

memoirs of a teenage amnesiac

Gabrielle Zevin

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX

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IF THINGS HAD BEEN DIFFERENT, I'D BE CALLED Nataliya or Natasha, and I'd have a Russian accent and chapped lips year round. Maybe I'd even be a street kid who'd trade you just about anything for a pair of blue jeans. But I am not Nataliya or Natasha, because at six months old I was delivered from Kratovo, Moscow Oblast, to Brooklyn, New York. I don't remember the trip or ever having lived in Russia at all. What I know about my orphanhood is limited to what I've been told by my parents and then by what they were told, which was sketchy at best: a week-old baby girl was found in an empty typewriter case in the second-to-last pew of an Eastern Orthodox Church. Was the case a clue to my biological father's profession? Did the church mean my birth mother was devout? I'll never know, so I choose not to speculate. Besides, I hate orphan stories. They're all the same, but most books are bursting with them anyway. You start to think everyone in the whole world must be an orphan.

I can't remember a time when I didn't know I was adopted. There was never a dramatic "we have something to tell you" talk. My adoption was simply another fact, like having dark hair or no siblings. I knew I was adopted even before I knew what that truly meant. Understanding adoption requires a basic understanding of sex, something I would not have until third grade when Gina Papadakis brought her grandparents' disturbingly dog-eared copy of *The Joy of Sex* to school. She passed it around at lunch and while most everyone else was gagging with the realization that their parents had done *that* to make *them* (so much hair, and the people in the drawings were not one bit joyful . . .), I felt perfectly fine, even a little smug. I might be adopted, but at least my parents hadn't degraded themselves like that for my sake.

You're probably wondering why they didn't do it the old-fashioned way. Not that it's any of your business, but they tried for a while without getting anywhere. After about a year, Mom and Dad decided that, rather than invest about a billion dollars on fertility treatments that might not work anyway, it would be better to spend the money helping some sob story like me. This is why you are not, at the very moment, holding in your hands the inspiring true account of a Kratovan orphan called Nataliya, who, things being different, might be named Nancy or Naomi.

Truth is, I rarely think about any of this. I'm only telling you now because, in a way, I was born to be an amnesiac. I have always been required to fill in the blanks.

But I'm definitely getting ahead of myself.

When he heard about my (for lack of a better term) accident, my best friend, Will, who I'd completely forgotten at the time, wrote me a

letter. (I didn't come across it immediately because he had slipped it inside the sleeve of a mix CD.) He had inherited a battered black typewriter from his great-uncle Desmond who'd supposedly been a war correspondent, though Will was unclear which war it had been. There was a dent on the carriage return that Will theorized might be from a ricocheting bullet. In any case, Will liked composing letters on the typewriter, even when it would have been much easier to send an e-mail or call a person on the phone. Incidentally, the boy wasn't antitechnology; he just had an appreciation for things other people had forgotten.

I should tell you that the following dispatch, while being the only record of the events leading up to my accident, does not really convey much of Will's personality. It was completely unlike him to be so formal, stiff, boring even. You do get some sense of him from his footnotes, but half of you probably won't bother with those anyway. I know I didn't. At the time, I felt about footnotes nearly the same way I did about orphan stories.

Chief:

The first thing you should know about me is that I remember everything, and the second thing is that I'm probably the most honest person in the world. I realize that you can't trust anyone who says that they're honest, and knowing this, I wouldn't normally say something like that about myself. I'm only telling you now because it's something I feel you should know.

In an attempt to make myself useful to you, I have assembled a timeline of the events

leading up to your accident, which you may or may not find helpful, but you will find below.

6:36 p.m. Naomi Porter and William Landsman, Co-editors of the national-award-winning¹ Thomas Purdue Country Day School yearbook, leave the offices of *The Phoenix*.²

6:45 p.m. Porter and Landsman arrive at the student parking lot. Porter realizes that they have left the camera back at the office.

6:46 p.m. Discussion³ ensues regarding who should have to return to the office to retrieve the camera. Landsman suggests settling the matter with a coin toss,⁴ a proposition which Porter accepts. Landsman says that he will be heads, but Porter states⁵ that she should be heads. Landsman concedes, as oft happens. Landsman flips the coin, and Porter loses.

6:53 p.m. Landsman drives home; Porter returns to *The Phoenix*.

7:02 p.m.⁶ (approx.) Porter arrives at the

1. Honorable Mention, NSPA.

2. While school starts after Labor Day for mere mortals, it starts in August for football players, marching band, and us. And bird-watchers. We had been planning to photograph the first meeting of the Tom Purdue Bird-watching Society the next morn.

3. We often "discuss" things. Others might call this "arguing."

4. Poses a series of interesting philosophical questions which I am still pondering, but am not prepared to discuss at this time.

5. Also "arguing."

6. Unfortunately, from this point forward, I have had to rely on the reports of others, like your dad and that cat James.

Phoenix office where she retrieves the camera.

7:05 p.m. (approx.) Porter falls down the exterior front steps at school. Porter strikes head on bottom step, but manages to hold on to the camera.⁷ Porter is discovered by one James Larkin.⁸

As \mathbb{W} mentioned to you, \mathbb{W} am always available to answer any other questions as they might arise.

\mathbb{W} remain your faithful servant,

William B.⁹ Landsman

P.S. Apologies for the “ \mathbb{W} ” [i] key. Hopefully, you’ve figured out by now that the thing that resembles a trident is actually the letter “ \mathbb{W} . ” There’s a defect in my typewriter such that every time capital “i” is pressed, “U” comes down with it.

7. The camera was an Oneiric 8000 G Pro, which we had just purchased for \$3,599.99 tax free plus shipping, using the entire proceeds of last year’s wrapping paper fundraiser. The staff of *The Phoenix* thanks you.

8. \mathbb{W} don’t know what he was doing there that day.

9. \mathbb{W} imagine you have also forgotten that the “B” stands for Blake, although William Blake is probably my least favorite poet and \mathbb{W} only feel fifty percent about him as an artist. The woman responsible for the name, aka my mother, will also be your AP English teacher, aka Mrs. Landsman.

Of course, I didn’t remember any of this. Not the coin toss. Not the camera. Certainly not my best friend, the veracious William Blake Landsman.

The first thing I remembered was “that cat” James Larkin,

though I didn't even know his name at the time. And I didn't remember all of James, James proper. Just his voice, because my eyes were still closed and I guess you'd call me asleep. Or half-asleep, like when your alarm clock sounds and you manage to ignore it for a while. You hear the radio and the shower; you smell coffee and toast. You know you will wake; it's only a question of when, and of what or who will finally push you into day.

His voice was low and steady. I've always associated those types of voices with honesty, but I'm sure there are loads of low-pitched liars just waiting to take advantage of easy prey like me. Even semi-conscious, I lapsed into my prejudices and decided to trust every word James said: "Sir, my name is James Larkin. Unfortunately her family is not here, but I am her boyfriend, and I am riding in this ambulance." I didn't hear anyone argue with him. His tone did not allow for discussion.

Someone took my hand, and I opened my eyes. It was him, though I didn't know his face.

"Hey there," he said softly, "welcome back."

I did not stop to consider where I had been that required welcoming. I did not even ask myself why I was in an ambulance with a boy who said he was my boyfriend but whom I did not readily recognize.

As ridiculous as this might seem, I tried to smile, but I doubt if he even saw. My attempt didn't last that long.

The pain came. The kind of pain for which there is no analogy; the kind of pain that allows for no other thought. The epicenter was concentrated in the area above my left eye, but it barely mattered; the waves through the rest of my head were almost worse. My brain felt too large for my skull. I felt like I needed to throw up, but I didn't.

Without my having to tell him, James asked, “Could someone please give her some drugs?”

An EMT shone a light in my eyes. “Not until she’s seen a doctor, maybe even had a CT scan. But it’s terrific news that she’s already up. Just five more minutes, okay, Naomi?”

“Just five more minutes *until what?*” I asked, trying to sound patient. Until Christmas? Until my head exploded?

“Sorry. Until we’re at the hospital,” said the EMT.

At this point, the pain in my head was so strong that I wanted to weep. I probably would have, too, but it occurred to me that crying might actually make me feel worse.

“Are you positive she can’t have any drugs?” James yelled.

“Distract her. Tell her a joke or something. We’re almost there,” was the EMT’s annoying, unhelpful reply.

“I don’t think that’s gonna do it,” James retorted.

“Laughter’s the best medicine,” said the EMT. I believe this may have been his idea of a joke, but it did nothing for my headache.

“Complete and utter . . .” James leaned in closer to me. He smelled like smoke and laundered sheets left to dry in the sun. “. . . bullshit, but would you like a joke anyway?” he asked.

I nodded. I really would have preferred drugs.

“Well, I can only think of one, and it’s not that good. Certainly not analgesic good. So . . . okay, this man goes to a psychiatrist and says, ‘My wife’s insane. She thinks she’s a chicken.’ And the doctor goes, ‘Well, why don’t you just commit her?’ And the man says—”

Just as he was about to reveal the punch line, a particularly impressive wave of pain pulsed through my head. My nails dug into James’s palm, piercing his skin, making him bleed. I couldn’t speak, so I tried to telegraph my apology with a look.

“No worries,” James said, “I can take it.” He winked at me.

In the emergency room, a doctor with eyes so bloodshot they made me tired just looking at them asked James how long I had been passed out, and he replied twenty-one minutes, he knew exactly. He’d seen it happen. “At Tom Purdue, there’re these steps out front. One second, she’s walking down them and the next, she’s flying headfirst toward me, like a meteor.”

“Is it strange that I don’t remember that?” I asked.

“Nope,” said the doctor. “Perfectly ordinary to forget incident-associated narrative for a time.” She shined a light in my eyes, and I flinched.

At some point, another doctor and a nurse had joined the party, though I couldn’t have told you when with any confidence. Nor can I recall much about them as individuals. They were an indistinct blur of pastel and white uniforms, like chalk doodles on a sidewalk in the rain.

The second doctor said that she had to ask me a couple of questions, general ones, not about the accident.

“Your full name?”

“Naomi Paige Porter.”

“Where do you live?”

“Tarrytown, New York.”

“Good, Naomi, good. What year is it?”

“Two thousand and . . . 2000, maybe?”

Even as I said it, I knew it wasn’t right. Because if it was 2000, I would have been twelve, and I knew for sure I wasn’t twelve. I didn’t feel twelve. I felt . . . I couldn’t say the exact number, but I just knew I felt older. Seventeen. Eighteen. My body didn’t feel twelve. My

mind didn't feel twelve either. And there was James, James proper—James looked at least seventeen, maybe older—and I felt the same age as him, the same as him. I looked from doctor to doctor to nurse: poker faces, every one.

One of the doctors said, “Okay, that's fine for now. Try not to worry.” This made me worry, of course.

I decided that the best thing for me to do would be to go home and sleep it off. I tried to sit up in the gurney, which made my head throb even more intensely than it had been.

“Whoa, Naomi, where you going?” the nurse said. He and James gently pushed me back into a horizontal position.

The doctor repeated, “Try not to worry.”

The other doctor paraphrased, “Really, you shouldn't worry.”

As they walked across the ER to some other patient, I heard the doctors muttering to each other all sorts of worrisome phrases: “mild traumatic brain injury” and “specialist” and “CT scan” and “possible retrograde amnesia.” I have a tendency to deal with things by not dealing with them at all, so instead of demanding that someone immediately tell me what was wrong, I just listened until I couldn't hear them anymore and then decided to concentrate on matters more tangible.

James always said how ugly he was, but I think he must have known that he wasn't. The only bad thing anyone could have said about him was that he was too skinny, but never mind that. Maybe because I couldn't seem to remember anything else, I felt like I needed to memorize every single thing about him. His fraying white dress shirt was open, so I could see that he was wearing a really old concert T-shirt—it was faded to the point that I couldn't even tell

what the band was. His boxers were sticking out over his jeans, and I could make out they were a dark green plaid. His fingers were long and thin like the rest of him, and a few of them were smudged with black ink. His hair was damp with sweat, which made it even darker than usual. Around his neck was a single leather rope with a silver ring on it, and I wondered if the ring was mine. His collar had gotten half turned up. I noticed blood on his lapels.

“There’s blood on your collar,” I said.

“Um . . . it’s yours.” He laughed.

I laughed, too, even though it made my brain beat like a heart. “In the ambulance . . .” For whatever reason, the phrase *in the ambulance* embarrassed me, and I had to rephrase. “In the van, you said you were my boyfriend?”

“Hmm, I hadn’t known you were listening to that.” He had this funny smile on his face and he shook his head a couple of times, as if in conversation with himself. He let go of my hand and laid it on the gurney. “No,” he said, “I just said you were my girlfriend so they would let me ride with you. I didn’t want you to be alone.”

This was disappointing news, to say the least.

There’s a joke about amnesiacs, which always reminds me of meeting James. It’s not exactly a joke, but more a “funny” slogan you’d wear on a T-shirt if you were a) an amnesiac, and b) extremely corny, and c) probably had issues in addition to amnesia, like low self-esteem or the need to give “too much information” or just plain bad taste in clothes. Okay, picture a really cheap, fifty-percent-polyester jersey with a white front and red sleeves. Now add the words “Hi, I’m an amnesiac. Have we met before?”

“You know something funny?” I said. “The first thing I thought

about you was what an honest voice you had, and it turns out you were lying to me.”

“No. Not to you. Only to some jerk in a uniform,” he corrected. “If I’d been thinking at all, I would have said you were my sister. No one would have even questioned that.”

“Except me. I don’t have any siblings.” I tried to make a joke of it. If given the choice, I preferred being his imaginary girlfriend to being his imaginary sister. “Are we friends, at least?”

“No, Naomi,” James said with the same little smile, “can’t say that we are.”

“Why not?” He seemed like the kind of person it might be nice to be friends with.

“Maybe we ought to be” was all he replied.

It was and it wasn’t a satisfactory answer, so I tried a different question. “Before, when you were shaking your head, what were you thinking?”

“You’re really gonna ask me that?”

“You have to tell me. I might die, you know.”

“I didn’t take you for the manipulative kind.”

I closed my eyes and pretended to pass out.

“Oh, all right, but that’s awful low,” he said with a resigned laugh. “I was wondering if I could get away with letting you think I was your boyfriend. And then I decided that would definitely be the wrong thing to do. It wouldn’t be fair—you don’t even know what year it is, for God’s sake. A good relationship is not built on lies and all that crap.”

“And well, I also wondered if it would be wrong to kiss you—not on the mouth, maybe on your forehead or hand—while I had

the chance, while you were still thinking you were mine. And I decided that would be very, very wrong and probably uncomfortable later on. Plus, a girl like you probably does have a boyfriend—”

I interrupted. “You think?”

James nodded. “Definitely. I don’t give a damn about him, but I didn’t want to compromise you . . . or take advantage. I decided that if I ever kissed you, I’d want your permission. I’d want—”

At that moment, my dad came into the ER.

James had been leaning over the side of the gurney railing, but he stood up straight like a soldier to shake Dad’s hand. “Sir,” he said, “I’m James Larkin. I go to school with your daughter.” But Dad pushed right past James to get to me, and James was left with his palm in the air, and I saw the four puncture wounds my nails had made from grabbing him so tight.

The doctors returned then, followed by a nurse, a specialist, and an orderly who began wheeling me away without even bothering to tell me where, and then I really had to throw up, and I didn’t want James to have to watch that (I didn’t want him to leave either), and somehow James slipped out without my seeing, which is something I would later find out he had a talent for.

Once I was admitted into a room, Dad passed the time by asking me if I was okay. “You okay, kid?”

“Yes, Dad.”

Five seconds later, “Kiddo, are you okay?”

In an amazing display of restraint, I managed to reply *Yes, Dad* three more times even though I had no earthly idea if I was. On the fifth or sixth time, I finally just snapped, “Where’s Mom?” She was better than Dad in these types of situations.

“In the city,” he said. He kept pacing the room and looking up and down the hallway. “Christ, is anyone ever going to help us?”

“Is she working?” Mom was a photographer and she sometimes had to go into New York City for that.

“Working?” Dad repeated. His head was sticking out the door like a turtle, but he pulled it back inside so that he could look at me. “She’s . . . She . . . Naomi, are you trying to worry me?”

“Dad, are you screwing with me?” Knowing my dad, this was not an unlikely scenario.

“Screwing with you?”

I assumed he hadn’t liked my use of the word *screw*, though Dad was not normally the sort of parent who cared much about swearing. He always said that words were words and the only reason to ever eliminate any of them was if they were either hurtful (and you weren’t meaning to be) or inexpressive. I figured that the anxiety of the situation must be getting to him, so I rephrased. “Sorry. *Playing* with me, whatever.”

“Are you screwing with *me*?” Dad asked.

“So you can use *screw* and I can’t? That doesn’t seem fair,” I protested.

“I don’t give a damn if you use the word *screw*, Naomi. But is that what you’re doing?”

“I’m not screwing with you! Just tell me where Mom is.”

“In N.Y.C.” It sounded like slow motion. EHNNNNNN. WHYYYYYY. SEEEEE. “New York—”

“City. Yes, I know what N.Y.C. stands for. But why?”

“She lives there. Since the divorce. You can’t have forgotten that.”

I’m sure you’ve already figured out that I had.

Everyone always says how much I look like her—my mom, I mean—which is ridiculous because she is half-Scottish and half-Japanese. We both have light blue eyes though, so I guess this accounts for the misunderstanding. No one ever says I look like Dad, which is ironic because he is actually part Russian. The rest of him is French, and all of him is Jewish, though he's not observant. All this makes everyone sound much more interesting than they are—my mom's really just a California girl, and my dad was born in D.C., and they met in college in New York City, where we used to live until I was eleven. If you're a wine-drinking type, you might have heard of them. They wrote a series of travel memoirs/coffee table books called *The Wandering Porters Do . . .* and then fill in the blank with the exotic locale of your choice, somewhere like Morocco or Tuscany. My mom took the pictures, and my dad wrote the text, except for the occasional footnote by Mom. Her footnotes were usually something mortifying, like “2. At an Edam cheese factory, Naomi vomited in an enormous wooden clog.” Or “7. Naomi was particularly fond of the schnitzel.” As for my contribution, I made a series of increasingly awkward appearances in their author photo on the back jacket flap above the caption “When not wandering, Cassandra Miles-Porter and Grant Porter live in New York with their daughter, Naomi.”

That's what popped into my head when Dad said they were divorced—all those Wandering Porter books and me as a kid on the back flap. In a strange way, I didn't feel like their divorce was happening to me, certainly not the “me” in that moment, the person lying in the hospital bed. It was happening to that little girl on the book jackets. I felt sad for her, but nothing yet for myself.

“Did it just happen?” I asked.

“Did *what* just happen?”

“The divorce.”

“It’s been two years, eleven months, but we’ve been separated close to four years now,” Dad said. Something in his tone told me he probably knew the precise number of days, too. Maybe even minutes and seconds. Dad was like that. “The doctors, they said you weren’t sure of the year before, but . . . Well, do you think this is part of the same thing?”

I didn’t answer him. For the first time, I allowed for the possibility that I had forgotten *everything* from the last four years.

I tried to remember the last thing I could remember. This turns out to be an incredibly difficult task because your brain is constantly making new memories. What came to mind was uselessly recent: my blood on James’s collar.

I decided to make a more specific request of my brain. I tried to remember the last thing I could about my mother. What came to me was her “Sign of the Times” show, which was an exhibition of her photographs at a Brooklyn gallery. She picked me up on the last day of sixth grade, so that she could give me a private showing before anyone else got there. The show had consisted of her pictures of signs from around the country and the world: street, traffic, restaurant, township, movie theater, bathroom, signs that were painted over but you could still make them out, signs handmade by homeless people or hitchhikers, etc. Mom had this theory that you could tell everything about people (and civilization in general) from the kinds of signs they put up. For example, one of her favorite pictures was of a mostly rusted sign in front of a house somewhere in the backwoods.

The sign read NO DOGS NEGROS MEXICANS. She said that, regardless of the rust, it had communicated to her clear as anything “to take the picture quick and get the hell out of town.” Most of her exhibit was more boring than that, though. As we were leaving, I told her I was proud of her because that’s what my parents always said to me whenever they came to see a dance recital or attended a school open house. Mom replied that she was “proud of herself, too.” I could remember her smiling just before she started to cry.

“So is Mom on her way, then?” I asked Dad.

“I didn’t think you’d want her here.”

I told him that she was my mother, so of course I wanted her.

“The thing is”—Dad cleared his throat before continuing—“I *have* called her, but since you haven’t really spoken to each other for a while, it didn’t seem right that she come.” Dad furrowed his brow. I noticed that he had less hair on his head than my brain was telling me he ought to have. “Do you want me to call her back?”

I did. I longed for Mom in the most primitive way, but I didn’t want to seem like a baby or not like myself, whatever that meant. And Mom and I not speaking? It seemed so unbelievable to me and like more than I could even begin to figure out in my current state. I needed time to think.

I told Dad that he didn’t need to call Mom, and his brow unfurrowed a wrinkle or two. “Well, that’s what I thought,” he said.

About a minute later, Dad clapped his hands together before taking his pad and pencil out of his back pocket. He always carried them in case he should be inspired. “You should make a list of everything you don’t remember,” he said, holding the pencil out to me.

Although my dad writes mainly books for a living, what he loves

writing most are lists. Groceries, books he's read, people he's angry at, the list goes on. If he could write lists for money instead of books, I think he'd be a happier person overall. I once said that to him, and he laughed before replying, "What do you think a table of contents is, kid? A book is just a very detailed and elaborate list."

My father is one of those people who believe that anything can be accomplished, the ills of the world cured, so long as it's written down and assigned a number. Maybe it's genetic, because I am most definitely not one of those people.

"So how about it?" Dad was still holding the pencil out to me.

"If I can't remember it in the first place, how'll I remember to put it on the list?" I asked. It was the most absurd thing in a day of absurd things, as ridiculous as asking a person who has lost her keys where she had last seen them.

"Oh. Good point." Dad tapped on his head with his pencil. "Brain's still working better than your old man's, I see. How about, as you hear things you don't remember, you tell me, and I'll write them down for you?"

I shrugged. At least it would keep Dad occupied.

"Things Naomi has forgotten," he said as he wrote. "Number one, Cass's and my divorce." He held up the paper to show me. "Just seeing it written down, doesn't that make it all so much less frightening?"

It didn't.

"Number two," he continued. "Everything after Cass's and my divorce. So that would be 2001, right?"

"I don't know." I knew Dad was trying to be helpful, but he was really starting to annoy the crap out of me.

“Number ten. Your boyfriend, I’m assuming?”

“I have a boyfriend?” I thought of what James had said.

Dad looked at me. “Ace. He’s still away at tennis camp.” He made a note.

My dad was up to nineteen (“Driver’s Ed? No. Driving? Maybe.”) when a nurse came into the room to wheel me away for my first of many tests. I remember feeling relieved that I didn’t have to hear twenty.

I was in the hospital for three more nights. A rotating coven of evil nurses would wake me up every three hours or so by shining a flashlight in my eyes. This is what they do when you’ve had a head trauma: all you want to do is sleep, and no one will let you. Besides not sleeping, the rest of my time was occupied with taking boring tests, ignoring my father’s incessant list-making, and wondering if James Larkin might take it upon himself to visit.

He didn’t.

My first visitor was William Landsman. Visiting hours began at eleven o’clock on Fridays, and Will showed up at 10:54. My dad had gone outside to make a few phone calls, so there was no one around to even tell me who this teenage boy in the maroon smoking jacket was. “Nice save, Chief!” Will said as he entered the room.

I asked him what he meant, and he explained about my rescue of the yearbook camera. “Not a scratch on it. Really going above and beyond the call of duty there,” he added.

Despite his questionable clothing choices, Will was not the least bit fussy or wimpy. When I asked him about the jacket, he claimed to wear it ironically, “as a way to entertain myself in the face of the

daily monotony of school uniforms.” He was compactly built, about my height (five feet seven inches), but solid-looking. He had wavy chestnut hair and dark blue eyes, sapphire or cerulean, a deeper shade than either mine or my mother’s. His eyelashes were very long and looked as if they had been coated with mascara even though they hadn’t been. On that day he had light dark circles under his eyes, and his cheeks were flushed. If he seemed loud or cavalier about my condition, I suspect now that it was a way of masking his concern for me. In any case, I liked him immediately. He felt comfortable and broken-in like favorite jeans. It probably goes without saying that James had had the opposite effect on me in the brief time that I had known him.

“Are you Ace?” I asked, remembering what Dad had said about my having a boyfriend.

Will removed his black rectangular-framed glasses and wiped them on his pants. I would later learn that removing his glasses was something Will did when embarrassed, as if not seeing something clearly could in some way distance him from an awkward situation. “No, I most definitely am not,” he said. “Ace’s about six inches taller than me. And also, he’s your boyfriend.” A second later, Will’s eyes flashed something mischievous. “Okay, so this is deeply wrong. I want it on the record that you are acknowledging that this is deeply wrong before I even say it.”

“Fine. It’s wrong,” I said.

“Deeply—”

“*Deeply* wrong.”

“Good.” Will nodded. “I feel so much better that you don’t remember *him* either. By the by, your man’s a dolt not to come.”

“Dolt?” Who used *dolt*?

“Tool. No offense.”

“Leave. Right now,” I said in a mock stern tone. “You go too far insulting Ace . . . What’s his last name?”

“Zuckerman.”

“Right. Zuckerman. Yeah, I’m really outraged about you insulting the boyfriend I don’t remember anyway.”

“You might be later and if that’s the case, I take it all back. Visiting hours only started a minute ago, so he’ll probably still come,” Will said, by way of encouragement I suppose.

“Dad said he was still at tennis camp.”

“If it were my girlfriend, I would have come back from tennis camp.”

“Who’s your girlfriend?” I asked.

“I don’t have one. I was speaking hypothetically.” Will chuckled and then stuck out his hand for me to shake. “Introductions are in order. I am William Landsman, the Co-editor of *The Phoenix*. Incidentally, you’re the other Co-editor. Your dad said you might have forgotten some things, but I didn’t think it was possible *I* might be one of them.”

“Are you *that* memorable?”

“Pretty much. Yes.” He nodded decisively.

“And humble.” I didn’t need to remember him to know exactly how to tease him.

“And also your best friend, if you haven’t already figured it out.” Will cleaned his glasses again.

“Really? My best friend wears a smoking jacket?” I nodded. “That’s very interesting.”

“It’s *ironic*. Seriously though, you can ask me anything. Honest to God, Chief, I know everything about you.”

I looked in his eyes, and I decided to trust him. “How does my face look?” Since they’d stitched up my forehead, I’d been basically trying to avoid my reflection.

He examined me from both sides and then from the front. “A little swollen around your left eye and cheekbone, but most of it’s covered by the tape and gauze.”

“Look under the gauze, will you?”

“Chief, I am not looking under the gauze for you! It’s completely unsanitary and probably against the rules! Do you want me to get kicked out of here and not be able to visit you?”

“I want a report before I have to see it for myself. I want to know if I’m, like, disfigured.” I tried to say this casually, but I was scared. “Please, Will, it’s important.”

Will sighed heavily before grumbling, “I said I’d tell you anything, not that I’d do anything. I want it on the record that I, William Landsman, did not want to do this, and am furthermore not trained for medical procedures.” He went into my room’s doll-house W.C. and washed his hands before returning to my bedside. He placed his left hand gently on the right side of my face before using his right hand to slowly remove a section of surgical tape from the left side near my hairline. “Tell me if I’m hurting you. Even a little.” I nodded.

When one of my hairs got pulled in the tape, I winced what I thought was imperceptibly, and Will stopped. “Am I hurting you?”

I shook my head. “Go on.”

Ten seconds later he had removed enough of the tape so that he

could lift up the gauze and look under it. “There are nine stitches, and a raised knob right below that, probably the size of a brussels sprout, and a larger bruise spread out across your forehead. None of it looks permanent. You’ll probably have a tiny scar from the stitches.” He refastened the gauze as delicately as he had removed it. “You’re still insanely, unfairly, tortuously beautiful, and that’s the last I’m gonna say about it, Chief.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“You are welcome,” he said jauntily. “Glad to be of service.” He tipped an imaginary hat. “Don’t think I’m unaware that you were really just fishing for compliments.”

“Yup, you see right through me,” I said.

Will leaned in close and whispered, “Come on, admit it. You really do remember me. All this amnesia crap is so you can get a break from *The Phoenix*. ”

“How’d you know? I just didn’t want to hurt your feelings, Landsman.”

“That’s real considerate of you.”

“So, what’s my boyfriend like?” I asked him.

“Let’s see. Ace Zuckerman is an awfully good tennis player.”

“You’re saying you don’t like him.”

“As he’s not my boyfriend, I don’t think I’m technically required to, Chief.”

“What about James Larkin?”

“James Larkin. Larkin comma James. Yeah, we haven’t really met him yet. He’s new this year, which is unusual for a senior. I think he might have gotten kicked out of his last school or something.”

“A delinquent?” That was interesting . . .

Will shrugged. “I only met him this morning when he dropped

off the camera at *The Phoenix* and he was polite as anything. FYI, the kid is nothing like Ace Zuckerman.” He paused. “Or me.” He reached into his messenger bag and pulled out his laptop. “You have your headphones with you, right?”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure.”

“You always do. Where’s your bag?”

I pointed to the closet in the corner of the room. Will opened the door and started digging through my backpack, which probably should have bothered me, but it didn’t. It seemed like someone else’s bag anyway. He pulled out an iPod, presumably mine, then plugged it into his laptop. “When I heard from your dad, I decided to make you a mix. Don’t worry. I burned it for you, too.” He handed me a CD and a playlist entitled *Songs for a Teenage Amnesiac*, Vol. I. “It’s not one of my best. Some of the selections are a little broad,” he continued, “but I was under time constraints. I promise that Volume II will be better, as it is with, for example, the second record of the Beatles’ *White Album* or the Godfather movies.”

Will handed me my headphones and put away his laptop. He started speaking really fast. “It’s hard to make a good mix. You don’t want anything too cliché, but you don’t want to make the songs too obscure either. Plus, you can only fit about nineteen tracks on a CD, and you want each one to say something different, and you want a balance of slow and fast songs, and then there’s the added pressure of making sure each track organically leads to the next. Plus, you’ve got to know the person for whom the mix is intended really well. For example, on yours each of the songs means something. Like the first one is sort of how we met freshman year. I thought it might jog your memory.”

I read the CD liner. “ ‘Fight Test,’ the Flaming Lips?”

“Yeah, I was on the fence between that and ‘Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots, Part I.’ And also ‘To Whom It May Concern’ by John Wesley Harding. I eliminated that one first ’cause I had another of his songs I wanted to use and it’s bad form to duplicate artists. The one I used instead is called ‘Song I Wrote Myself in the Future,’ and it’s the next to last track.”

I was about to ask him how we *had* met, but I was interrupted by the arrival of someone who made me forget the mix and William Landsman for the time being.

“Hi, Mrs. Miles,” Will said to my mother.

“Hello there,” she replied uncertainly.

Will laughed. “We’ve never met before, but I’ve seen your picture. I’m William Landsman, Will.”

“Could we have a moment alone?” my mother asked Will.

Will looked at me. “You’ll be okay?”

I nodded.

“I should be getting back to yearbook anyway,” Will said.

“There’s yearbook in the summer?” I asked.

“It never quits.” He took my hand in his and shook it rather formally. “I’ll call you,” he promised. “Don’t forget to charge up your cell phone.”

After Will closed the door, neither my mother nor I spoke.

My mother is beautiful, and since I’m adopted you can know I’m not saying that as some sort of backhanded way of telling you how pretty I am. Besides, everyone says so. And she isn’t beautiful in any of the clichéd ways. She’s not tall and skinny and blond with big boobs or something. She’s little and curvy with wavy light brown hair halfway down her back and almond-shaped ice blue eyes. It felt

like I hadn't seen her in forever. I almost started to cry, but something kept me from doing it.

Mom, however, did not hold back. She burst into tears almost as soon as she got to my bedside. "I told myself I wasn't going to do that," she said. She mock-slapped herself across the face before taking my hand.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"Your dad told me not to come, that you didn't want me. But how could I not come?" She looked at my face. "Your poor head." She ever so gently stroked my brow, and then she leaned over to hug me. I pulled away. I needed to know a few things first.

"You and Dad are divorced."

She nodded.

"But why?"

Dad came into the room then. His voice was hard as bricks.
"Yes, tell her, Cass."

"I can explain." Mom's eyes started to tear again. "You were twelve when I ran into Nigel. It was just by chance."

"Who's Nigel?"

"Her high school boyfriend," Dad answered for her.

"Just by chance," Mom repeated. "I was waiting for the subway, and it was the most random thing in the whole—"

I told her that I didn't want a story, only facts.

"I . . ." she began again. "This is so hard."

I told her that I didn't want adjectives and adverbs, only nouns and verbs. I asked her if she could handle that. She nodded and cleared her throat.

"I had an affair," she said.

“I got pregnant,” she said.

“Your dad and I divorced,” she said.

“I married Nigel and moved back to the city.”

“You have a three-year-old sister.”

“Sister?” It was a foreign word on my tongue, gibberish. Sisters were something other people had, like mono or ponies.

“But I thought you couldn’t have children,” I said.

Dad whispered to my mother something about how he had been trying to break this to me slowly, how I had already been through *a lot*. He had never mentioned my sister or Mom’s pregnancy, which seemed odd, especially when you consider all his list-making. I wondered what else he’d been holding back.

“Sister?” I repeated. It felt even more made up the second time.

“Yes. Her name is Chloe.”

“Are we close?” I asked.

“No,” Mom said. “You refuse to see her.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“It’s probably a lot to hear all at once,” Dad said.

“How are you feeling, cupcake?” Her voice was high and whispery. She sounded like she was floating away.

How did I feel? About what? Which part?

“About everything I’ve just told you, I suppose.”

What I felt was that all of these were very good reasons for us not to be speaking. It was one thing for Mom and Dad to have gotten divorced, but for Mom to get together with her high school boyfriend and have an affair and a daughter and a whole new family . . . “I feel like”—her eyes were wide and expectant—“I honestly feel repulsed. I honestly feel like you’re a slut.”

“Naomi,” Dad said.

“What?” I asked. “She is. Women who cheat on their husbands and get pregnant are sluts. Why don’t you add that one to your list, Dad?”

Mom stood up and started backing away from my bed, not quite able to look me in the eye. “I understand,” she said, “I understand. I understand.” Finally, Dad said that he thought she should go, which was funny because she seemed to be heading in that direction already.

“What happened to the Wandering Porters?” I asked after Mom had left.

“They wander no more.” Dad tried to make a joke out of it. “The last book was Iceland. Do you remember that summer we went to Iceland?”

I did. We had left right after Mom’s show, which may have even made it my last memory. I was twelve, and it had pretty much been fifty degrees all summer long, the coldest summer of my life. My mom and I used to say that it was the summer without any summer.

“What do you do now?” I asked.

“Your mom still takes pictures. I still write books. We just don’t do it together. And the Wandering Porters are still in print mostly.”

“What are your new books about?”

“Um . . . well, the last one was about . . . I’m not good at describing. It was about lots of things really,” Dad said. “But the jacket copy said it was about ‘the end of my marriage as seen through the prism of larger world events.’ ”

I interpreted. “It’s about the divorce?”

“Basically. You could say that. Yes.”

I asked him if I had liked it. He said that I hadn't even read it, but that the reviews had been pretty decent.

"Maybe I should read it now?" I said. "If my memory doesn't come back."

"Yeah, you could just skip through the parts about the Middle East," Dad suggested. "There's quite a bit about that, too. Not that you shouldn't be informed, but even I think it gets a little dry. Naomi, are you crying?"

I guess I was. "I'm sorry," I said. I turned onto my side, away from Dad. I didn't want him to watch me cry. In all likelihood, the reason he hadn't already told me about Mom and Chloe was because he hadn't wanted to discuss it himself.

Whenever Dad said anything serious, he would usually undercut it with a joke. That was his style. When he and my mom used to throw parties, he always had a funny story and could make everyone else laugh. My dad certainly wasn't what anyone would call shy, and yet he was. By himself, he was always a bit stingy with saying certain things. Like, he rarely said "I love you." I knew that he did love me. He just didn't say it a whole lot. My mom was the one with all the "I love you's." But I understood what Dad was like because I was like that, too. This was why I couldn't look at him.

"Why are you crying, kiddo? Is it your head?"

The doctors had told us that people with head injuries could be emotional, but it wasn't that. It was just . . . everything.

"It wasn't entirely your mother's fault. Mainly hers, but . . ." Dad laughed. "I'm kidding. Mostly."

I felt so alone.

"What is it? Please, tell your old man."

“I feel like an orphan.” I was sobbing to the point that Dad couldn’t understand me the first time and I had to repeat myself. “I’m an orphan.”

It probably won’t make any sense, but it was like my mother was less my mother than she had been before. Or maybe that I was less her child now that she had a new one. I was a vestigial daughter: an obsolete girl with an obsolete brain and an obsolete heart. I could hear my dad’s breathing, but he didn’t say anything and I still couldn’t bear to look at him. I closed my eyes.

“Naomi?” Dad said after a while. “Are you sleeping?”

I kept my eyes closed and let him think that I was.

He kissed me on my forehead. “I’ll never leave you, kid.” He wouldn’t have said this if he’d thought I was awake.

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