

HOW THEY MET AND OTHER STORIES

David Levithan

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**HOW THEY MET,
AND OTHER STORIES**



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For Nancy

*(The book of love would not be long and boring
were she the editor)*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book starts, bizarrely enough, with me in physics class.

It was my junior year of high school. Despite the best efforts of my physics teacher, I was continually bored out of my wits. I needed something to do besides pay attention, and passing notes to my friend Lynda only occupied about half the time. So I decided to write a story, going through the physics book (it would look like I was being studious!) and finding as many romantic notions as possible within its pages (I would not be studious at all!). I think I started in November, and by February I had finished the story. I decided to give it to my friends for Valentine's Day. The next year they wanted another. And so on, for all the years after.

Not all of these stories are official valentine stories—I can, it seems, write about love and its follies year-round. But when putting together this book of stories about love (“love stories” has the wrong feel to it—I prefer “stories about love”), I decided to go all the way back. As a result, this book contains that first valentine story (“A Romantic Inclination”) and the one that came the year after (“Memory Dance,” which is still my mom's favorite). Instead of trying to rewrite them as I'd write them now, I've decided to leave them as I wrote them in high school, give or take some punctuation and an awkward last line. “The escalator, a love story” (from college), “Intersection,” “The Number of People Who Meet on Airplanes,” “Flirting with Waiters,” “Starbucks Boy,” and “Miss Lucy Had a Steamboat” were also valentine stories, as were “The Good Witch,” “Andrew Chang,” “Love Sometimes,” and “Skipping the Prom,” a medley of prom riffs that I turned into separate stories here (My novels *Boy Meets Boy*, *The Realm of Possibility*, and *Are We There Yet?* also started as valentine stories.)

All of the stories in this book (indeed, most of the stories I've written) have been proofread by friends of mine. It is foolish to try to list them all, and I'm sure I'm going to overlook some of them, but I'd like to attempt to thank them for taking the time and helping to make me the writer I am. So thanks to the proofreaders, the suggestion-makers, and the story-encouragers (in order of appearance: Mom and Dad, Adam, Mayling Birney, Lynda Hong, Jennifer Bodner, Eliza Sporn, Jennifer Fain, Carrie Retlin, Michael Rothman, Andrew Farmer, Piper Hoffman, Shira Epstein, Jennifer Corn, Alistair Newbern, Karen Popernik, David Leventhal, Joanna Fried, Janet Vultee, Ellen Miles (I think all the pages are here this time), Nancy Mercado, Dan Poblocki, Nancy Hinkel, Brian Selznick, Billy Merrell, Nick Eliopoulos, and Allison Wortche, as well as my friends (past and present, authorial and editorial) at Scholastic, my friends at Random House, my Teen Author Drinks Night cohorts, and the fine purveyors of Pink Drinks.

These stories aren't interconnected...but of course they are, in a way. They don't share characters, but they share many other things. I'm sure I don't even recognize all of the connections now. I know people are afraid of story collections—they don't get the same respect as novels—but I don't understand why. Together, these stories say much more than they would apart. *How They Met* refers

not only to the characters in the stories but also to the stories themselves. Here they are, meeting for the first time. In the same way that paragraphs meet, and sentences meet, and words meet. —

Enjoy the intersections.

—D.

STARBUCKS BOY

It was my aunt who pimped me out.

We had this arrangement: I would get to live with her for a few weeks over the summer and take a pre-college course at Columbia before my senior year. In return, I wouldn't have to do a thing besides stay out of the way. It sounded like a good plan to me, except that when I got to Columbia on the first day of summer classes, I found that my course had been dropped. Apparently, there'd been a notice that nobody in my family had bothered to notice.

I thought Aunt Celia would be mad. Or at least concerned. But instead she said, "Well, this could actually solve Elise's problem."

Elise was a friend of Aunt Celia's who lived in the same apartment building. She had a six-year-old daughter.

"I'm sure you're wonderful with children," Aunt Celia told me.

This was an especially strange statement coming from Aunt Celia, who (as far as I could tell) considered the continued existence of children to be something akin to a plague. We have a picture I love to look at in my immediate family, taken right after my brother, Jonathan, was born. It's Aunt Celia's turn to hold him, and from the look on her face and the positioning of her body, you'd think that someone had asked her to cradle a ten-pound turd. Nothing personal against Jonathan—I'm sure she was the same with me. As Jonathan and I grew up, Aunt Celia always gave us presents to "save for later." For my seventh birthday I received a pair of Tiffany candlesticks. For my eighth, it was a matching finger bowl. I freaked out, thinking a finger bowl was meant to hold fingers. (Aunt Celia left the room so my parents could explain.) When I turned thirteen, Aunt Celia actually seemed relieved. She finally stopped maintaining any pretense of treating me like a child, and started treating me like a lesser form of adult instead.

"Aren't you?" she now prompted. "Wonderful? With children?"

I didn't know where we were going with this, but I was sure that if I had no reason to stay in New York, Aunt Celia would ship me back to suburbia faster than she could dial out for dinner. Even if I found a way to avoid being underfoot, she would be unnerved by the *concept* of me being underfoot.

"I'm wonderful with children," I assured her. Various instances of me "babysitting" Jonathan flashed through my head—we hadn't been allowed to have pets, so I'd often encouraged him to adopt a dog like one. I thought it best not to mention the particulars of my sitting experience, which, at its most extreme, stopped just short of accidental lobotomy.

“Perfect,” she said. Then she picked up her cell phone off the front table, speed-dialed, and told the person on the other end, “Elise, it’s Celia. I have a solution for the whole Astrid affair. My nephew, yes, Gabriel. The one I was telling you about...escaping my sister, yes. Well, it seems that his course has been canceled. And I happen to know he’s wonderful with children. A complete charmer.... Yes, he’s entirely free.... I’m sure those hours would be fine.... He’s delighted....You’ll see him then.. Yes, it’s quite a loaded potato.... Absolutely my pleasure!”

She hung up and looked at me like I’d just been checked off a list.

“It’s all set,” she said. “Although you’ll have to dress nicer than that.”

“What’s all set?” I asked. If I couldn’t do it in a T-shirt, I was worried.

“Why, your job. For the next three weeks.”

“Which is...?” I coaxed.

She sighed. “To take care of Elise’s daughter, Arabella. You’ll love her. She’s *wonderful*.”

No follow-up questions were possible. With an air kiss and a trail of perfume, Aunt Celia was off.

I started the next morning at eight. My class was supposed to have started at ten, and I’d look forward to the extra hours of sleep. Instead, Aunt Celia came into my room at seven-fifteen, turned off the lights, released a low-octaved “Be ready by eight,” and left before I could see her without the compensations of makeup.

Even after I cured my early-morning dayblindness with two cups of coffee and a shower prolonged by ten minutes of tangential thinking, I still wasn’t fully awake when I rang the doorbell of apartment 8C. I looked presentable enough in my button-down shirt and khakis, but my mind felt buttoned-down and khaki as well. I was already starting to resent my new job.

Aunt Celia’s friend Elise was three-quarters out the door when she opened it for me.

“You must be Gabriel,” she said. “I’ve heard so much about you. Come in.”

Elise was one of those women who exercised so often that she was starting to look like a piece of exercise equipment herself. She walked around the apartment as if she were still on a treadmill, telling me about emergency numbers and people to call and when to expect her back.

“I really appreciate you doing this,” she said, putting on her jacket and leading me down a hallway. “Arabella’s back here.”

Arabella’s door was decorated with a framed copy of the unicorn tapestry from The Cloisters. Elise knocked three quick raps into the door, then opened it for me. I was astounded, but not particularly surprised, by the room that was revealed to me. It was everything you might expect from a fairly rich

New York City girl named Arabella. It was designed like a *Vogue* version of Disney, with a four poster bed and no-poster walls. Pink was the dominant color, with blue and green playing the major supporting roles. My attention was caught by a number of wide-eyed dolls relegated to size-order rows on a magisterial display shelf, as if they were about to take a class picture and had dressed for the occasion. This was the room I had never dreamed about as a little boy, and still feared now.

Even though the light in the room was on, Arabella remained under the covers, reading by flashlight. I could see the beam breaking through the comforter, and could hear the pages turn even when her mother called her name. Finally, as the calling grew more insistent, Arabella emerged. She was not, as I'd expected, sleek and steely like her mother. In fact, she was pudgy and flushed, her hair only making a halfhearted effort at curling. Her expression was sour, her clothing dour, and her anger at being interrupted was palpable. She held up her Berenstain Bears book and said, "*I'm trying to read!*"

Elise took it in stride.

"Well, I'm heading off, Arabella. Gabriel will take care of you until Manolo comes at two. *Comprenez-vous?*"

"*Oui.*"

Arabella didn't seem to pay me any mind, and once her mother left the apartment, I remained standing there awkwardly. Arabella didn't return under her covers, but she continued to use the flashlight over every page.

Stupidly, I hadn't brought any reading material of my own. So I reached for a copy of *Pete's Pizza*, only to be chastised when I picked it up.

"You should ask first," Arabella said.

I apologized.

"I don't go out until ten," she told me. "You can watch TV if you want."

"Do you mind if I read some of these instead?" I asked, gesturing to her bookshelf.

"Sure," she replied. "Just don't say them out loud."

I started with a few picture books, then found a copy of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and began to read that. Every now and then I'd look up and check on my babysittee. I could see her concentrating on each word of every page; only after a sentence was through would she look at the pictures. It was cool to see reading become such a transparent act—it was as if her face had a different expression for each punctuation mark, and when there was dialogue you could see her actually listening to it in her head. One time she caught me watching her and grimaced. I quickly returned to my own book, and didn't smile or even acknowledge it when she started to take books from the pile that I'd already read.

At precisely ten o'clock, Arabella announced, "It's time to go."

Elise hadn't said anything about whether or not we could leave the building, but I assumed it was okay. Arabella swiftly moved to the front door, undoing the locks and bolts as if they were pieces of an ancient Chinese puzzle. She pointed out the spare keys and then instructed me how to lock up once the door was closed again.

I had always secretly suspected that rich New York City kids acted twice as old as they really were. The three-year-olds acted six, the six-year-olds acted twelve, the twelve-year-olds partied like they were twenty-four, and each eighteen-year-old took on a thirty-six-year-old's weariness. Because they had seen the city, they felt they'd seen the world. Whereas those of us in the suburbs had simply seen the suburbs.

I will admit: I was still somewhat amazed and intimidated by New York City and its complete hugeness. Back home when I wanted to go somewhere, I jumped in my car and drove there. But the city required the higher math of navigation, factoring in subway grids and bus paths and street maps with so many letters and numbers and names and letter-number combinations and number-number combinations. The basic act of considering a local distance in terms of east, west, north, and south was so bizarre to me; those words, I felt, should be used to describe coasts or countries, not a place two blocks over and one block up.

Arabella didn't seem fazed. Even though she was barely taller than the hydrants, she knew exactly where she was going. Since we were near Central Park, I thought we might be heading for the zoo, or a museum, or a playground. It was a perfect July day—sunny, but with the feeling that God had left the windows open.

At the end of the first block, Arabella waited, even though there was a walk sign. I didn't understand, so after a moment she said to me, a little impatiently, "You need to hold my hand when we cross the street."

Such a strange thing, to hold a six-year-old's hand. Especially a six-year-old you've only just met. A toddler will grab hold of your finger, and someone your own age will clasp on to your whole hand, but with six-year-olds it's something in between, this acknowledgment that they can't be the one to take hold, so you have to do all the holding, folding your hand around theirs, feeling so much bigger and responsible. It's weird and it's scary and it's nice. Neither Arabella nor I said a word, and as soon as we got back to the curb, she pulled away and I let go until the next curb.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"I want to try a new Starbucks," she replied.

"Are you sure you're allowed to go to Starbucks?"

"I go there *all the time*."

Elise had told me to call if there was an emergency, but I figured the prospect of undue caffeination didn't really count as one. In fact, Arabella made it seem like going to Starbucks was the most natural thing in the world, so I followed along. We only had to walk five blocks to hit the nearest one. It was now ten-fifteen, and the morning rush was over. Instead the seats were filled by the daytrippers, the

patrons for whom the word *ensconced* was no doubt termed. Laptops were open, bookmarks were orphaned on tables, and newspapers were set out to be read section by section. An idle idyll. Suddenly I felt more at home.

And then I looked behind the counter.

Now, it has to be one of Starbucks's more brilliant marketing strategies to maintain at least one completely dreamy guy behind the counter at any given shift. This guy is invariably known as Starbucks Boy to the hundreds of regular customers who have a crush on him, and the glory of it is that he always seems just accessible enough to be within reach, but never accessible enough to actually touch. Starbucks Boy wears short sleeves even in the winter, so you can study his arms whenever you're feeling too shy to stare at his face (in hopes of catching an eye sparkle or a dimple). Depending on the location of the Starbucks, you can imagine that the minute he gets off work, he heads off to rehearse some new songs with his band, or surf the big waves, or shoot an indie film. He is, unlike most beautiful people you've ever encountered, friendly—and you honestly believe it's not because that's a part of his job. He banters with the counter girls relentlessly, whether it's cornrowed Latisha or corn-fed Barbara, or corn-toed Betty. You listen in on their in-jokes, and then think that the way he says “Good morning” or “Have a good one” or “Here you go” to you is a little different from the way he says it to anyone else. Or at least that's the hope.

The dreamy guy at this Starbucks wasn't working the counter. Instead he was working a broom behind it, smiling as he swept. At first I didn't get the smile, but then I realized he was listening to the radio, to Norah Jones sliding her voice around the notes. In his own way, he was dancing along.

I was so busy not-looking-but-looking that I didn't notice Arabella arrive at the front of the line.

“Can I help you?” the counter girl asked. She was about my age, with her hair pulled into a ponytail and her face pulled into a ponyfront.

Suddenly, Arabella became shy. She leaned into me and whispered, “I want a vanilla mocha decaf latte but with no mocha.”

I figured the counter girl had heard, but instead of punching it in, she stared at me. So I said, “She like a vanilla mocha decaf latte, hold the mocha.”

“You mean like a vanilla steamer?” the bored barista asked.

“No!” Arabella shouted. “I want a vanilla mocha decaf latte, *hold the mocha!*”

“One vanilla mocha decaf latte, hold the mocha,” the barista repeated.

Arabella pulled on my shirt. I leaned down and she whispered, “I have my purple cup.” She rummaged through the small Hello Kitty purse she'd brought and pulled it out.

I could sense a stop to the sweeping, and could imagine Starbucks Boy finally noticing me as I said to the counter girl, “And would you mind putting it in this purple cup?”

“I’m sorry, we can only refill Starbucks mugs,” she said.

I looked down to Arabella and saw she was on the verge of an outburst.

“C’mon,” I said.

The barista looked offended by this plea—I was violating the Starbucks Code of Customer Behavior. But she would be violating the Starbucks Code of Employee Behavior to tell me to piss off, so we were at a standstill.

Arabella chimed in with a “Pleeeeeeeeease,” and that’s what did it. Starbucks Boy leaned in, took the cup out of my hand, and said, “No problem.”

Then he smiled. At me. The kind of smile that feels like there’s a wink attached to it.

I ordered an iced chai, then paid with my hard-earned (well, unearned parental) dollars. Arabella and I shifted over to the pickup counter, where Starbucks Boy was already waiting with her vanilla milk. Frustratingly, a Starbucks Boy never wears a name tag, so you just have to imagine his name is Dalton or Troy or Dylan. As my Starbucks Boy handed Arabella her drink, I observed that he gave her the same smile he gave me. I realized how stupid I was being, thinking his attentions were anything more than routine. Then, when he handed over my drink and our hands accidentally touched, I forgot that realization entirely.

Arabella picked out one of the superlong straws to sip her milk with, and I drank the minute’s worth of liquid that had been given to me with an afternoon’s worth of ice cubes. When we were finished, I stole one last glance at Starbucks Boy, who was making some foam. I almost went up and purchased a mini bundt cake just to get another view, then I dismissed myself as too silly for words (this was a full conversation in my head) and ushered Arabella (who’d lost interest in her drink after six carefully spaced sips) outside. I proposed a stop at the Central Park Zoo, and she acted like she was humoring me by saying yes.

I found myself wanting to impress her, like we were on a date. I rattled off facts about polar bears and penguins, and was excited when she seemed mildly interested. She started asking me the names of each of the animals—not their scientific names, but their proper names, like Freezy or Gertrude. I gave her the answers, making them up as we went along, and it took a good dozen species before Arabella figured out I was kidding.

“The emu is not named Clifford,” she said. “Clifford is a dog.”

“Did I say Clifford?” I backtracked. “I meant Gifford. Like Kathie Lee.”

“Who’s Kathie Lee?”

“Kathie Lee’s the sea otter. Let’s go see her.”

I had thought it wouldn’t be any problem for us to get back by two, and because of that I didn’t bother to check the clock on my cell phone. I was shocked when I finally saw that we only had twenty

five minutes to get home.

“You forgot lunch,” Arabella said as we headed home.

“You didn’t tell me you were hungry,” I replied, and then immediately felt the way any adult feels when he or she picks an argument with a six-year-old—namely, stupid.

“I was,” Arabella said, and that was that.

We got back with three minutes to spare.

“Don’t worry,” Arabella told me as I made her a pb & j sandwich in the kitchen. “Manolo’s always late.”

I nodded and asked her who Manolo was.

“My French tutor,” she replied. Then she asked, “Do you have a boyfriend?”

I was about to bitch and moan—the usual response—but then I realized who I was talking to. Only in New York (and maybe San Francisco) could a six-year-old have gaydar.

“How do you know I’m gay?” I asked. I genuinely wanted to know. My wardrobe wasn’t infused with pink or rainbows, and I certainly hadn’t been very flamboyant in her presence. I wondered what my tells were.

“The way you look at boys,” she said. “You’re gay.”

The doorbell rang. Arabella made no move to answer it.

“I’ll get it,” I said. It took me a minute to walk to the door, but two minutes to get the locks open.

“The top one first and to the left,” the voice on the other side of the door said. “Then the middle one to the right. Then the bottom one, twice around to the left. Now turn the knob.”

When I finally got it open, I found a guy a few years older than me, wearing a winter sweater on a summer day. He had Harry Potter glasses and a Beatrix Potter body.

“*Bonjour*,” he said.

“’*Allo*,” I said, trying to sound Cockney but ending up sounding Klingon.

“You must be Astrid’s successor,” he continued. “I’m charmed to meet you.”

“And you must be Manolo,” I said. “Or do you prefer Manny?”

At that last word, he shuddered.

“Manolo,” he said. “Is *la fille* ready?”

“She’s in *le kitchen*.”

“Can you tell her to meet me in the study?”

“My pleasure.”

I watched him stroll off without another look in my direction, then poked my head into the kitchen.

“Your Frenchman’s here,” I said. “I’m going to head home.”

Arabella put her sandwich down and said, “That’s fine. I won’t tell Mom about lunch as long as you remember tomorrow.”

I told her she had a deal.

The next day was much the same, only I was wearing better clothes. I had a suspicion that Arabella was a daily-ritual kind of girl, and if I was going to see Starbucks Boy again, it wasn’t going to be in khakis and a button-down.

If Elise or Arabella noticed my more casual attire, neither mentioned it. Instead Elise mentioned that Ivan—the math tutor—was coming at three.

Figuring it might mean extra money—and also figuring I had more than a fair grasp of first-grade math—I told Elise, “If you want, I could tutor Arabella. You know, stay later and do it.”

Elise stared down her nose at me. She had to angle her head to do it.

“I’m sure you’re very intelligent, but we prefer Arabella’s tutors to have graduated college.”

“Ivy league?” I asked, tongue in cheek.

“Preferred, but not essential,” Elise replied, tongue nowhere near cheek. “We had a lovely girl from Smith, but she went away to India with her new lover.”

I didn’t think it would win me the argument to point out that I wasn’t going to be running off with any lovers anytime soon. I made a mental note to teach Arabella some really stupid knock-knock jokes as retribution.

As I’d predicted, we followed the same morning routine: reading in Arabella’s room until ten (once again, I didn’t bring my own book, but this time it was deliberate—I enjoyed reading hers), then stroll down to Starbucks. I kept looking at my reflection in windows as we walked there, checking to see if my hair was flat or if my shirt was billowing the wrong way. Arabella was telling me a story about a girl in her kindergarten class who had eaten a crayon and said it tasted like chicken. I tried to follow.

All of my prayers and fears were answered, because Starbucks Boy was working the register when we walked in. ~~There were two people in front of us, and I obsessively paid attention to the way he talked to them—genial, but nothing special.~~ When we got to the front of the line, he smiled a little wider (I was sure of it) and said, without missing a beat, “One iced chai and one vanilla mocha decaf latte, hold the mocha, in a purple cup, right?”

Was I dealing with some kind of Starbucks Savant, or had he thought my order yesterday was worth remembering? Melodramatic as it may sound (and it certainly *felt* melodramatic), I considered that my entire romantic future might hinge on the answer to that question.

The trouble with flirting with someone at a cash register is that your time together is bound to be fleeting. I could hear the people behind me shuffling and preparing to grumble as I fumbled through my wallet for correct change (saving my singles for the tip jar, where they’d be more noticeable). Starbucks Boy conveyed my order and Arabella’s cup to the worker behind him, then looked at my wallet and said, “It’s cool you have a change pocket. I need one of those in my wallet. I *hate* loose change.”

If there was something to say next that would parlay our conversation from reportage to repartee, I couldn’t figure it out. So instead of something inspiringly witty, I said, “I got it at H&M. I like it a lot.”

“Homosexual and Metrosexual,” Starbucks Boy replied. Then, as I thought *WHA?!*, he added, “H&M. I know it stands for something Swedish, but really it should be Homosexual & Metrosexual.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Mmm-hmm.”

“It’s a cool wallet.”

“Thanks.”

Because I’d paid in exact change, there wasn’t anything for him to give me back except the receipt. And once he handed that over, I couldn’t continue to hold up the line. I didn’t think the woman behind me would understand if I turned to her and said, “I just need another moment—I’m admiring his eyes.” Or maybe she would, and she’d get further with him than I could.

Homosexual or metrosexual? Or just a fan of mass-produced Swedish fashion?

I hadn’t even realized that Arabella had disappeared from my side, which I imagined wasn’t the best babysitter behavior on my part. Luckily she was only a few steps away, at the pickup counter.

“He’s nice,” she observed. I restrained myself from grabbing her by the shoulders and asking, *What else did you notice? Do you think he’s into guys? And into me, specifically?* I wished I were back home, where I could send my girl posse in to suss him out.

That afternoon, after I’d abandoned Arabella to Ivan (who looked like the love child of Lenin and Stalin), I found myself ambling by the Starbucks again. I debated whether or not to go in, to see if Starbucks Boy’s shift had ended. Then I started to feel like I was exhibiting Typical Stalker Behavior.

and decided to stalk wallets at H&M instead.

I knew I was getting perilously close to opening up my History of Stupid Things Done in the Name of Crushes, but the insidious thing about the History was that I always felt each new blank page had the potential to transform it into a different book. One successful gesture, one successful relationship would suddenly turn it into a History of Stupid Things Done in the Name of Crushes That Were A Redeemed in the End. If on page 13 I wrote Justin Timberlake's initials with mine in a heart on my sneakers, only to throw them out the next day when Laura Duke teased me for it, or if on page 98 I set up base camp outside Roger Lin's locker just to see if he'd notice me there, or if on page 154 I entered a milkshake-drinking contest to be able to stand next to Mark Tamlin for fifteen minutes, only to have him puke vanilla chum onto my Skechers...well, somehow I felt these pages didn't bear consideration as I headed to page 239 and bought a ten-dollar H&M wallet for a boy because it was the only thing in the world I knew for sure he liked, including me. I didn't buy him the same exact wallet—I made his green to my blue—and I didn't actually believe I'd ever give it to him. But at least it provided me with the illusion of doing something proactive.

That night, Aunt Celia asked me how it was going with Arabella. We were at a trattoria down the street from her apartment, her concession for never cooking me dinner.

“Fine,” I said.

Aunt Celia swirled the wine in her glass for a second before drinking it. “She’s a very talented girl...or so Elise tells me.”

“She’s very smart,” I agreed.

Aunt Celia nodded. “Good.” Then she speared an asparagus and we remained in silence until she released her next fleeting criticism.

Pretty much the whole time, I was thinking of Starbucks Boy.

The next morning, I couldn't stop myself from being impatient. Arabella also seemed to be pushing the clock to go faster. Instead of spending time on each book, she sped through them, scowling at the illustrated kittens and puppies as if it were their fault that time couldn't move as fast as she turned the pages.

Finally, a little before ten o'clock, she looked at me thoughtfully and said, “Let's go now.”

I had spent about a half hour deciding which T-shirt to wear, which was a sure sign of a crush—ever there was one. I was also carrying two wallets—an empty one in my left pocket, an only marginally-more-full one in my right.

I didn't even accept the possibility that he might not be there when we arrived. I knew that if I entered the Starbucks and didn't see him, I would impale myself on the nearest coffee stirrer.

My heart missed about a thousand beats when we walked in and discovered the surly girly behind the counter. But then Starbucks Boy emerged from the back room, a stack of cups piled high in his hands. Gently he settled them down next to the mocha machines. I felt all the nervous static in my heart empty into my bloodstream.

As he straightened the cups into neat rows, he looked up and saw me. There was instant recognition and another one of those smiles. As Arabella and I moved to the front of the line, he relieved his coworker at the cash register.

"The usual?" he asked.

"Thanks," I said, handing over Arabella's purple cup.

Then he went back and *made them himself*. The glum girl returned to the cash register as if it had always been planned.

I thought about leaving the H&M wallet in the tip jar. Then I thought about striking up a conversation and handing it to him. Then I thought about how ridiculous everything was, and all my resolve dissolved. When I picked up Arabella's milk and my chai, my fingers again briefly touched his. But it was just a hand-off, not a hands-on.

"Thanks," I said again.

"My pleasure," he replied. And then we stood there for a second, before I felt goofy and turned away to get a table.

Arabella didn't seem happy with me.

"He's really nice," she said once more, this time between sips.

"He sure is," I agreed, perhaps too enthusiastically.

After about four more sips, Arabella announced she had to go to the girls' room.

I looked at the restroom door and saw I'd need to get the key.

"Are you sure you can't wait until we get home?" I asked.

"I need to go *now*."

"Okay, okay," I mumbled. Then I went back up to the counter. Of course, Starbucks Boy was the one who came to my aid.

"The bathroom key?" I said. He reached over and gave me a key with a plank the size of a gym teacher's clipboard attached.

I felt silly, so I told him, "It's not for me."

He smiled and said, "It would be okay if it was."

Now I felt truly foolish, and knew there was no transition in the universe that could take me "Hey, I have a wallet for you!" So I took the plank-key and led Arabella to the bathroom.

"Give me the key," she said.

I handed it over, and she locked herself in the bathroom. I decided to guard the door, just in case.

Minutes passed. I finished my chai and threw out the cup. A line started to form for the restroom.

"You okay in there?" I asked through the door.

"It's coming out!" Arabella called back.

More minutes passed.

"How're you doing?"

"Good."

The line grew longer.

I didn't hear any activity inside, and felt like a perv for listening.

The people in the line were getting grumpy. One lady went and got Starbucks Boy.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Great," I said. "I'm sure she'll just be another second."

Up close, I could not only see his dimples, but also the light stubble on his chin. I so wanted touch it.

"Arabella?" I called into the bathroom.

"Almost empty!" she shouted back.

Then, even louder, "Oh! There's another!"

Starbucks Boy chuckled.

"How old's your sister?" he asked.

"Oh, she's not my sister."

"She's not?"

“No. I guess I’m...uh...babysitting.”

“I’M HALF EMPTY NOW!” Arabella called out.

Deadpan, as if he hadn’t heard it loud and clear, I told him, “She’s half empty now.”

People were leaving the line, giving up. The lady who’d complained started to complain some more saying there needed to be a time limit for restrooms, and minors should never, ever be let in on their own....

Starbucks Boy turned on all the charm, and told her there was a bathroom in the Barnes & Noble two blocks away. She only huffed some more, said something about writing Bill Gates to complain, then stomped away.

And it was at that moment—that glorious moment—that the saints went marching in. Because it was at that moment—that wonderful moment—that Starbucks Boy leaned over to me and said, “Go tell my last boyfriend was *just like that*.”

The tell.

“That must have been fun,” I said, my heart break-dancing.

“A blast,” he said.

Then he looked down at the door and asked, “Hey, where’s the key?”

“Um...in there...with her.”

Starbucks Boy seemed to be torn between amusement and concern. “You know, there isn’t another key,” he told me.

“No,” I said, “I didn’t know that.” Then I knocked on the door and said Arabella’s name again.

“Almost empty!” she called.

Starbucks Boy and I hovered there awkwardly. I could sense he was about to say he needed to go back behind the counter, and I didn’t want that to happen. Somehow it made it easier to talk to him when I could see his shoes.

“I’m Gabriel,” I said.

He smiled. “I’m Justin.”

Justin.

“Three-quarters empty!” Arabella announced.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said.

“It’s nice to meet you, too.”

“I have to wipe now!”

“Okay, Arabella!”

“Is that really her name?”

“Yup.”

“I can hear you!”

“Do you live around here?” Starbucks Boy—*Justin*—asked.

“Yeah,” I said. Then I added, “For the summer.”

“Cool.”

Yes yes yes yes yes.

Arabella had fallen silent.

Please may this not be a part of the History...

“So, Justin...”

“So, Gabriel...?”

I can’t believe I’m doing this. I can’t believe I’m doing this.

“You wanna—I dunno—get coffee or something sometime?”

Justin smiled. “Not coffee. But yes.”

“Not Coffee it is, then.”

“Yes, Not Coffee.”

As Arabella emerged from the bathroom, hands freshly washed, Justin ran for a pen, then came back with his number on a napkin. Untrusting of napkins, I entered it into my phone.

“Tomorrowish?” Justin asked.

“Sure,” I said. “Tomorrowish.”

Arabella looked satisfied, but I couldn’t tell whether it was from what she’d just done or what I just done.

On the way out, she gave me a hint.

“You’re going to call him, right?” she asked.

And I said, yes, I was going to call him.

When we got to the first block, she took my hand. And for the rest of the afternoon, she rarely let me go.

That night, Aunt Celia got a call from Elise. Aunt Celia’s side of the conversation went something like this:

“Hello, Elise.... Oh, it was fine.... Yes?...No! Already?...I see.... Yes, he’s right here.... That’s really amazing, isn’t it?...No, I’m sure he won’t.... I’ll make sure he does.... No, thank *you*, Elise. Talk later!”

Aunt Celia hung up, then shocked the heavens out of me by saying, “I hear you’re going on a date tomorrow.”

I still hadn’t called Justin—I figured waiting until eight was a good idea, for some arbitrary reason—but I figured that since it *was* going to happen, I could tell her, yes, I had a date tomorrow.

“You know,” Aunt Celia said, “Elise told me that Arabella was good, but I had no idea she was *that* good. Three days!”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Oh, you’re the fourth of Arabella’s minders to have been set up by her. It’s remarkable, really. Maybe *I* should start taking care of her!”

“She didn’t set us up,” I said—but immediately I started to wonder. I mean, I was sure I’d had something to do with it. But maybe not everything....

“You’re not to quit on Elise, do you understand?” Aunt Celia continued. “The last girl, Astrid, did that. And that other girl—the one who ended up in India with her girlfriend. Poor Elise—she loses sitters faster than I lose umbrellas.”

“I won’t leave her,” I promised.

“And you won’t run off to India?”

“Just Starbucks.”

Aunt Celia grimaced. “Starbucks is so *crowded*,” she judged.

“But you do what you want.” She gestured toward the take-out menus and told me to order what I wanted for dinner. “I won’t be back too late,” she told me. “Nor too early, for that matter.”

I waited until she was gone before I took out my phone...and the green H&M wallet. I imagined myself filling it with lucky pennies and love notes and photobooth strips of Justin and me in playful poses.

“You’re such a goofball,” I said to myself.

I discarded the notion of waiting until eight and dialed his number. I already had my first line read

“You’ll never believe this,” I’d say. Then I’d tell him the whole story.

Except for the wallet. I wouldn’t tell him about the wallet.

I’d save that for an anniversary.

MISS LUCY HAD A STEAMBOAT

The minute I saw Ashley, I thought, *Oh shit. Trouble.*

You have to understand: I grew up in a house where my mother told me on an almost daily basis that until I got married, my pussy was for peeing. In her world, all lesbians talked like Hillary Clinton and looked like Bill, and that included Rosie O'Donnell especially. My mother didn't know any lesbians personally, and she didn't want to know any, either. She was so oblivious that she stayed up all night worrying that I was going to get myself pregnant. There was no way to tell her the only way *that* was going to happen was if God himself knocked me up.

Luckily, I'd learned that the best defense against such hole-headed thinking was to find everything funny. Like the fact that all the sports teams in our school—even the girls' teams—were called the Minutemen. All you had to do was pronounce the first part of that word “my-newt” and it was funny. Or like suddenly our football team had *Tiny Dicks* written on their jerseys. Or the fact that in the past calendar year, my mother had hit so many mailboxes, deer, and side mirrors that her license had been suspended. I chose to think she did it on purpose, just so I'd have to drive her around and hear her advice on boys, school, and how bad my hair looked. Hysterical. And, best of all for a quick laugh, there was Lily White—that was her name, swear to God—who certainly enjoyed kissing me in secret. But then when I brought up the idea of, hey, maybe doing it outside of her house, she shut down the whole thing and said to me, “None of this happened.”

Well, I knew a punch line when I saw one. So the next day at lunch, when no one was looking, I spilled her Diet Coke all over her fancy shirt and said, “None of this happened.” And the next day, my bumper just happened to ram into the side of her daddygirl Cadillac. I left her a note: *None of this happened.* And it didn't happen the next day, either.

I, for one, was amused.

It was hard for me not to feel a little stupid about Lily White. Not because it ended or that it had gone on for three months, but because I'd started it in the first place. Lily was the popular girl equivalent of a B-minus student—never the brightest bulb in the room, but still lit. She never laughed at a joke until she saw other people laughing at it, too. Even when we were kissing, she never seemed to admit that we were kissing—it was like I was saying something she couldn't hear, and she was just nodding along to be polite. The first time we got together, it had less to do with romance and more to do with Miller Lite. It took just two cans for her to turn playful. We kissed; it was nice. And for three months we pretty much stuck to that. The kissing was hot, but Lily was pretty insistent about not letting the fire spread. Every time I tried to take her clothes off, she suddenly had somewhere else to be. Every time I felt her up, she acted like my hands were cold. And every time I tried to go near her

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