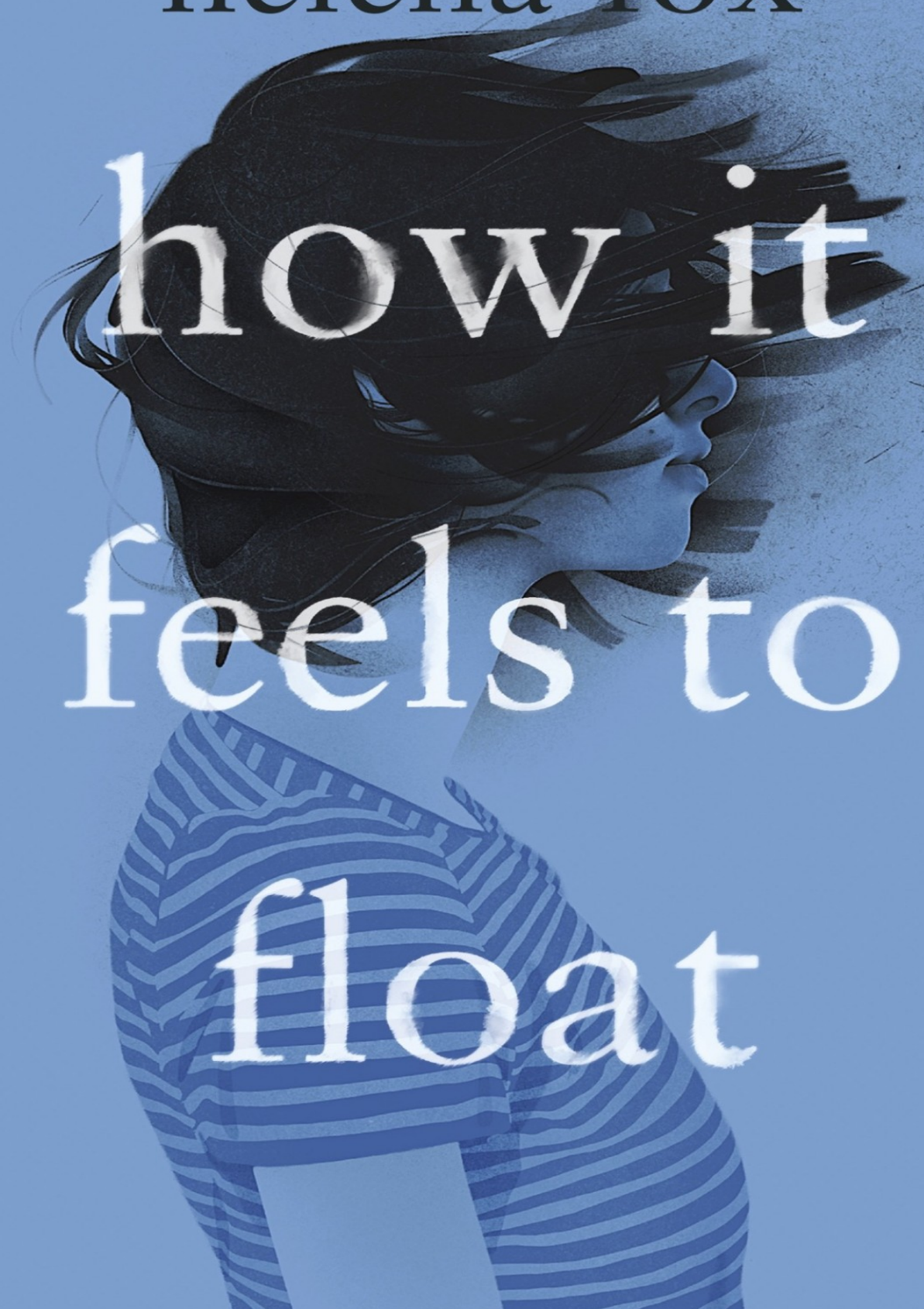


“A profoundly moving story about grief, loss, and love that will take your breath away. Helena Fox is a writer to be reckoned with.”

—KATHLEEN GLASGOW, AUTHOR OF *GIRL IN PIECES*

helena fox



how it
feels to
float

how it
feels to
float

helena fox



Dial Books

DIAL BOOKS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



Copyright © 2019 by Helena Fox

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com

Ebook ISBN 9780525554356

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fox, Helena, author.

How it feels to float / Helena Fox.

New York : Dial Books, [2019]

Summary: "Sixteen-year-old Biz sees her father every day, though he died when she was seven. When he suddenly disappears, she tumbles into a disaster-land of grief and depression from which she must find her way back"—Provided by publisher.

LCCN 2018058425 | ISBN 9780525554295 (hardback)

Subjects: CYAC: Mental illness—Fiction. | Depression, Mental—Fiction. | Loss (Psychology)—Fiction. | Grief—Fiction. | Families—Fiction.

LCC PZ7.1.F686 Ho 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018058425>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version_1

For Anna

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Part I](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

Part II

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

Part III

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Chapter 74](#)

[Chapter 75](#)

[Chapter 76](#)

[Chapter 77](#)

[Chapter 78](#)

[Chapter 79](#)

[Chapter 80](#)

[Chapter 81](#)

[Chapter 82](#)

[Chapter 83](#)

[Chapter 84](#)

[Chapter 85](#)

[Chapter 86](#)

[Chapter 87](#)

[Chapter 88](#)

[Chapter 89](#)

[Chapter 90](#)

[Chapter 91](#)

[Chapter 92](#)

[Chapter 93](#)

[Chapter 94](#)

[Chapter 95](#)

[Chapter 96](#)

[Chapter 97](#)

[Chapter 98](#)

[Chapter 99](#)

[Chapter 100](#)

[Chapter 101](#)

IV

[Chapter 102](#)

[Chapter 103](#)

[Chapter 104](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*Reaching Out*](#)

[*On Sexuality*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

I

AT THREE IN THE MORNING WHEN I CAN'T SLEEP, THE ROOM TICKS over in the dark and all I have for company is the rush of words coming up fast like those racehorses you see on television, poor things, and when their hearts give out they are laid on the ground and shot dead behind a blue sheet.

At three a.m., I think of hearts. I think of candy hearts and carved-tree hearts and hummingbird hearts. I think of hearts in bodies and the rhythm inside us we don't get to choose.

I lay my hand over mine. There it is.

It beatbeats beatbeatbeats skipsabeatbeatbeat
beatbeatbeats.

A heart is a mystery and not a mystery. It hides under ribs, pumping blood. You can pull it out, hold it in your hand. *Squeeze*. It wants what it wants. It can be made of gold, glass, stone. It can stop anytime.

People scratch hearts into benches, draw them onto fogged windows, tattoo them on their skin. Believe the story they tell themselves: that hearts are somehow bigger than muscle, that we are something more than an accidental arrangement of molecules, that we are pulled by a force greater than gravity, that love is anything more than a mess of nerve and impulse—

“Biz.”

A whisper.

“Biz.”

In the dark.

“Biz.”

In my room.

I open my eyes, and Dad’s sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You need to stop,” he says.

What? I squint at him. He’s blurry.

“The thinking. I can hear it when you breathe.”

Dad’s wearing a gray sweatshirt. His hands are folded in his lap. He looks tired.

“You should sleep like you did when you were small,” he says. He looks away, smiles. “Your tiny fingers, tucked under your chin. There’s a photo . . .” Dad trails off.

Yeah, Dad. I’ve seen it.

“The one of us in hospital, after you were born—”

Yeah. The one just after Mum got her new blood and you fainted and they gave you orange juice. The one where Mum’s laughing up at the camera as I sleep in her arms. Yeah. I’ve seen it.

Dad smiles again. He reaches across to touch me, but of course he can’t.

◦ ◦ ◦ ◦

That photo has been on every fridge door in every house I’ve ever lived in. It sits under a plumbing company magnet and beside a clip holding year-old receipts Mum can’t seem to throw away.

The photo was taken an hour after I came bulleting out of Mum so fast she had to have a transfusion. In the picture, I look like a slug and Dad looks flattened, like he’s seen a car accident. But Mum’s face is bright, open, happy.

All the other photos are in albums on our living room bookshelf, next to the non-working fireplace. The albums hold every picture of me Dad ever took until he died, and all the ones of me Mum took until smartphones came along and she stopped printing me onto paper. I'm now partly inside a frozen computer Mum keeps meaning to get fixed, and on an overcrowded iPhone she keeps meaning to download.

And I'm in the photos friends have taken when I've let them and the ones the twins have taken with their eyes since they were babies. I'm in the ocean I walk beside when I skip school and in the clouds where I imagine myself sometimes. And I'm in the look on my friend Grace's face, a second after I kissed her, five seconds before she said she thought of me as a friend.

o ° o ° o

I blink. Dad's gone again. The room is empty but for me, my bed, my walls, my thoughts, my things.

It's what—four in the morning?

I have a physics test at eight.

My ribs hurt. Behind them, my heart beatbeats beatbeatbeats
beatskipsabeat

beatbeat beats.

MY NAME IS ELIZABETH MARTIN GREY, BUT NO ONE I LOVE CALLS me that.

The Martin is for Dad's dad who died in a farm accident when he was thirty and Dad was ten.

I was seven when Dad died. Which means I had less time with Dad alive than Dad had with his.

There's never enough time. Actually, there's too much and too little, in unequal parts. More than enough of time passing but not enough of the time passed.

Right?

Ratio of the time you want versus the time you get (a rough estimate)—

1 : 20,000.

Ratio of Dad's time as the son of Martin : as the living father of Biz : as my dead dad, sitting on the edge of my bed telling me stories—

1 : 0.7 : ∞ .

MONDAY MORNING, 7:30, AND IT'S SO HOT THE HOUSE FEELS LIKE it's melting. Cicadas scream through the windows. The dog pants on the kitchen floor. I had a shower five minutes ago and already I'm sweating through my shirt.

"Ugh," I say, flopping over the kitchen counter, crumpled uniform on, shoes untied.

Mum reads my face and sighs. She's making breakfast for the twins. "Be grateful you get to have an education, Biz." She waggles a spatula. "Not everyone's as lucky."

I peer at her. "You might have read me wrong, Mum. Maybe I meant, 'Ugh. How I wish school lasted all weekend, I have missed it so very much.'"

I'm a month into Year 11, which is ridiculous because I am nano and unformed but I'm still supposed to write essays about Lenin and Richard III and urban sprawl. Year 11 is a big deal. We are only seconds away, the teachers say, from our final exams. The teachers can't stop revving us up about our impending future.

This is a big deal! say the teachers of English, science, art, maths, music, geography, and Other Important Subjects in Which We Are Not Remotely Interested But Are Taking So We Can Get a Good Mark.

You need to take it seriously!

You need to be prepared!

You need to not freak out, then have to go to the counselor because we've freaked you out!

I open the fridge. "I'm going to sit in here, okay? Just for a minute. Let me squat next to the broccoli."

Mum laughs. She's making banana pancakes. Billie and Dart drool over their waiting plates. The twins have the morning off school. They're going to the dentist! They love the dentist—it's where Mum works, so they get extra toothbrushes, and as many little packs of floss and toothpaste as they can carry in their hands.

"Are they ready yet?" says my brother, Dart, six years old.

"Come on, Mum! I'm starving to *death*," says my sister, Billie, nineteen minutes younger than Dart.

"Give me a second," says Mum. "A watched pancake never boils."

She flips one over. It looks scorched. Mum doesn't love cooking.

I can't see how she can be anywhere near a stove in this heat. I grab some coconut yogurt and grapes out of the fridge.

"Did you study for your test?" Mum says.

"Absolutely," I say, and it's true, if you count watching YouTube videos and listening to music while reading the textbook studying. I don't know if I'm ready—there's the lack of sleep thing, and the not-having-spoken-properly-to-Grace-since-I-kissed-her thing, which makes today impossible and complicated before it even begins.

I hug Mum goodbye and smooch the twins' cheeks as they squirm.

I grab my bike from the shed, ride it for thirty seconds before I realize the front tire is flat.

Ah, that's right.

When did the tire go? Friday? No, Thursday.

Shit, Biz! You had one job.

A magpie laughs from a nearby tree. His magpie friend looks down, then joins in.

I could ask Mum to drive me but I know what she'd say: "Do I look like a taxi, Biz?"

I could skip school, but then I'd miss my test and ruin my impending future.

I shove the bike back in the shed. And start walking.

I LIVE WITH MUM AND THE TWINS IN WOLLONGONG, IN A BLUE-clad house on a street wallpapered with trees.

We moved here a couple of years ago, after moving to a lot of other places. We're one and a half hours south of Sydney. The city is not too big, not too small; it's just right for now, says Mum. The city sits beside the sea, under an escarpment. The sea pushes at the shore, shoving under rocks and dunes and lovers. Craggy cliffs lean over us, trying to read what we've written. The city is long like a finger. It was a steel town once.

There, that's the tour.

When I was seven, Mum, Dad, and I lived up north, near Queensland—in the Australian jungle, Mum likes to say. She says the mosquitoes were full on, but I don't remember them.

I remember frogs *click-clacking* at night in the creek at the bottom of the hill. The house was wooden; it had stilts. The backyard was a steep tangle of eucalypts and ferns and figs and shrubs.

You could see hills like women's boobs all around. I'd wake up and hear kookaburras. Light would come in through my curtainless windows and lift me out of bed. I'd run in to Mum and Dad's room and jump on them to wake them up.

I had a puppy. I called him Bumpy.

Our street is flat now. It goes past a park where I walk the dog and he sniffs the shit left by other dogs. I can walk to school in fifteen minutes or I can walk straight past it and go to the sea. Or, if I want to be a total rebel, I can go the opposite direction and in fifteen minutes end up in a rainforest, under a mountain, gathering leeches for my leech army.

◦ ◦ ◦ ◦

On the walk to school, the cicadas keep me company. They scream from one huge gum tree to another. I pass the community center. I pass the park. I get to the end of the cul-de-sac and wait under the bleaching sun to cross the freeway.

Traffic bawls past. I can feel my skin frying. I can feel cancer pooling in my freckles. I can feel the road tar melting under my feet as I scurry across the road.

Past the freeway there's a vet, a pub, and a train station. Every day I have to cross the train tracks to get to school. Every time I think, *What if the signals are wrong, and a train comes out of the blue and hits me as I cross?*

A woman walked against the signal once. Not here, but close enough it might as well be here. She was in a rush, they said; she ignored the ringing bells, the dropping barrier. She got halfway and thought better of it. She turned back. The train came.

Every time I cross the tracks, I think of her and try not to think of her.

I've traced and retraced her last moments in my head. I have googled her and I know the names of her family, the job she had, the music she listened to, and the last concert she saw before she died. I can feel the tightness of her skin when she saw the train, and how sweat sprang up a moment before the train hit—

step

and how our pupils widened

step

and turned my eyes to black

step

and in that infinite, molecular moment, I can't remember if I meant to cross, or have paused on the tracks and am waiting here—

“Hey, Biz.”

I turn my head. Dad's walking beside me, barefoot, in his running shorts and KISS T-shirt.

“Do you remember your first train ride?”

No. I don't remember that, Dad.

“It was a steam train. You were four. We went through a rainforest! We went really high up a mountain, and visited a butterfly sanctuary. And you flapped around like a monarch. You were beautiful.”

Is that right, Dad?

“You should flap around. Try it, Biz; it'll shake off the frets.”

I look down. I'm over the train tracks and past the station. I'm on the path; it opens in front of me, green grass on both sides, the sun beaming.

I think of butterflies. I think of flying.

Dad laughs.

He's gone by the time I reach the school gate.