

the
WRITING
RETREAT

A NOVEL

JULIA
BARTZ

The
door
with the
eyes rolled
sting light

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THE
Writing
RETREAT

A NOVEL

JULIA BARTZ

EMILY BESTLER BOOKS

ATRIA

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*For Andi, my blood and soul sister, who's always up for a scary
movie.*



PART ONE

The City

Chapter 1



Fuck her.

These were the words that got me down the subway steps. I was going to Ursula's book party, and if Wren was there, too, well, she could just go fuck herself.

But my fingers were shaking in the moment before I gripped the subway pole. So much for bravado. And I had to admit: this wild, frenetic energy coursing through me wasn't rage, exactly. It was more like abject terror.

Friday night commuters filled the sweaty subway car. I stood over two seated girls who were maybe in high school, their mascara-laden eyes darting, hands pulling nervously at hair. One leaned in and said something into the other's ear. She nodded sagely, and they regarded each other with smirks.

The interaction jabbed like a penknife in the ribs. Their shared world. Their undeniable certainty that they were a team. It reminded me of early days with Wren, holding hands as we rode out to Bushwick, wearing cheap pleather leggings, swigging from a shared plastic bottle of vodka and soda.

Stop. I curled my fist in my pocket, digging my fingernails into my palm. I couldn't show up like this, with soft, pathetic yearning in my eyes. Wren and I were no longer best friends. Or friends at all. And that was fine. I was thirty years old. It didn't make sense that I was still so broken up about a goddamn friendship.

The doors slid open. I followed a small stream of people out, throwing a final glance back at the teen girls. One stared directly at me, her gaze both curious and hostile.



Pete was waiting for me in the hotel lobby, a mishmash of leather couches, gleaming wood surfaces, and golden chandeliers.

“Alex, hello!” He jumped up, then stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned. “Don’t tell anyone, but I’m definitely not cool enough to be here.”

I’d been more relieved than I’d let on that Pete, my one work friend, had agreed to come to the book party. Seeing him in his smudged glasses, loose jeans, and non-ironic running shoes caused my heart rate to slow.

“Careful.” I smiled, shrugging off my heavy coat. “They can smell your fear.”

He chattered as we walked towards the basement steps and I tried to focus on his words. Pete and I had only started hanging out outside work recently, and while part of me enjoyed his unselfconsciously affable personality, another part was bereft. I could almost hear Wren’s amused voice: *Really? This nerd is your new bestie?*

At the top of the stairs, two women blew past us, waves of flowery perfume streaming off their fur-trimmed coats. I felt like I was in a dream as I followed Pete down the steps, studying the back of his head as he kept half turning to explain something ridiculous his boss had done that day.

At the bottom a hallway stretched in both directions. From the right came the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses, undercut by some kind of buzzing electronic music. A mirror ran down the hallway, a thin strip cutting us off below the shoulders. I looked like a disembodied ghoul: pale skin marked with red blotches from the cold, eyes teary from the wind, dark hair staticky from my hat. I tried to bend my mouth into a smile. I’d redone my makeup before leaving work, adding extra eyeliner and lipstick, but I worried it only made me look false and weird.

We strode towards the music. A marquis sign with pressed-in letters greeted us at the open doorway: URSULA’S BOOK RELEASE!! WELCOME BITCHES!!!!

Beyond was a wall of people. It looked like a living thing, blinking and shimmering and pushing various tentacles towards the bar. My stomach plummeted. I’d never been afraid of crowds before. In fact, I’d always thrown myself in—at dance parties, sweaty basement shows, art galleries so packed that you knew someone was going to knock over a sculpture.

But now I was afraid. More than that: on the verge of a panic attack.

“Yikes.” Pete considered. “I can literally feel my social anxiety rising.”

The words made me smile. “Me too.”

“What do you think?” Pete studied me. I knew that if for whatever reason I wanted to leave, he’d take it in stride. He’d probably offer an alternative: a beer, a snack nearby.

But I had to do this. True, I hadn’t seen Wren since that awful day—her birthday, nearly a year ago now. Sure, I’d stalked her social media, watching as her beauty editor job had earned her a blue check mark. I’d seen her style change, her dark bangs go blunt instead of choppy, her growing proclivity for designer jackets. I couldn’t comprehend seeing her in person; it’d be like confronting a ghost who’d come back to life.

“Let’s make for the bar.” I said it grimly and Pete laughed.

“Here we go!” We plunged into the crowd. Pete slithered up to the bar, leaving me a few steps behind. It was sweltering and loud, guests shout-talking to be heard over the music, slurping drinks like it was 2:00 a.m. instead of early evening. I glanced surreptitiously around. My breath caught in my throat as I saw the back of her sleek dark bob. But she turned and no—it wasn’t her. I forced myself to take a deep breath. Maybe she wouldn’t come; maybe she was out of town or something. Wouldn’t that be hilarious, all that panic for nothing?

“Jesus.” Pete returned with two beers. “These cost twelve dollars each! I thought that was the whole point of book parties—free booze!”

“Thanks. I’ll Venmo you.” I took the glass gratefully and gulped.

“Hmm.” Pete squinted at the crowd like a shipman searching the horizon. “Maybe let’s go over there where it’s more chill.” I followed him into the main room with the stage. We made it to the back wall and both leaned against it with relief. The tightness in my chest eased.

“That’s Ursula, right?” Pete gestured with his glass.

“That’s her.” She stood near the stage, holding court with a semicircle of admirers.

“How’d you meet her again?”

“A writing group. A long time ago.” Seeing her in the flesh—tortoiseshell glasses and animal-print dress against pale tattooed skin and hot-pink hair—made me relax further. It was a bit sad that the fear of seeing Wren had made me forget about the point of this whole event: to celebrate Ursula’s success.

I’d met Ursula through Wren, actually, shortly after meeting Wren at work. An image reared up: Wren in her signature vintage black rabbit fur coat and

red lipstick. She'd been assigned to train me as an assistant, though she'd been working at the educational publishing company only a few months longer than me. That first morning with Wren, I'd known—instantly—what becoming friends meant: secret dance parties in abandoned warehouses, madcap dates ending with kisses in forlorn alleys, boozy brunches laughing over the night before. It was as clear as if someone had whispered it into my ear. Wren was a ticket into the life I'd envisioned in my fantasies, staring out of the window of Mom's broken-down hatchback as we raced over gray plains to get far away from her last disastrous boyfriend. Wren was the tornado that could pick me up and put me down in the midst of a luscious, Technicolor dreamworld.

But first I had to impress her. In an uncharacteristic burst of luck, it had happened before I could even make a plan. Leaning over my desk to help me log in, she'd seen the book I'd set down: *Polar Star*, the most recent Roza Vallo. I'd already read it, of course, having put a hold on it at the library before it had even come out. But the past few months of job hunting had been demoralizing, and I'd splurged on the gorgeous hardcover during a particularly low day.

"You like Roza Vallo?" Wren stared askance. I knew her skepticism stemmed from my uncool professional outfit: slacks and a pale blue button-up shirt. She loomed over me, a tall girl who wore platforms because she didn't give a fuck about towering over everyone else.

"She's my favorite author." I calculated and continued: "She's a big inspiration for me. For my writing, I mean."

Wren's ruby lips curved. "Me too." She leaned in, eyes narrowing. "I kind of love your eyebrows. Where do you get them done?"

I fought not to touch them self-consciously. Was she referring to my inexpert plucking? "I do them myself."

"Nice." She yawned. "Lord, I'm hungover. Let's get lunch."

Though it was barely eleven, we'd soon found ourselves slurping spicy noodles while talking nonstop about our current writing projects. We were both working on novels, and both extremely serious about them. That afternoon I sent my first email to her, containing a link to a Roza Vallo article that explored the feminist themes underpinning her novels' use of period blood. I also boldly joked about my boss's cleavage. She responded almost

immediately, and we started a spate of witty exchanges that I spent much more time and energy on than my actual job.

Two months later Wren had asked me to join her writing group, since their third person had dropped out. There I'd met Ursula. She was nearly ten years older than us and had a calm self-confidence that I could only dream of. At this point I'd been blatantly copying Wren—which meant spending whole days at Goodwill, looking for clothes she might admire. But Ursula was her own person. She had her own neon-colored, clashing style and wrote intensely personal pieces about being Chinese American, queer, and a fat activist. She was so different from Wren and yet was the one person Wren ever seemed in awe of.

The music switched off, and Pete's next question rang too loud in my ear. "How long have you known her?"

I blinked before realizing he was talking about Ursula, not Wren. "I guess about eight years?" The crowd from the bar oozed into the main room.

"Huh. Back before she was famous."

"Yep." Even back then I'd known Ursula would find success. I'd always thought her essays were good enough to be published in the *New York Times*, so it wasn't a surprise when one actually was. After her *Modern Love* piece came out, she got snatched up by an agent and editor who fast-tracked her first book of essays. That had been three years ago; she was now publishing her second.

"You recognize anyone?" Pete scanned the crowd.

I forced myself to look. Hordes of hip people, many of them young, early twenties, purposefully plain with severely shorn hair and no makeup. That level of confidence—at such a young age!—amazed me. I couldn't leave my apartment without a full face of makeup.

"Not really," I was saying, but then I heard it—a familiar laugh. About ten feet away stood Ridhi, one of Wren's choice friends. I shifted so that I was partially hidden by Pete.

"Hi, everyone!" a female voice crackled over a loudspeaker. "We're going to start!" The crowd shuffled and I saw with relief that Ridhi and her group were moving ahead. My stomach dropped as I recognized several others with her, including another of Wren's good friends, Craig. He wore a slim olive suit and was murmuring into Ridhi's ear with a wide grin.

“Welcome, everyone.” Ursula’s agent, Melody, had a commanding voice and everyone quieted down immediately. As she introduced Ursula, I kept an eye on the crew. Watching them gave me an unexpectedly powerful ache. The friend breakup with Wren hadn’t just been between the two of us; I’d lost all our mutual friends too.

I should’ve known; it was unthinkable now that I hadn’t. After all, the night of Wren’s birthday had ended in arcs of blood, splattering black in the moonlight.

People were applauding. I shook myself and clapped along as Ursula strode across the stage in iridescent platform boots. “Guys, seriously, thank you so much for being here.” Her low voice was often sardonic, but now it was resonant with sincerity. “You are all amazing people and sometimes I have to pinch myself that I have such an incredible support network.” As Ursula continued speaking, I took another gulp of beer, realizing it was almost gone. I hadn’t eaten since lunch, and the alcohol was making me woozy in the overheated room.

“Okay!” Ursula raised her glass. “I know at book parties you’re supposed to read an excerpt and blah blah blah, but why don’t we skip that boring part tonight and just party?” She laughed at the ensuing wolf whistles. “Awesome. Let’s go ahead and mingle, then! Oh, and buy a book or three!” Amidst cheers, Ursula left the stage and the crowd dispersed, many making for the bar. I watched Wren’s crew join the signing line, still oblivious to my presence. If Wren was here, she’d be with them. So she wasn’t here. She must be traveling, at a photo shoot, doing something she was probably already posting about. And, no, I wasn’t going to immediately check. The confirmation made me relieved but also unexpectedly disappointed.

“This is wild,” I told Pete, attempting to distract myself as we joined the back of the signing line. “Ursula’s last reading was in the basement of a bookstore in Greenpoint with bottles of Two-Buck Chuck.”

“At least they had free alcohol.” Pete held up his own empty glass. “Want another IPA?”

“Sure.” Finally, I could relax. This called for at least another drink, maybe more.

Ursula’s publicist strode down the line with a stack of books. I bought two copies, one for Pete. The smooth, weighty hardcover showed a picture of

Ursula on a vintage red-velvet couch. She sat cross-legged in ripped denim overalls, gazing unabashedly into the camera. A hungry, wolfish feeling reared up in my gut. What would it feel like to hold your own book in your hands for the first time? For it to be a physical object, a thing that people paid for?

I glanced up, feeling eyes on me. The crew was staring at me, surprised and faintly disgusted, like I was a racoon that had wandered into their living room. Only Craig was looking at someone else—

Wren. He was looking at Wren.

The world blurred, and for a moment it was just me and her. There was something glinting in her eyes, a reflection of the pain and loss that I so keenly felt. A sob rose up in my throat at the realization that she felt it, too, that she did miss me, that she, too, wanted nothing more than for us to grasp each other in a tight, desperate hug, pulled back together like two powerful magnets.

But then a wall came down. The pain shifted into something else, something darker: revulsion.

Don't touch me. I'd been drunk that night but could still remember her voice with perfect clarity. How she'd hissed the words from between clenched teeth. How literally moments later she'd been lying in a spreading pool of blood.

I felt frozen, unable to look away. Wren turned and said something to Craig. He laughed and looked relieved. The others moved inward towards her, though Ridhi glowered at me a few seconds longer.

The beer gurgled in my stomach. I turned and raced towards the bathroom, making it to a stall just in time. Yellow liquid frothed in the bowl. I sat on my knees and wiped my mouth. I was still clutching the books.

Slowly, I stood and flushed the toilet. At the sink a pretty girl washed her hands and avoided looking at me. She must have heard my retches. I wanted to burst into tears but I kept them firmly down.

What had I expected? For Wren to smile and ask if I wanted to be friends again?

We were over. Forever. I knew that now.

A text pinged. Hey where are you? Can't find you. Pete. Leaning against the sink, I wrote back with shaky fingers. I just saw someone I didn't want to run into. Mind if we leave?

Sure! came the instant reply. Sounds like we need to get you another drink.

Chapter 2



My phone rang, a tinny guitar riff that made me grit my teeth. I rolled over in bed and groaned. I had a headache, the type that felt like hot metal spikes through my skull. I silenced the ringtone, noting the string of text messages from Pete.

3:00 a.m.: Let me know you got home safe

4:00 a.m.: Alex??? You okay?????

7:00 a.m.: Please call me when you see this, I'm serious

Memories from the night before poured in. Guzzling more beers at a pub down the street and feeling good, better than I had in days, weeks, months? Pete and I chatting with the bartender, an actual Irish dude who'd given us shot after shot of whiskey. Making eyes at him, even though he couldn't have been more than twenty-two, and him grinning back at me as he poured, as if telling me he knew what I wanted and he wanted it too.

But then somehow Pete and I had ended up in a cab, furiously making out. We'd gone to his apartment, which was in Manhattan, stumbling straight to his bed, suddenly naked.

The next part was blurrier, but I knew that we'd had sex. Afterwards, I'd freaked out and left, wasted but determined to get home.

I pulled my phone closer and typed. Hey Pete. I'm okay. Thanks for checking in.

He started writing back, then stopped.

I moaned, burying my face in my damp, sweaty pillow. The one friend I'd managed to make after my excommunication from Wren's coterie, and now I'd ruined that too. How was I going to be able to go back to work? How was I going to be able to look him in the face after forcing him to call me those names? *Slut. Cunt. Whore.*

I emailed my boss, Sharon, letting her know I'd woken up with a fever—untrue but close—and pulled myself out of bed to crack the windows. The

radiators in the apartment were always tropical in the wintertime, no matter how far I turned them down. I stumbled to the bathroom and stepped into the shower, letting the water strip my greasy skin.

You like that, don't you? Pete's voice in my ear as he thrust into me from behind. *You like that, you little...*

"Stop," I said out loud. When I got out of the shower, I felt a little better, though my stomach still roiled. I made ginger tea and settled onto the couch, grateful that my roommate was over at her boyfriend's. I had a voicemail notification from the night before: Ursula.

"Al!" Her voice was barely audible over thudding music. "Where are you? We're out at Simone's! Right by you. Anyway, I'm with some people..." Her words melted into mutterings as she spoke to someone else. "They're telling me you were at the book party but bounced? And that you and Wren still aren't talking? What is this, middle school?" Craig's laughter in the background. "Anyhow, I want you here, so you should come immediately. Also, I have to tell you something cool: I just found out from Melody, my agent... say hi, Melody!" A warm "Hiiiiii." "Get this: Melody knows Roza Vallo's agent! Isn't that amazing? I'm trying to finagle a visit to Blackbriar... oh, okay. I have to go; they're telling me I have to go. Call me or text me, okay?" More sounds of music, laughter, screams, then nothing.

I smiled, remembering nights out at Simone's, a dirty dive that turned into a dance party after midnight. It would get hot and sweaty and disgusting, but we didn't care, because we were more often than not absolutely sloshed. Wren and I would find ourselves there if the earlier parts of the night had been a bust, meaning we hadn't yet met cute boys. There were always boys there, reliably attractive, though maybe that was due to the hours of drinking beforehand.

I called Ursula back.

"Hey." Her voice was subdued, a marked contrast to the voicemail.

"Hey." I stretched out my legs. "Just got your voicemail."

"Voicemail?" She chuckled. "Oh my god, yeah. We were at Simone's and I really wanted you there. Where were you?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I got wasted and ended up making bad decisions with a coworker." I blew out my breath, attempting to sound breezy. "Anyway, I wanted to call and say congratulations! I am so proud of—"

"Hold up, who's this guy? They said they saw you there with someone."

“They? You got the full report from Wren?” The thought gave me a flash of unease.

“Well, Craig.” She coughed and said a soft thank-you, presumably to her girlfriend Phoebe, then sipped something. The sound buzzed and crackled. “Missed you last night.”

“I’m really sorry.” Shame washed over me. “I wanted to see you, obviously, and celebrate with you. But then I saw Wren and kind of freaked out.”

“Okay.” She sighed. “So this is really still a thing? Because of what went down at her birthday? I don’t get it. That was an accident. Horrific, yes. But an accident.”

“It was.” Which wasn’t exactly true. I pushed the growing panic down into my core.

“And you guys were so close. I mean, I’ve grown apart from people before. It happens. But you guys were like sisters.”

“Yeah. It was pretty unexpected.” The recurring ache reared up in my chest, all the way to my throat. I swallowed, driving it back down. I didn’t want to think about this, much less talk about it.

“I told Wren you guys should get a third-party person and sit down and talk about it,” Ursula went on musingly. “Maybe couples counselors do that. Or I could even do it if you wanted.”

“You told her that?” I asked, my curiosity piqued. “What’d she say?”

Ursula paused. “You know what? I do not remember.”

“Listen.” I forced a smile. “Enough about our drama. Really, it’s fine and we will both survive. I want to know about you: living in LA, book events... I’m really excited to read your book, by the way!”

“Yeah, let me know what you think. I feel like they rushed it and I had to write the last two essays in, like, a day.” She snorted. “Things are good. Some podcasts and interviews and whatnot coming up, which still make me feel awkward. But I guess that’s the writer life. I actually wanted to ask you: How’s your writing going?”

“Good,” I lied, bright.

“Did you apply for that fellowship I sent you a few months ago?”

“I did,” I lied again. The shame returned, heavy and damp. Another topic to make me feel horrible about myself. Then, to change the subject: “Also, wait, you were talking about Roza Vallo last night? Your agent knows her?”

“Yes! I had no idea!” She chuckled. “Apparently she—Roza’s agent—was one of Melody’s mentors. So of course I had to ask Melody if she’s ever been to Roza’s estate. Sadly, no. But, hey, that’s only two connections away. I feel like we can make it happen.”

“Totally.” It had been a running joke between the three of us: how to meet our shared favorite author, the famously reclusive Roza Vallo.

“That retreat must be starting soon,” Ursula went on.

“Next month.” I’d kept track of it, following the news articles as they popped up on literary sites and in the arts sections of major outlets. Wren and I had both applied, sending in our best, most polished short stories. Somehow we’d been convinced that at least one of us would get in.

Two years ago, Roza Vallo—our guru, imagined mentor, and patron saint—had come out with a shocking announcement. She was going to hold a monthlong writing retreat at her home, Blackbriar Estate, for four up-and-coming female writers who were under thirty. She wanted to foster and cultivate the next big names. Simply getting picked would mean instant fame. Wren and I had promised that whichever of us got in—hopefully both, but we didn’t want to be too presumptuous—would help raise up the other.

Of course, neither of us had been chosen. Thousands must have applied. And the reading period had lasted so long that, by the time the winners were picked, both of us had aged out of the under-thirty condition.

I’d been so curious to see who the chosen ones were, but that information had been kept from the public. I’d read on a Roza Vallo subreddit that the winners had had to sign NDAs promising not to tell anyone they’d gotten in. Some commentators guessed it was because they’d be approached by news outlets promising payment for pictures or video inside the estate. Honestly, it had been a relief not to know. It was exhausting enough to stalk one person on social media—meaning Wren, embarrassing but true—let alone four more.

“We’ll find a way to meet Roza,” Ursula said. “Don’t worry.”

“Someday. Hey, when do you go back to LA?” I felt like death, but I’d conquer it in order to see Ursula. “Want to get lunch or something? I took the day off.”

“I’d love to, but Phoebe and I are heading to the airport soon. It was a really quick trip. Let’s make plans the next time I’m here, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

After we hung up, I made myself a piece of toast and turned on some mindless reality TV. My mind drifted back to Roza. What would she do if she were in my position? She would've fucked Pete without a second thought. No shame or regret at all. And before, at the party, she would've gone right up to Wren, called her on her attitude, and maybe even slapped her sharp cheek.

I pulled up Roza's recent *New York Times Magazine* interview, intent on infusing her signature badass energy into my tepid life. I'd even used the main picture—Roza lounging on stone steps in a floor-length sequined gown—as my current lock screen. Roza stared directly at the camera, her expression a little amused, maybe even teasing.

Roza didn't do many interviews, so this was a big deal. It had come out six months before, after the contest had closed.

Who is Roza Vallo?

"People think I'm a witch." Vallo says it lightly as she picks up her stoneware mug of peppermint tea. We're in Blackbriar Estate, her famed home in the Adirondacks of New York. The mansion has been renovated to re-create the home originally built in 1881 by oil tycoon Horace Hamilton. Driving up to the circular drive to view the imposing Victorian mansion reminded me of approaching Daphne du Maurier's Manderley or even Shirley Jackson's Hill House. There's a sense of unease beyond the stonework and sun-blocked windows.

Vallo had answered the front door herself, barefoot in a floaty black dress. She's in her midfifties, but—like many wealthy, well-kempt women—she could easily pass for a decade younger. Now we sit in the library, a stunning repository of more than 10,000 books.

When I ask if she's a good witch or a bad witch, she laughs.

"Bad." She swings back her long auburn tresses. Her voice contains just a hint of her Hungarian heritage, a slight emphasis on the consonants. "Is there really any other kind?"

Vallo has cultivated this witchy, mythical existence around herself, starting at 19 when her first novel, "Devil's Tongue," was published. The prose is lyrical and lush, and it's astounding to remember it was written by a teen. Perhaps even more surprising is the depth and complexity of the story itself, which I believe holds important clues to unlocking the mysteries

of Vallo. (Spoilers ahead.) The plot begins with 12-year-old Kata, whose best friend Eliza has just died. The reasons for her death are murky but somehow related to an early sex scene between Eliza and her male teacher. After the funeral, as Kata tearfully contemplates her best friend's open coffin and the grown-ups settle payment with the funeral director in the back, Eliza wakes up. She climbs out of the coffin and beckons Kata to follow her outside.

The problem: Eliza is still dead. But as she begins to decompose, she and Kata share a few more days together, stunned by this occurrence, talking and holding each other and, eventually, sexually exploring together. They also discover what's keeping Eliza alive: an elderly woman at the edge of town is actually a witch who wants Eliza's essence for herself. Eliza is convinced that if they kill the woman she'll come fully back to life, so she and a reluctant Kata make plans to murder her in her sleep.

But the plan doesn't work. In a last-ditch attempt, Kata tries to cast another spell with the witch's spell books. Eliza's soul enters the body of a hunter in the woods nearby. Kata and Eliza continue their love affair in Eliza's new form. Eventually, Kata catches Eliza casting another spell to jump into Kata's body. She must decide whether to save herself by destroying Eliza or to sacrifice herself for her friend's existence.

Vallo wrote the book while her own best friend, Mila, was dying of stomach cancer.

"I couldn't believe it when she got sick." Vallo picks at a sugar-dusted molasses cookie. "She was so tough. Always the one who wanted to rebel. She loved stealing lipstick from the store. Teasing boys. But I think it's because she felt safe. Secure. Her father was a rich man, a lawyer." Though Vallo and Mila were neighbors in Budapest, and both Jewish, they came from vastly different economic backgrounds. Vallo's father worked in a factory while her mother was a seamstress. The family struggled under Soviet rule and the ongoing economic depression.

"They were older," Vallo says of her parents. "My mother had me at forty, which I think was an accident. And they were always financially struggling. They worked a lot and expected me to take care of myself, even when I was very young. So I'd entertain myself with books. There was a used bookstore nearby they took me to and there was such a variety to choose