

Love on
PLANET A

Christina Minaki

JAMES LORIMER & COMPANY LTD., PUBLISHERS
TORONTO

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Published in Canada in 2025. Published in the United States in 2026.

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James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers acknowledges funding support from the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), an agency of the Government of Ontario. We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts. This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada and with the support of Ontario Creates.



Cover design: Tyler Cleroux

Cover image: Shutterstock

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Love on Planet A / Christina Minaki.

Names: Minaki, Christina, 1977- author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 2025018401X | Canadiana (ebook) 20250184885 | ISBN 9781459420380 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781459420373 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459420397 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Social problem fiction. | LCGFT: Bildungsromans. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8626.I526 L68 2025 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Published by:

James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers

117 Peter Street, Suite 304

Toronto, ON, Canada

M5V 0M3

www.lorimer.ca

Distributed in the US by:

Lerner Publisher Services

241 1st Ave. N.

Minneapolis, MN, USA

55401

www.lernerbooks.com

Printed and bound in Canada.

*To Mom, who knows how to raise a leader. And in loving memory of
Dad, who loved us so much that he faced rollercoasters with us.*

To William and Abby, who have my heart and who always matter.

To Bonnie, a true and forever friend who leans in close so beautifully.

*To Tina, a loyal friend who would follow me up a tree —
or a wall — and back down again.*

*To Marlee and Pastor Carrie,
both wonderful and beautiful daughters of the King.*

To Lilian, a magnificent soul and faithful friend.

*And in loving memory of Krystianna,
who loved God, life and trees, and whose “no matter what” climbing
gave me the seed of Lydia’s daring.*

1

Everyone who loves me calls me Lydie. My whole name, stretched like a skyline, is Lydia Grace Campbell. My father always reminds me that he and my mom chose that for me because I have noble strength and I'm a gift from God. He always says I have the power of a storm inside me.

This is the mantra that streaks through my mind when life becomes too much.

It helps, but this "noble strength, gift from God" thing is also a lot of pressure.

When I'm this frustrated, I'd rather just be a storm.

I know I'm not supposed to see the *Fiddler on the Roof* casting list. Can I help it if it's sitting under my dad's coffee cup, right in front of me at breakfast?

"Dad! What in the world did you do?" I pause for a second

as I spin my wheelchair around.

I should be grateful for my part in *Fiddler*. Yente is a good role, even if I don't want to play a gossipy old lady. I gotta say, I will be good at it. I just wish Dad had found a way for me to play someone young and gutsy, like Chava.

She's strong enough to marry the boy she loves, even if he's not Jewish. Chava is her own woman. I'd love to play her — even though I know it wouldn't work. I hobble like Yente, after all. I'm not the kind of girl a guy can sweep off her feet.

I love *Fiddler on the Roof*. It's not modern like *Rent*, but I still dig it. It's set in this tiny Russian village called Anatevka, in 1905. It's the story of Tevye, a farmer whose five daughters refuse to follow the Jewish custom that says the matchmaker must choose husbands for them. Three of his daughters defy expectations by falling in love with men they choose for themselves, and one of the men is not a Jew. Tevye's faith is big-time important to him, so he's not super-happy about this. I'm a Christian, not Jewish, but I can totally relate to that — my faith being important to me, I mean.

There was lots of discrimination and uprisings against Jews in 1905 Russia, and because of that, Tevye's whole village must flee Anatevka in the end.

Jewish or not, violence against anyone is so wrong it makes my stomach hurt.

The story doesn't work at all without Yente, the matchmaker. Dad did pick a fitting role for me — one with humour, and one where, if I lose my balance onstage, we'll just work it into the show. I should be happy, and I better figure out how to be, because I know my dad will do exactly nothing once he finds out how I feel.

My dad and I have rules. He teaches Phys Ed and Drama at Fairmont High, where I'm a student. At school, I call him Mr. Campbell and he calls me Lydia, never Lydie. I get good grades and go about my responsibilities like a trouper. He stays out of my business unless I'm on fire. He doesn't helicopter. He acts like he doesn't teach half my friends and see them when they come over on Friday nights for takeout. I represent. I only use my wheelchair outside, my walker in class and in the halls. I never call my dad Ben or use the first names of any staff I know because they're his friends, and sometimes also mine.

I've made rules, too. In this house, we do what we can to take climate action. I planted wildflowers in the garden to attract and support bees. We compost, and we never use pesticides in our garden. We use vinegar and baking soda as all-natural cleaners in our house. We only eat meat on weekends, and we only buy meat from a butcher who only sells ethically raised meat from local farmers. Everyone who's part of Youth Alive for Planet A, the climate-change club I'm

part of at school, is as committed to doing the right thing for Earth as I am. We've all signed Climate Action pledges, and we take them seriously.

I can't change everything for the planet. I only wish I had the power to make climate change go away. But I gotta admit that taking every good action I can gives me some control.

I just wish I had some control over this casting list.

We're gonna have to work even harder and faster than usual on this show, because rehearsals are starting late. The auditorium where we rehearse and where the show is going to happen needed to have some drywall and insulation repairs done because of water damage after a freaky thunderstorm. Thank you, climate change. I was afraid we'd have to cancel the show because of the water damage. But thank God, that didn't happen.

We were just given the all-clear last week to go back into the auditorium for rehearsals. It's already the beginning of March, and opening night is at the beginning of June. Dad's been making it work, using different classrooms for auditions and stuff, but we really need the auditorium for proper rehearsals. There's so much catching up to do now!

Wanting to be Chava should be the last thing on my mind, but I can't help it.

That's what's filling my head as I push my wheelchair

toward the bathroom. I can hear my dad brushing his teeth, and I smell vinegar. He must have just cleaned the bathroom sink. I meet him at the doorway just as he's turning off the tap. He sees me and smiles, then notices the casting list on my lap.

"Morning, Lydie," he says. "You weren't supposed to see that."

"You left it at the table, right where I sit, Dad."

He slaps his forehead. "I'm sorry, honey, that's my fault. But you'll make the perfect Yente."

"A little too perfect," I tell him.

"What do you mean?" he asks, casually pushing my chair back toward the kitchen.

"I mean, it would be nice to be given a role for reasons other than my disability. I mean, I could have been Chava. I could have been Tzeitel. I know Yente's the right fit because of my disability. But you cast Dorian as Motel, and he's Greek, not Jewish. Holly's a Filipina Tzeitel, if you wanna talk about changing things up. You could've found a way to shake things up for me, too. You know I can do it, Dad."

"That's not the point," he says, suddenly curt. "The point is what's feasible for you."

"Aunt Sophie would understand," is all I can bring myself to say.

Dad stops and kisses the top of my head. Although I didn't

consciously do it to soften him up, he responds this way to comments that remind him that my aunt Sophie, his sister-in-law, is the closest thing I have to a mother. My mom died in a car accident not very long after I was born. I've heard so many stories about my mom that part of me feels like I know her, but memories and photos from Aunt Sophie and Dad are all I have of her.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I sound tough, but I understand how you feel. I didn't give you the role of Yente only because it's really good cover for your wonky balance. That's part of how I made the decision, but there's plenty of challenge in Yente's role. You are a very good actress, my girl. You'll have plenty of ways to show it here."

"I'm not worried about being a bad actress, Dad. I know I can do it well," I tell him honestly.

"You have your mother's confidence."

That makes me smile. On the living room wall, I spot Mom smiling in our last family photo with her. She's holding me. I'm a tiny sleeping baby. Dad is beaming beside Mom, and her blue eyes are shining. The blue butterfly earrings she's wearing match her eyes. I would have loved to know her for myself.

Seeing it, I consider pointing out to my dad that Mom would want me to take my confidence out for a spin. But I

don't know for sure what her reaction would have been. She might have been even more overprotective than Dad.

I better leave it alone.

Dad's gone quiet, and I know he's thinking of how much we hate that accident for taking her from us. It depresses me when I think about it too much, but most of the time, I'm happy. I think not having a mom would drag me down more if Aunt Sophie wasn't such an amazing aunt, but she really has filled the gap Mom left.

My aunt Sophie loves animals and is a wickedly talented veterinarian. Dad is an only child, and his parents were both sick when I was small. So Aunt Sophie knew she was the only family who could help us after Mom died. She bought a house just down the block from us and made sure she was there whenever we needed help. I'm sure she was always busy, always on-call even then, but I've never felt second-best. I still don't feel shafted by Aunt Sophie, even now that she's moved for a tenure position teaching veterinary medicine at UPEI. Somehow, from halfway across the country, she's still always there for me. My childhood is full of memories with her.

There's her laugh that reminds me of a cascade of shiny bubbles rising, or the way she won't hesitate to sing off-key with the car radio. Or the way we have vegetable fights in the kitchen sometimes, wielding our cucumber or carrot swords,

blocking each other's jabs with our respective vegetables and yelling "En garde!" until our stomachs hurt with laughter and one of us surrenders.

Of course, it hasn't been all good times. Here is a memory I can't shake.

I'm six years old, and I basically do what I'm told. No talking in class? No problem. Eat your lunch quietly? Done. I'm in Grade One, and my teacher, Mrs. Jones, is giving us a Language Arts lesson on rhyming. I'm super happy. She has what I want to know, and all I have to do is sit in and pay attention.

"I'm going to read to you," Mrs. Jones says. "We'll talk about the words, and there will be time for questions, but only after I finish reading. Please listen quietly until the story is done."

The only thing is, I have to pee. I know what to do. It starts gently, one squeeze and the feeling of pressure goes away. Simple. I let my mind get carried away on the words of *The Cat in the Hat*.

"All we could do was SIT, SIT, SIT . . . and we did not like it one little BIT . . ." Mrs. Jones keeps reading, her voice clear, emphasizing the patterns of the words, just like Aunt Sophie does when she reads Dr. Seuss to me. Both of their voices make me think of the teeter-totter and of how the air rushes

and my stomach drops as I dip and rise.

It's getting harder now to squeeze away this inside-me feeling, though. I start raising my hand to ask to go to the washroom. Then I remember that Mrs. Jones said not to interrupt the story.

I put my hand down again and work to squeeze the feeling away.

By the time the Cat in the Hat is bringing in the big red box and letting Thing One and Thing Two out of it, I can't hold it anymore. I feel a rush of warm and wet that spreads underneath me.

I can hear a small dripping noise close to me, like I'm a small rain cloud.

I don't want to cry. From his desk across the aisle, Dorian begins to laugh. I send him a hurt look. "Don't," I whisper, but he can't stop. He doesn't stop for another minute that stretches like my underneath sheet when Daddy and I make my bed.

"Dorian, there will be none of that," Mrs. Jones lets him know. "Stop right now." But how can there be none of his laughing when it already happened? My teacher looks at me and gets up to press the intercom button that calls the janitor to mop up my mess.

"I'm going to call Mrs. Vernon to come and take you to the office so your dad can come and get you, sweetie," she tells me.

My stomach drops again. I love Mrs. Vernon, the school nurse. But she also happens to be my next-door neighbour. I don't want her to know I wet my pants and see the smelly mess up close.

"I want to go myself," I tell Mrs. Jones. I hope I sound sure.

"No, Lydia, you shouldn't," she says. But I'm already moving. So much for doing what I'm told.

I turn in my seat toward the aisle, grab my walker and stand up, walking to the classroom door. I try not to think of how wet my jeans feel. I can sense everyone looking at me, or at the puddle on the floor right under my chair.

I want to run far away from the hot feeling of the staring, but I can't. I have to walk slowly and keep my balance, because I know the only thing worse than having wet my pants would be wetting my pants and then falling because I was too embarrassed to be careful.

I wish that I could disappear or snap my fingers and be at the office in one instant. I pray for one of those things to happen. I pray so hard, the way Aunt Sophie taught me. She said I could take all my problems to God and He would help me.

Nothing I ask for happens. But something better does. It's something so good I couldn't have even dreamed of it.

Just as I'm whispering my prayers under my breath, I