

Rhapsodist

Episode 1: "Foolish. Poet."

INT. SCHOOL ASSEMBLY HALL - DAY

A plastic trophy on a table bounces golden sunlight into a primary school hall.

LEXI (11) afro hair twisted into multicoloured clips, wears a school coat and stares at the trophy with lust. She's on the front row chairs; behind her, diverse school-uniformed children and families are packed. Everybody watches two kids standing side by side on a raised platform:

RICHARD (10) holds a fake microphone and lip-syncs to 'Addicted to Love', and PUNEET (11) in a school sports kit, balances a spinning football on his finger. Lexi focuses on Puneet; he transfers the ball to his knee and keeps it up with all parts of his body. Lexi's jaw drops in wonder.

MS. KAPOOR (24, petite) rises from her chair.

MS. KAPOOR

What do we think everybody? Can we hear it for Richard's fantastic performance?

A lukewarm round of applause is ruptured by high pitched congratulatory shrieks from a group of Richard's fans.

MS. KAPOOR (CONT'D)

Thank you, thank you. And now, can we hear it for Puneet?

Fuller applause follows. Lexi whoops enthusiastically.

MS. KAPOOR (CONT'D)

Once again, Puneet, you're through to the next round! Beautiful effort, Richard, please sit down.

Richard skips offstage, untroubled by his defeat. Lexi's family: AFIA (27, radiant), CHARLES (40s, steadfast), BB (4, intense) and JOE (9, gentle), lean into Lexi.

CHARLES

Are you nervous, sausage?

BB

Do you want my acorn?

BB offers her an acorn she's been gripping. Lexi gazes at the golden trophy, stands and unzips her coat to reveal a party dress bedazzled with sequins.

LEXI

No thank you.

Afia, shocked, pulls the coat off her shoulders.

AFIA

What did you do to your dress?!

LEXI

I used the glue gun.

AFIA

Everyone else is in school uniform!

MS. KAPOOR

Now for the final competitor in our
Year 6 Talent Show; our own budding
poet - Lexi Arthur.

BB stands on her chair and squeals encouragement. Afia pulls BB onto her lap. Lexi steps onstage. Puneet spins his football, impressively, beside Lexi. Lexi takes her position and recites, animated:

LEXI

Returning home I find that every
thing that I have ever owned has
been removed and then replaced with
a matching replica / Each item (I
discover) is identical / In shape /
And colour / To its original / But -
here's the inexplicable- /
Everything's two millimetres
smaller!

Unexpected laughter spurs her; she continues:

LITTLE LEXI

On hands and knees locating an
metre ruler / My shrinking world a
clamp of disbelief / I practice my
techniques / Deep breathe / Deep
breathe / And in an illuminating
gap between an outbreath and an in -
/ I remember, with a grin / It's me
again! I've gone and gotten taller!

Spontaneous applause. Puneet scowls. Charles starts a standing ovation. Joe blows a whistle round his neck.

EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - NIGHT

Reflected golden light shimmers on Lexi's cheeks as she hugs the plastic trophy to her chest. The Arthur family stride proudly through the playground-come-car-park towards an ancient Volkswagen Beetle. Charles touches a silver FOUNTAIN PEN clipped inside the top pocket of his shirt, the word "Afia" is engraved on it.

BB

Why is Mum's name on your pen?

LEXI

How do you become Poet Laureate,
Dad?

Charles starts the engine. It stalls. Lexi clips her belt in.

AFIA

It's very hard to become Poet
Laureate; you have to be personally
appointed by the Queen, and there
have only been twenty-one Poet
Laureates in the UK since 1668, and
twenty-one out of twenty-one of
them were white, and twenty out of
twenty-one of them were men.

Charles re-starts the engine.

CHARLES

Yeah, but Lexi could do it, easy-
peasy; she's already a better poet
at eleven than I am at forty-two.

The children laugh at a funny face Charles pulls in the rear
view mirror. Afia twists in her seat to address Lexi, her
Ghanaian flag earrings swing against her jaw.

AFIA

Aiming for something almost
impossible to reach, like Poet
Laureateship, might not be a smart
choice, sweetie.

Charles attempts to start the engine again.

AFIA (CONT'D)

There are so many options with a
great brain like yours, there are
hundreds of other fulfilling
careers that pay good money,
careers that can change the world,
careers that mean you can go on
holidays and have nice things -

Charles, irritated, hits the dash and turns the key again.

LEXI

Why would I need holidays if I'm
doing what I love?

The car finally starts. Charles begins to reverse.

AFIA

Okay, not holidays, then; food-
you'll need money to eat food,
won't you? You have no idea what
the realities of living on a poet's
salary are -

LEXI

-You think I'm gunna fail!

CHARLES

Sausage, your Mum can't help this, she's a statistician; she compulsively analyses data and makes predictions.

Charles side-glances at Afia in gentle warning. Lexis sees it. Lexi opens the car door.

AFIA

Alexis! What are you -

Lexi jumps out of the car and sprints across the playground. BB and Joe press their faces to the car windows. They watch Lexi arrive at Puneet's Dad's Mercedes and hand Puneet her golden trophy. Lexi walks back to the car with folded arms.

The car door closes behind her and she fastens her seatbelt.

LEXI

Predict my future then, Mum.

Silence. The car pulls away. Lexi glares out of the window. She glances longingly at the trophy in Puneet's hands as the car passes by him. BB's acorn lands in Lexi's lap. She looks down at it, then up at Joe and BB who smile compassionately.

LEXI (CONT'D)

(Whispered, to BB and Joe)
Don't worry, I'm gunna get a real solid gold trophy when I'm poet laureate. Just watch.

Charles's hand clasps the engraved FOUNTAIN PEN his pocket. The battered, rusty car rattles off into the distance.

INT. KWIK SAVE SUPERSTORE, BAKERY - DAY

Hands in thin plastic gloves knead dough in a grocery-store bakery. We speed past one pair of hands, two, three - each pounds the dough, rolls it, folds - until we reach LEXI (31, energetic) - whose plastic-gloved fingers hold the FOUNTAIN PEN.

Lexi's writes in a notebook sprinkled with flour. She wears a maroon tabard reading: 'Kwik Save'.

UNDER THE WORKTOP

HUNTER (5, male, non-verbal), his face smeared with butter-icing and jam, crawls past the standing legs of BAKERS at adjacent trays, and taps Lexi's knee.

ABOVE THE WORKTOP

Lexi startles at the tapping, and ducks under the station.

UNDER THE WORKTOP

On her knees, holding her notebook, Lexi faces Hunter:

LEXI
You're not meant to be here,
Hunter.

Lexi lets Hunter touch the notebook.

LEXI (CONT'D)
It's a poem about 'Romeo and
Juliet', do you remember the story?

Hunter nods.

LEXI (CONT'D)
Romeo and Juliet are so in love
with each other that they literally
make the ultimate sacrifice. It's
just... wow.

Lexi uses her tabard to wipe jam off his cheek and dusts crumbs off him as she continues.

LEXI (CONT'D)
And just 'cuz you haven't
started using words don't mean
nothing, okay? Don't let anyone
make you feel small for stuff
you can't do, yeah? Just show
people what you can do; like how
amazing you are at putting
things in order.

Hunter attempts to stop Lexi cleaning him. She playfully hits his hands away. He loves it. So does she. Crumbs fall.

LEXI (CONT'D)
Is this...oh no - is this cake?

Hunter nods. Lexi snaps her face out to:

INT. CAKE AISLE - CONTINUOUS

The cake aisle ends in a glass wall beneath the bakery hatch. Lexi's face squishes to the glass and gawks at the cakes everywhere. Toppled. Smearred. A cake-pocalypse.

LEXI
Donna's gunna murder you.

INT. BAKERY, UNDER THE COUNTER - CONTINUOUS.

Lexi grabs Hunter's hand and they crawl out from under the worktop. They surface next to the bakery trays.

BAKER #1
Interesting batch.

A sad-looking dough ball lies, untouched, on Lexi's tray.

BAKER #1 (CONT'D)
He can't be in here.

Lexi looks for somewhere to hide Hunter, when the door swings open violently. It's MICHAEL (35, neck tattoos).

MICHAEL
Here you are. Sorry, sorry, Lex,
his Mum was rushed to the psych-
ward again over the weekend and the
babysitter cancelled this morning -
eighteen minutes before pick-up -
it's, it's just. Come here, son.

Hunter hides behind Lexi, playful, while she tries to wipe a blob of jam off his sleeve.

LEXI
We've been chatting about
Shakespeare, haven't we, matey?

Michael reaches for Hunter's hand.

MICHAEL
He don't understand that stuff.

BAKER #2 shushes them from her workstation.

LEXI
What?! This kid knows iambic
pentameter!

MICHAEL
Iamb...i- what?

An EMPLOYEE brushes past them, passive-aggressive.

LEXI
Iambic. Show him, Hunt?

Hunter takes a flat palm and beats a rhythm out on his chest:
Di-dum, di-dum, di-dum, di-dum, di-dum.

LEXI (CONT'D)
Ten syllables a line, in pairs of
five, with the stress on the second
syllable, okay? Like - Di-dum, di-
dum, di-dum, di-dum, di-dum!

Michael, impressed, takes Hunter and leads him to the door.

LEXI (CONT'D)
 (To Hunter, stressing the
 iambic)
 Oh, Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art
 thou Romeo?

On his chest, Hunter beats the rhythm back to Lexi, as Michael ushers him out. Michael glances affectionately at Lexi and the door shuts. Lexi peers, proud, through the bakery hatch - but something makes her smile drop...

INT. CAKE AISLE

DONNA (50s, joyless) towers over cake-pocalypse. She makes eye contact with Lexi.

INT. CAKE AISLE

Lexi marches beside Donna who picks her way through the mess.

LEXI
 I go mad for vanilla sponge, Donna.

They arrive at a shelf stacked with birthday cakes. Two of the boxes are open, handfuls of cake having been scooped out.

DONNA
 You want me to believe this was
 you, and not that retarded boy.

LEXI
 You can't- he's not - you're not
 allowed to say that!

DONNA
 So you pulled this off the shelf
 and ate it off the floor?

Enraged, Lexi calmly kneels down, reaches out a hand and scoops up a fistful of cake from the floor. She eats it. Donna looks at her in disbelief.

DONNA (CONT'D)
 Okay. Hand over your tabard and
 name badge.

LEXI
 I'll clean it up now. I'm sorry.

Donna shakes her head and holds out her hand for the tabard.

LEXI (CONT'D)
 Donna. Serious though, I'm messing.

DONNA

Now you can see where protecting Michael gets you.

LEXI

His ex-wife is having a nervous breakdown; social services said she can't look after Hunter, so Michael's his sole carer and his babysitter keeps cancelling. You gotta give him a break!

DONNA

So it was his little boy who made this mess?

A beat. Lexi softens.

LEXI

But you know in a couple of days I'll probably have to quit anyways, so if you can find it in your heart to let me stay for a-

DONNA

-Yeah, yeah, everyone knows you're in the Quarter Finals, you'd better win it now, hadn't you? You spend half your shifts running to the toilets with your notebook - don't think management can't guess what you're doing. Tabard.

Lexi removes her NOTEBOOK, FOUNTAIN PEN, and a FLYER from the front pocket of her tabard, and hands the tabard to Donna.

LEXI

You need to get your heart checked.

Lexi storms out, hugging her belongings. She slips the FLYER into the back pocket of her jeans.

EXT. KWIK SAVE CAR PARK - MORNING.

Michael rushes to the automatic glass doors in pursuit of Lexi, who's already passed the shopping trolleys outside. He jogs alongside her through the car park.

MICHAEL

You can't take the hit for me. You've got no money, man.

LEXI

Nor have you, man! But I've got this, THIS tomorrow night-

She stops mid-stride and shows Michael the FLYER; it reads:
 "National Poetry Slam Quarterfinals".

MICHAEL

Everybody's coming to watch, I
 can't wait.

Lexi beams, jubilant. He goes to hug her but stops himself
 and jumps on the spot instead.

LEXI

And you've done me a favour 'cuz
 now I've got more time to practice
 my poem with my sis.

MICHAEL

I thought your poems were
 improvised?

LEXI

Ha! Never improvised in my life.

Lexi notices Hunter lean on the glass wall inside the
 superstore, watching them. Lexi blows Hunter a kiss.

MICHAEL

I'll miss you. A bit. Not a lot.

LEXI

Oh, stop it, you knob.

Michael laughs.

MICHAEL

Tell me you'll come back to
 purchase Kwik Save's finest smooth
 peanut butter?

Lexi laughs. LOUD BANGING interrupts - Hunter's fist pounds
 the window inside the store, then points, animated. Lexi and
 Michael follow his finger; it's Donna, marching to the exit.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

The Ice-Queen's seen us.

LEXI

Jeez, I hope she pays me for this
 morning.

Michael runs back towards the store.

MICHAEL

You're gunna win a hundred grand!

Lexi runs in the opposite direction.

LEXI

I'm not in the Finals - yet!