Joan and said:

'Hey, Chinese boy, how do you say *hello* in your language?'

A moment of silence. At this point I was getting ready to intervene, but Joan, who has a PhD in putting up with idiots, just smiled and answered:

'Firstly, Vietnamese. Not Chinese. Secondly, my language is the same as yours, Martí.'

However, of course, Martí doesn't have an off switch. So he carried on.

'Is it annoying that people get you mixed up? I mean, in Asia you all look the same, right?'

This is when Joan switches from zen mode to "that's enough" mode. With a mixture of anger and weariness, he let loose.

'Martí, it doesn't annoy me when people get confused. What annoys me is that you still haven't discovered that



Asia has more than forty countries. Forty. Yes, that's more than there are *Fast and Furious* films. Surprising, right?'

I, meanwhile, was already getting my tongue warmed up and I couldn't stay on the sidelines. So I looked at Martí and took my shot.

'Martí, intelligence follows you, but you're faster.'

It's not just Martí, though. There's also Gina, who thinks that anything "different" is *supercool*. The other day, she said to Joan:

'Oh, Joan, you're so lucky to be Vietnamese. You must do all kinds of exotic rituals and eat insects.'

That's when Joan, in that uniquely calm tone of his, replied:

'Yes, Gina, I have a ritual every morning: I get up, I have tomato on toast for breakfast and I go to school. If that's exotic, you must be from another planet.'

So, for all those that are still unsure, Joan knows where he's from. And if anyone isn't sure where to find Vietnam or a bit of decency, no problem: he'll let them know. With sarcasm. As for me, as always, I'll be at his side, making sure no one dares to argue back.

Joan currently lives with his grandma, Maria. His parents have had to go abroad to work for a year. Not for good, just temporarily... That said, they do come to visit him often.

Personally, I think it's a really interesting idea. I mean, I think sometimes everyone needs a bit of space, don't they? I'd love to send my parents and Roger somewhere far away. Just for a year, of course, don't worry. A while



without Roger yelling or my parents arguing whether the car does or doesn't need an oil change? Where do I sign?

Joan is handling it well, his parents being far away. Every day he videocalls them, tells them how things are going, shows them he's not missing them too much...even though he is. That's Joan for you, he isn't one to complain. He's more the kind of person to find positives in everything, even when things aren't perfect.

Maria's house is one of my favourite places in the world. If there's a special person in my life – besides Joan – it's Maria. She has everything you can imagine: wisdom, patience and an unfailing radar that detects when someone needs advice. I never knew my grandparents. My dad was orphaned when he was little and my mum's parents died not long after I was born. So having someone who spoils you, who tells you stories and makes you feel like the world is a little bit safer, wasn't part of my early years. But then Maria appeared and it was as if someone had gifted me a grandma with superpowers. She has a special talent. You don't need to say anything: she just looks at you and knows what's wrong.

Talking to Maria about books is an experience that everyone should have at least once in their life. She runs the book club at the senior centre with more enthusiasm than an influencer talking about their favourite clothing brand. She talks to you about a book so passionately that you feel like you just have to read it. She's like a machine for generating love for literature. I was already a reader, but



now I'm a book addict. There's always a bit of everything in our conversations: she tells me about the books they're reading at the centre and I tell her about the ones they make us read at school. And when I let out a complaint about how hard some texts are, she smiles and says:

'They just haven't taught you yet that difficult books are like homemade croquetas: at first they're tricky, but in the end, they're worth it.'

Because if anyone knows about croquetas, it's her. Maria's are legendary. I'm not exaggerating when I say that there are people who go to the senior centre just to try to get the recipe from her. But Maria never shares it. She says it's not a question of ingredients, but of patience.

Hold on, don't get me wrong: at home, everything is great. Seriously. I mean, I have parents who love me and a brother, Roger, who is, well...unique. However, naturally, family life isn't a TV advert. Sometimes you need a bit of silence, somewhere where you don't need to compete for attention. A place where you're not *Aloma, Roger's brother* or *Aloma, who complains about everything*. Just Aloma. Me.

When the world seems too complicated, I know I can count on Maria. I go through the door and I see her with that placid smile and suddenly everything looks a little brighter. Never, ever, does she make you feel silly for having a bad day. If you tell her someone at school annoyed you or your maths teacher gives you too much homework, she doesn't look at you with a face that says *come on, child, that's nothing*. No. Maria listens to you, as if what you're saying were



the most important thing in the world. Maria is the grand-  
ma I never had but, somehow, I always needed.

These are my people, as the song by La Pegatina goes:

Eh, eh, eh, eh-eh.  
Eh, eh, eh, eh-eh.  
I've found my people,  
they smile at me,  
and nothing else matters.

And this is my world. It's not perfect, but it's mine. And,  
in a way, I think that's enough.

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My life, my school, my friends, my family...everything seemed like a comedy of errors that I was surviving without attracting much attention. But all that ended the day that **@HiddenFaces** appeared, an account that exposes the secrets of everyone in school. Staying on the sidelines was no longer an option.

My name is **Aloma** and this is my world. It's not perfect, but it's mine. Along with **Joan, Júlia** and **Pol**, I will try to find out who is behind that profile. However, the closer I get, the more I realise that the secrets aren't just other people's business and that social media can be a broken mirror which distorts reality.

*Drama and Likes in High School* is the story of how I discovered that friendship, forgiveness and honesty are more important than appearances. And that loving someone also means trusting them. However, sometimes trust can be a bit of a minefield.

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