



Some things you can't undo.

if he had been
with me

a novel

laura nowlin

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For my husband, Robert;
without you, I wouldn't have known how to
write about true love.

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1

I wasn't with Finny on that August night, but my imagination has burned the scene in my mind so that it feels like a memory.

It was raining, of course, and with his girlfriend, Sylvie Whitehouse, he glided through the rain in the red car his father had given him on his sixteenth birthday. In a few weeks, Finny would be turning nineteen.

They were arguing. No one ever says what they were arguing about. It is, in other people's opinions, not important to the story. What they do not know is that there is another story. The story lurking underneath and in between the facts of the one they can see. What they do not know, the cause of the argument, is crucial to the story of me.

I can see it—the rain-slicked road and the flashing lights of ambulance and police cars cutting through the darkness of night, warning those passing by: catastrophe has struck here, please drive slowly. I see Sylvie sitting sideways out of the back of the policeman's car, her feet drumming on the wet pavement as she talks. I cannot hear her, but I see Sylvie tell them the cause of the argument, and I know, I know, I know, I know. If he had been with me, everything would have been different.

I can see them in the car before the accident—the heavy rain, the world and the pavement as wet and slick as if it had been oiled down for their arrival. They glide through the night, regrettably together, and they argue. Finny is frowning. He is distracted. He is not thinking of the rain or the car or the wet road beneath it. He is thinking of this argument with Sylvie. He is thinking of the cause of the argument, and the car swerves suddenly to the right, startling him out of his thoughts. I imagine that Sylvie screams, and then he overcompensates by turning the wheel too far.

Finny is wearing his seat belt. He is blameless. It is Sylvie who is not.

When the impact occurs, she sails through the windshield and out into the night, improbably, miraculously, only suffering minor cuts on her arms and face. Though true, it is hard to imagine, so hard that even I cannot achieve the image. All I can see is the moment afterward, the moment of her weightless suspension in the air, her arms flailing in slow motion, her hair, a bit bloody and now wet with rain, streaming behind her like a mermaid's, her mouth a round O in a scream of panic, the dark wet night surrounding her in perfect silhouette.

Sylvie is suddenly on Earth again. She hits the pavement with a loud smack and is knocked unconscious.

She lies on the pavement, crumpled. Finny is untouched. He breathes heavily, and in shock and wonder, he stares out into the night. This is his moment of weightless suspension. His mind is blank. He feels nothing, he thinks nothing; he exists, perfect and unscathed. He does not even hear the rain.

Stay. I whisper to him. *Stay in the car. Stay in this moment.*

But of course he never does.

2

Phineas Smith is Aunt Angelina's son. Aunt Angelina is not my aunt; she is my mother's best friend from girlhood, her best friend still—and next-door neighbor. Our mothers had been pregnant together that spring and summer long ago. My mother respectably so, married to her high-school sweetheart for over a year with numerous pictures of their wedding scattered throughout their house with a fenced-in backyard. My father was—is—never around because of his work at The Office but Mother did not mind; she had Angelina. Angelina was pregnant from her lover. He was married and rich and far too old for her. He also refused to believe that it was his child. It would take a court-ordered DNA test a few weeks after Phineas's birth to get his father to do the honorable thing—buy Aunt Angelina the house next door to my mother, and after writing each monthly check, pretend that she and the baby did not exist for the next thirty days.

My mother did not work and Aunt Angelina taught art at Vogt Elementary across the street from her duplex, so the summer was theirs to spend. They told us that the summer of their pregnancies, Aunt Angelina would walk over from her duplex on Church Street—her stomach large and heavy, protruding, as if it were leading the way—to our large Victorian house on Elizabeth Street, and they would spend the day on the back porch with their feet propped up on the railing. They would drink lemonade or iced tea, and only go inside to watch the *I Love Lucy Show* in the afternoon. They sat close together so that Finny and I could kick each other like twins.

They made such plans for us that summer.

Phineas was born first on the twenty-first of September. A week later,

likely missing the one who had been kicking me, I came along.

In September people will tell you that their favorite season is autumn. They will not say this during any other month of the year. People forget September is actually a summer month. In St. Louis, this should be apparent to people. The leaves are still green on the trees and the weather is still warm, yet people hang smiling scarecrows on their front doors. By the time the leaves and weather do begin to change in late October, they have tired of autumn and are thinking of Christmas. They never stop; they never wonder if they already have it all.

My mother named me Autumn. People say to me “Oh how pretty,” and then the name seems to glide away from them, not grasping all the things that the word should mean to them, shades of red, change, and death.

Phineas understood my name before I did. My name had what his did not, associations, meaning, a history. His disappointment when our fourth grade class looked up names in the baby name books surprised me. Every book gave his name a different meaning and origin: snake, Nubian, oracle, Hebrew, Arabic, unknown. My name meant exactly what it was; there was nothing to be discovered by it. I thought if a name was of unknown origin and meaning, it could not disappoint. I did not understand then that a boy without a real father would crave an origin and a meaning.

There were so many things that I did not understand about him over the years, but of course, of course, of course, of course, they all make sense now.

We grew up in Ferguson, a small town in the suburbs of St. Louis, composed of Victorian houses, old brick churches, and a picturesque downtown of shops owned by families for generations. I suppose it was a happy childhood.

I was quirky and odd and I did not have any friends besides Finny. He could have had other close friends if he wanted; he was good at sports and nothing was odd about him. He was sweet and shy and everyone liked him. The girls had crushes on him. The boys picked him first in gym. The teachers called on him for the right answer.

I wanted to learn about the Salem witch trials for history. I read books under my desk during lessons and refused to eat the bottom left corner of

my sandwiches. I believed platypuses to be a government conspiracy. I could not turn a cartwheel or kick, hit, or serve any sort of ball. In third grade, I announced that I was a feminist. During Job Week in fifth grade, I told the class and teacher that my career goal was to move to New York, wear black turtlenecks, and sit in coffee shops all day, thinking deep thoughts and making up stories in my head.

After a moment of surprise, Mrs. Morgansen wrote *Freelance Writer* under my smiling Polaroid picture and tacked it on the walls with the future teachers and football stars. After consulting her, I agreed that it was close enough. I think she was pleased to have found something for me, but sometimes I wonder if she would have cared as much if I had been ugly as well as odd.

For as long as I can remember, people have told me that I am pretty. This came from adults more often than other children. They said it to me when they met me; they whispered it to each other when they thought I could not hear. It became a fact I knew about myself, like my middle name was Rose or that I was left-handed: I was pretty.

Not that it did me any good. The adults all seemed to think it did, or at least should, but in childhood my prettiness gave more pleasure to the adults than it did me.

For other children, the defining characteristic was another fact I had accepted about myself—I was *weird*.

I never tried to be weird, and I hated being seen that way. It was as if I had been born without the ability to understand if the things I was about to say or do were strange, so I was trapped into constantly being myself. Being “pretty” was a poor consolation in my eyes.

Finny was loyal to me; he taunted anyone who dared torment me, snubbed anyone who scorned me, and always picked me first to be on his team.

It was understood by everyone that I belonged to Finny and that we belonged together. We were accepted as oddity by our classmates, and most of the time they left me alone. And I was happy; I had Finny.

We were rarely ever apart. At recess I sat on the hill reading while Finny played kickball with the boys in the field below. We did every group

project together. We walked home together and trick-or-treated together. We did our homework side by side at my kitchen table. With my father so often gone, The Mothers frequently had each other over for dinner. A week could easily go by with Finny and I only being separated to sleep in our own beds, and even then we went to sleep knowing the other wasn't very far away.

In my memory of childhood, it is always summer first. I see the dancing light and green leaves. Finny and I hide under bushes or in trees. Autumn is our birthdays and walking to school together and a deepening of that golden light. He and his mother spend Christmas at our house. My father makes an appearance. His father sends a present that is both expensive and unfathomable. A chemistry set. Custom-made golf clubs. Finny shrugs and lays them aside. Winter is a blur of white and cold hands shoved in pockets. Finny rescues me when other kids throw snowballs at me. We sled or stay indoors. Spring is a painting in pale green, and I sit watching from the stands while Finny plays soccer.

All the time that became known in my mind as Before.

3

I walk toward the bus stop with my book bag slung over one shoulder. There are a few kids already there, standing loosely grouped together but not acknowledging each other. I look down at the sidewalk. My boots are spray-painted silver. My hair and fingernails are black. I stop at the corner and stand to the side. We are all quiet.

Our bus stop is at the top of the big hill on Darst Road. Finny and I used to ride our bikes down this hill. I had always been frightened. Finny never was.

I look at the other kids at the corner while pretending that I am not. There are seven of us. Some of them I recognize from middle school or even elementary school; some of them I don't.

It is my first day of high school.

I go back to looking down and study the shredded hem of my black dress. I cut the lace with fingernail clippers a week ago. My mother says I can dress however I want as long as my grades stay the same. But then, she still hasn't figured out that I'm not going to be one of the popular girls this year.

On the last day of school, Sasha and I walked to the drugstore and spent an hour picking out dyes. She wanted me to dye my hair red because of my name. I thought that was dorky but I didn't tell her; since our recent eviction from The Clique, Sasha has been my only girlfriend, my only friend actually.

"Hey," somebody says. Everyone looks up. Finny is standing with us now, tall, blond, and preppy enough to be in a catalog. Everyone looks away again.

"Hey," I hear one girl's voice say. She is standing somewhere behind

me and I cannot see her. I should have said hello back to Finny, but I'm too nervous to speak right now.

Last night at his house we had what The Mothers called an end-of-summer barbeque. While they were grilling, I sat on the back porch and watched Finny kick a soccer ball against the fence. I was thinking of a short story I started the day before, my first attempt at a gothic romance. I planned on a very tragic ending, and I was working out the details of my heroine's misfortunes as I watched him play. When they sent us inside to get the paper plates, he spoke to me.

"So why did you dye your hair?" he said.

"I dunno," I said. If someone had asked me why Finny and I weren't friends anymore, I would have said that it was an accident. Our mothers would have said that we seemed to have grown apart in the past few years. I don't know what Finny would have said.

In elementary school, we were accepted as an oddity. In middle school, it was weird that we were friends, and in the beginning, we had to explain ourselves to the others, but then we hardly saw each other, and we had to explain less and less.

By some strange accident, my weirdness became acceptable, and I was one of the popular girls that first semester of eighth grade. We called ourselves The Clique. Every day we ate lunch together and afterward all went to the bathroom to brush our hair. Every week we painted our nails the same color. We had secret nicknames and friendship bracelets. I wasn't used to being admired or envied or having girlfriends, and even though Finny had always been enough for me Before, I drank it up as if I had been thirsting for it for years.

Finny joined a group of guys who were vaguely geeky but not harassed, and I usually waved to him when I saw him at school. He always waved back.

We were taking different classes. Which meant different homework. After a few weeks, we stopped studying together and I saw him even less. Being one of the popular girls took a lot of time. After school they wanted

me to come over and watch movies while we did each other's hair. On the weekends we went shopping.

When I did see Finny, we didn't have a lot to talk about anymore. Every moment we spent in silence was like another brick in the wall going up between us.

Somehow we weren't friends anymore.

It wasn't a choice. Not really.

I'm looking at my silver boots and torn lace when the bus pulls up. Everyone steps forward, heads down. We silently file onto the bus where everyone *is* talking. Even though I had no reason to think Sasha wouldn't be there, I am relieved when I see her sitting in the middle of the bus. She is wearing a black T-shirt and thick, dark eyeliner.

"Hey," I say as I slide in next to her, placing my book bag on my lap.

"Hey," she says. Since I refused to dye my hair red, she dyed hers an unnatural shade instead. We smile at each other. Our transformation is complete. Sort of.

I can say *exactly* why Sasha and I weren't friends with Alexis Myers or any of those girls anymore.

I didn't try out for cheerleading.

I had planned on it. I wanted to be a cheerleader. I wanted to be popular and date a soccer player—that what's cool at McClure High instead of football—and everything that went along with staying in The Clique. But I couldn't make up my own routine and perform it alone for tryouts, so that was that.

Alexis and Taylor and Victoria all made it onto the squad, but Sasha didn't. Officially, we weren't kicked out of The Clique, but all they talked about at lunch was cheerleading camp and the older girls on the squad who had seemed soooooo nice.

On the last day of school, Alexis and Taylor and Victoria all came to

class with their hair in braids. They hadn't told us that it was going to be a braid day. We always wore our hair in braids on the same day. At lunch when we asked them why they didn't tell us, they just looked at each other and giggled. I figured they had finally realized the truth I had kept hidden; I was a Pretty Girl, but I wasn't a Popular Girl. I was different. I was strange. So I decided to give up and be the Weird Girl again, and Sasha followed me.

On the bus, Sasha leans toward me and says, "You look cool."

"So do you," I say. I turn to face forward and I see a girl walk down the aisle wearing the blue and red uniform. Her blond hair swishes back and forth in a ponytail. I am still feeling the pang of rejection when I see that she is sitting down next to Finny. By the end of the month, they will be going out, and my mother will tell me that Finny met Sylvie Whitehouse on campus while he was at soccer practice and she was there for cheerleading.

"What do you think people will say?" Sasha says. I almost tell her not to be so dorky.

"I dunno," I say.

4

For the first few days, Sasha and I eat lunch alone on what I start to call The Steps to Nowhere. The cement steps descend from the front courtyard down a hill to a field of grass and weeds that is used for nothing.

Alexis and the others wear their uniforms and smirk every time they see us, as if our new look is hostile to them. A new girl, Sylvie from St. John's Catholic School, sits at their table. Nearly all of the freshmen are from Ferguson Middle, but there is a sprinkling of these new Catholic kids whose parents could not afford the higher cost of the private high schools. These kids have been with the same classmates since kindergarten and are lost and awed in the vast sea of McClure High. It is awkward the first few days as everyone tries to figure their places out. Then, slowly, everyone slides into new alliances and a pattern begins to be set that will be followed for the rest of the year, possibly for the rest of high school.

Sasha has met a girl from St. John's who wears a crucifix and a skull on the same chain. They have gym class together and walk the track side by side for a few days before Sasha invites her to eat with us. Her name is Brooke and she brings her boyfriend Noah and her cousin Jamie with her. The next day, more people show up—so and so's friend, someone from somebody's class who seems cool. Soon we have a group hanging out on The Steps to Nowhere. Some leave after a few days, finding other groups; a few stay. By the end of the second week, a group of friends emerges from The Steps to Nowhere.

There are four girls and three boys in our group. Brooke and Noah are already together, and they are devoted to each other. They even look alike, brown hair and freckles, and when they laugh their eyes crinkle.

That leaves me, Sasha, and Angie for Jamie and Alex. Angie, blond and

a little bit chubby, still has a crush on some guy from her old school. Alex has pretty eyes, but he is short and the goofy, silly type, still a little immature. I can see by the way she looks at him that Sasha is my competition for Jamie.

I got butterflies in my stomach the first time I saw Jamie's face; his eyes are green and fringed with impossibly long eyelashes. Above that, his hair is dark, a little curly, and very messy. He is tall, skinny, and pale.

Jamie is animated and funny and he smirks a lot. He reminds me of Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Jamie leads the other boys into mischief that the girls sit back and watch from The Steps, giggling. They play football in the field with Brooke's shoe, toss balls of paper inside open classroom windows, and sing songs in a style mocking the school's a cappella group. Jamie throws his head back and laughs when his mischief turns out as planned. I watch him and think of Peter Pan telling Wendy that he just has to crow when he is pleased with himself.

Sasha and I each try to hold Jamie's attention in our own way. Sasha teases him and displays her tomboy cuteness. I am alternately demure and flirtatious. She runs down the steps and participates in the boy's games. I smile at his jokes and look up at him from under my eyelashes. Sasha holds her hand up for a high five. I cheer for him from the steps. It is a battle, but we never cut each other. Sasha and I know that when it is over we must still be friends.

Slowly, yet at the same time suddenly, because it happens in only a matter of days, I pull ahead of Sasha. She makes a valiant effort for a few lunches, but it becomes obvious that Jamie is now courting me. He sits next to me on the steps. He offers me the rest of his French fries. He tickles me. He smiles up at me on the steps while he and the boys are playing shoe-ball, and my stomach flutters. *Jamie. Jamie. James. Jamie.*

One Monday afternoon on The Steps to Nowhere, Jamie takes my hand in his, as if it has long been settled that it is his hand to take whenever he pleases, and everyone acts as if this is normal. I hold his hand and look down at the concrete steps to try to stop from grinning and giving away my feelings. Inside, I feel like I am trembling; on the outside, I stay as casual as he is. Of course we're together, of course. Of course.