

"I LOVED this novel. . . .

If you have ever sung along to a hit on the radio, in any decade,
then you will devour *Mary Jane* at 45 rpm." —NICK HORNBY

mary jane

A Novel

JESSICA ANYA BLAU



"I LOVED this novel. . . .

If you have ever sung along to a hit on the radio, in any decade,
then you will devour *Mary Jane* at 45 rpm." —NICK HORNBY

mary jane

A Novel

JESSICA ANYA BLAU

mary jane

A NOVEL

**jessica
anya
blau**

ch.
CUSTOM
HOUSE

Dedication

For Marcia and Nick

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Jessica Anya Blau

Copyright

About the Publisher

Mrs. Cone showed me around the house. I wanted to stop at every turn and examine the things that were stacked and heaped in places they didn't belong: books teetering on a burner on the stove, a coffee cup on a shoebox in the entrance hall, a copper Buddha on the radiator, a pink blow-up pool raft in the center of the living room. I had just turned fourteen, it was 1975, and my ideas about homes, furniture, and cleanliness ran straight into me like an umbilical cord from my mother. As Mrs. Cone used her bare foot (toenails painted a glittering red) to kick aside a stack of sweaters on the steps, I felt a jolt of wonder. Did people really live like this? I suppose I knew that they did somewhere in the world. But I never expected to find a home like this in our neighborhood, Roland Park, which my mother claimed was the finest neighborhood in Baltimore.

On the second floor all but one of the dark wood doors were open. The bottom half of the single closed door was plastered with *IMPEACHMENT: Now More Than Ever* bumper stickers and a masking-taped poster of Snoopy dancing, nose in the air. Everything was slightly angled, as if placed there by a drunk on his knees.

"This is Izzy's room." Mrs. Cone opened the door and I followed her past Snoopy into a space that looked like it had been attacked by a cannon that shot out toys. An Etch A Sketch; Operation game board; Legos; paper doll books; Colorforms box and stickies; Richard Scarry books; and a heap of molded plastic horses: No surface was uncovered. I wondered if Izzy, or her mother, swept an arm across the bed at night, pushing everything to the floor.

"Izzy." I smiled. Our neighbor, Mrs. Riley, had told me her name was Isabelle. But I liked Izzy better, the way it fizzed on my tongue. I didn't know anyone named Izzy, or Isabelle. I'd never even met Izzy Cone. But through

the recommendation of Mrs. Riley, and after a phone call with Mrs. Cone, I'd been hired as the summer nanny. I had thought the phone call was going to be an interview, but really Mrs. Cone just told me about Izzy. "She doesn't like to play with kids her own age. I don't think she's interested in what other five-year-olds do. Really, she only wants to hang out with me all day," Mrs. Cone had said. "Which is usually fine, but I've got other stuff going on this summer, so . . ." Mrs. Cone had paused then and I'd wondered if I was supposed to tell her that I'd take the job, or was I to wait for her to officially offer it to me?

A five-year-old who only wanted to hang out with her mother was someone I understood. I, too, had been a girl who only wanted to hang out with her mother. I was still happy helping my mother with the chores in the house, sitting beside her and reading, or grocery shopping with her, searching out the best bell peppers or the best cut of meat. When I did have to socialize with kids my age—like at the sleepovers to which every girl in the class had been invited—I felt like I was from another country. How did girls know what to whisper about? Why were they all thinking about the same things? Depending on the year, it could be Barbies, dress-up, boys, hairstyles, lip gloss, or *Teen Beat* magazine, none of which interested me. I had no real friends until middle school, when the Kellogg twins moved to Baltimore from Albany, New York. They, too, looked like they didn't know the customs and rituals of girlhood. They, too, were happy to spend an afternoon by the record player listening to the *Pippin* soundtrack; or playing the piano and singing multilayered baroque songs in melody, harmony, and bass; or watching reruns of *The French Chef* and then trying out one of the recipes; or even just making a simple dessert featured in *Good Housekeeping* magazine.

The more Mrs. Cone told me about Izzy on that phone call, the more I wanted to take care of her. All I could think was how much nicer it would be to spend my summer looking after a little girl who had no friends than going to our country club pool and *being* the girl who had no friends. I barely listened when Mrs. Cone told me how much they'd pay. The money felt like a bonus. Before the call had ended, I'd decided I'd save everything I earned and then buy my own record player at the end of the summer. One I could keep in my room; maybe it would even have separate speakers. If there was enough money left over, I'd buy a radio so I could listen to American Top 40: the songs from the records that my mother would never let me buy.

Downstairs I could hear the front door open and then slam shut. Mrs. Cone froze, listening, her ear tilted toward the doorway. "Richard?" she called out. "Richard! We're up here!"

My stomach clenched at the idea that Dr. Cone would ask me to call him Richard. Mrs. Cone had told me to call her Bonnie, but I couldn't. Even in my head I thought of her as Mrs. Cone, though, really, she didn't look like a *Mrs. Anything* to me. Mrs. Cone's hair was long, red, and shiny. She had freckles all over her face and her lips were waxy with bright orange lipstick. Draped over her body was either a long silk blouse or a very short silk dress. The liquid-looking fabric swished against her skin, revealing the outline of her nipples. The only place I'd seen nipples like that was in posters of celebrities, or women in liquor ads. I'd never seen even a hint of my mother's nipples; the couple of times I'd entered her bedroom when she was in her bra, it was like seeing breasts in beige armor.

"What?!" Dr. Cone yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

"Mommy!" Izzy yelled.

"Richard! Izzy! Come up!"

It was more hollering than I'd ever heard in my own house. Once, just before bedtime, my mother had loudly said "Damn it!" when she'd stepped on a shard of glass from a plate I'd dropped in the kitchen earlier in the day. I had thought the world was about to cave in like a tar-paper shack being consumed by fire. It wasn't only the words; I'd never seen my mother barefoot before. My eyes must have been bugging out of my head as I watched her pull the shard from her heel.

"Mary Jane," my mom had said, "go upstairs and fetch my slippers so I can mop this floor the right way." She had stood over my shoulder and supervised when I had mopped up after breaking the plate. Obviously, I hadn't done a good job.

"Why are you barefoot?" I asked.

My mother only said, "This is why we should never be barefoot. Now go get the slippers."

"You come down!" Dr. Cone yelled up the stairs. "Izzy made something!"

"I made something!" Izzy yelled.

"Mary Jane is here!" Mrs. Cone yelled back.

"Who?" Dr. Cone shouted.

"MARY JANE! The summer nanny!"

I smiled nervously. Did Dr. Cone know I had been hired to work in his house? And how much hollering could go on before someone moved closer to the other person?

"Mary Jane!" Izzy's feet made a muted *thunk thunk thunk* as she ran up the stairs and into the bedroom. She had a face from a Victorian Valentine's card and the energy of a ball of lightning. I liked her already.

I bounced back and received the hug.

“She’s been so excited for you to get here,” Mrs. Cone said.

“Hey. So good to meet you!” I ran my fingers through Izzy’s coppery-red curls, which were half knotted.

“I made something!” Izzy turned from me and hugged her mother. “It’s downstairs.”

Dr. Cone appeared in the doorway. “Mary Jane! I’m Richard.” He stuck out his hand and shook mine, like I was a grown-up.

My mother thought it was nice that I’d be working for a doctor and his wife for the summer. She said that a house with a doctor was a respectable house. The outside of the Cones’ house certainly looked respectable; it was a rambling shingled home with blue shutters on every window. The landscaping was a little shabby (there were dirt patches on the lawn and half the hedges were dead and looked like the scraggly arms of starving children), but still, my mother never would have guessed at the piles of things lining the steps or strewn down the hall or exploded around the room where we stood just then.

And my mother also never would have imagined the long sideburns Dr. Cone had. Tufty, goaty things that crawled down his face. The hair on his head looked like it had never been combed—just a messy swirl of brown this way and that. My own father had a smooth helmet of hair that he carefully combed to the side. I’d never seen a whisker or even a five o’clock shadow on his face. No human under forty would have ever called my father anything but Mr. Dillard.

If my father knew I was working for a doctor’s family, he would have approved. But he didn’t pay much attention to matters concerning me. Or concerning anyone, really. Each night, he came home from work, settled into his chair by the living room window, and read the *Evening Sun* until my mother announced that dinner was ready, at which point he moved into the dining room, where he sat at the head of the table. Unless we had a guest, which was rare, he continued to read the paper while Mom and I talked. Every now and then my mother would try to include him in the conversation by saying something like “Gerald, did you hear that? Mary Jane’s English teacher, Miss Hazen, had a poem published in a magazine! Can you imagine?”

Sometimes my dad responded with a nod. Sometimes he said things like *That’s nice* or *Well, I’ll be*. Most often he just kept on reading as if no one had said a word.

When Dr. Cone stepped deeper into the room and kissed Mrs. Cone on the lips, I almost fainted. Their bodies were pressed together, their heads only an inch apart after the kiss as they whispered to each other. I would have

listened in, but I couldn't because Izzy was talking to me, pulling my hand, picking up things from the floor and explaining them to me as if I'd grown up in Siberia and had never seen American toys. Of Legos she said, "You click the blocks together and voilà!" Then she threw the blocks she had just coupled straight into the air. They landed, nearly invisible, in a heap of Fisher-Price circle-headed kids that lay beside their upside-down yellow school bus.

Dr. and Mrs. Cone continued talking, their mouths breathing the same thin slice of air, while Izzy explained the buzzer in Operation. The twins had Operation and I considered myself an expert. Izzy held the tweezers against the metal rim, purposefully setting off the electric hum. She laughed. Then she looked up at her parents and said, "Mom, you *have* to see what I made!" Dr. and Mrs. Cone snapped their heads toward Izzy at the exact same moment. Their bodies were still touching all the way up and down so that they were like a single two-headed being.

Izzy led the charge down the stairs, almost tripping over a cactus in a ceramic pot. Mrs. Cone was behind her, I followed Mrs. Cone, and Dr. Cone was behind me, talking the whole way. They had to get going on the third floor. They needed a better mattress on the bed, and they'd need better lighting, too. It could be a very comfortable guest suite.

As we entered the living room, Mrs. Cone picked up the inflated raft and sailed it into the dining room. It hit the long junk-covered table and then fell silently to the floor. The four of us assembled in front of the coffee table, which was covered with books, magazines, and a package of Fig Newton cookies that looked like it had been ripped open by a wolf. Beside the Fig Newtons, on top of a teetering pile of paperbacks, stood a lumpy papier-mâché lighthouse. It rose about three feet high and curved to the right.

"That's beautiful," I said.

"Is it a lighthouse?" Mrs. Cone leaned to one side to get a better look.

"Yes! On the Chesapeake Bay!" Izzy had been at a sailing-and-craft camp down at the Inner Harbor. Today was her last day. Mrs. Cone had mentioned the camp in our introductory phone call. She described it as "a bunch of bratty private school kids who think nothing of excluding Izzy from every game."

"It's magnificent," Mrs. Cone finally said. She picked up the lighthouse and went to the fireplace. On the mantel were more books, wineglasses, bongos that appeared to be made of ceramic and animal hide, and what I thought was a ukulele but was maybe some other kind of stringed instrument. She set the lighthouse on top of the books.

"Perfect," Dr. Cone said.

“Sort of looks like a giant dildo.” Mrs. Cone said this quietly, maybe so Izzy couldn’t hear. I had no idea what a dildo was. I glanced at Dr. Cone. He seemed to be holding in a laugh.

“I love it!” Izzy took my hand and pulled me back upstairs. Maybe her instinct was right and I was like a visitor from Siberia. I had never met anyone like Dr. and Mrs. Cone. And I’d never been in a house where every space was crammed with things to look at or think about (could it be that all messes weren’t evil and didn’t need to be banished with such efficiency?). I’d felt instantaneous affection for Izzy and was happy that I was to be her nanny. But I was happy for other things too: that I’d be doing something I’d never done before, that my days would be spent in a world that was so different to me that I could feel a sheen of anticipation on my skin. Already, I didn’t want the summer to end.

2

On my first full day at the Cones', I dressed in my red terry-cloth shorts and the rainbow-striped top I'd picked out as part of my new summer wardrobe. My mother thought the shorts were too short, but we couldn't find anything longer at Hutzler's downtown, at least not in the juniors section. Mom told me to put my dirty-blond hair in a ponytail. "You need to be professional. It's a doctor's home," she said.

I pulled my hair back, put on my flip-flops, and walked through the neighborhood toward the Cones' house. It was sunny and quiet out. I saw a few men in suits walking to their cars, about to drive to work. I only saw one woman: our new neighbor. My mother and I had driven by as the movers had been unloading the furniture, and my mother slowed the car to catch a glimpse of a chintz sofa being carried off the truck. "A bit too blue," she had said, once the couch was out of sight.

The new neighbor was in her gardening capris and a checked shirt. In her blond hair was the thin triangle of a blue scarf. She was on her knees, leaning over a hole she'd just dug in the dirt outline of the lawn. Beside her was a wooden crate full of flowers.

She sat up straight and shielded her eyes as I approached. "Good morning," she said.

"Good morning." I slowed but didn't stop, even though I really wanted to. This woman had a face out of a Hitchcock film. She was pretty. Clean-looking. Did she have kids? Was she married? Had she grown up in town? Had she attended the all-girls Roland Park Country School, where I was a student?

Before I crossed to the next block, I looked back at the woman. Her rump was in the air, her hands were deep in the dirt, and the scarf on her head

flapped like a bird about to take off. She sat up quickly, caught me watching, and waved. I waved back, embarrassed, and then hurried away.

Mrs. Cone opened the door for me, smiling and holding a cup of coffee. As she closed the door behind us, she splashed coffee on the floor of the foyer. She was wearing a nightgown that came to her knees and was unbuttoned down the front, revealing just about everything. I tried not to look.

“They’re in the kitchen—go on in.” She turned and trotted up the stairs, ignoring the spill.

“Mary Jane?!” Izzy shouted. “We’re in the kitchen!”

Dr. Cone shouted, as if Izzy hadn’t, “We’re in the kitchen!”

“IN THE KITCHEN!” Izzy repeated.

“Coming.” I couldn’t bring myself to shout, so I announced myself again after I’d passed out of the living room, through the dining room, and into the kitchen. “I’m here.”

Dr. Cone was wearing pajama bottoms and a T-shirt. Izzy was wearing pink pajama pants and no shirt. Her taut belly sweetly popped out.

“I’m coloring!” Izzy announced.

“I love coloring.” I scooted in next to her on the blue-cushioned banquette. The window behind the kitchen table looked out into the backyard and toward the garage. There was a lamp on in the garage; it appeared to be sitting on a surface—a table or a desk—at the window.

Dr. Cone noticed me looking. He pointed past me and Izzy. “That’s my office.”

“The garage?” I imagined a nurse inside, hospital beds, IV bags full of blood, ambulances pulling into the alleyway.

“Well, it was a garage once. A barn before that.”

“Ours, too.” The neighborhood had been built about eighty years ago by one of the Olmsted brothers who’d designed Central Park in New York City. It was full of winding roads, already mature trees, and a horse barn behind every house. I loved that our neighborhood had a connection to New York City. I liked to imagine myself in New York City, walking beside all those towering buildings and among the people cramming the sidewalks, like I’d seen in movies and TV shows. But most of all, I wanted to go to a Broadway show. My mother and I belonged to the Show Tunes of the Month Club and received a new Broadway cast album every month. I had memorized every song from all the great shows, and the best songs from the bad shows. My mother adored Broadway songs but not New York City, which she said was full of thieves, drug addicts, and degenerates.

“What should we color?” Izzy was sorting through a six-inch-high stack of coloring books.

“Is there a nurse in there?” I asked Dr. Cone, nodding toward the window.

“A nurse?”

“Who helps you with the patients.”

Dr. Cone laughed. “I’m a psychiatrist. I’m a medical doctor, but I just work with thoughts. Addiction, obsessions. I don’t deal in bodies.”

“Oh.” I wondered if my mother thought psychiatrists were as big a deal as the doctors who dealt in bodies.

“Bodies!” Izzy said, and waved a coloring book in front of me. *The Human Body* was printed on the front.

“That looks cool.” I gathered crayons from around the table and grouped them according to color.

“Let’s do the penis.” Izzy opened the book and started flipping through the pages. My face burned and I felt a little shaky.

“What color are you going to do the penis?” Dr. Cone asked, and I almost gasped. I’d never heard an adult say *penis*. I’d barely heard people my age say *penis*. The Kellogg twins were the two top students in our class, and they never said words like *penis*.

“GREEN!” Izzy stopped at a page that showed a penis and scrotum. The whole thing looked droopy and boneless; the scrotum reminded me of half-rotted guavas that had started to wrinkle as they shrunk. Words were printed on the side and lines directed each word to what it was naming. This penis was larger and far more detailed than the one I’d barely glanced at on the anatomy drawing we’d been handed in sex ed class last year. In fact, upon receiving that handout, most girls took a pen and rapidly scratched over the penis so they wouldn’t have to look at it. I was too afraid of the teacher to graffiti my paper. Sally Beaton, who sat beside me and was afraid of no one, saw my pristine page and reached from her desk to mine to scribble out the penis. Izzy picked up a green crayon and started frantically coloring the penis green. I wasn’t sure if I should color with her or not. If it hadn’t been a penis, I would have. *But it was a penis*, and Dr. Cone was right there. Would he want a girl who colored a penis taking care of his daughter? Then again, his own daughter was coloring a penis! And I had to assume he or Mrs. Cone had bought her the book.

“Help me!” Izzy handed me a red crayon. I nervously started coloring the tip.

Dr. Cone glanced over. “Jesus, looks like it’s pissing blood.”

I froze. I felt like my heart had stopped. But before I could say anything, or put the red crayon down, Dr. Cone wandered out of the kitchen.

Izzy and I finished the penis. I was relieved when she turned the page and we colored a uterus and fallopian tubes. Orange and yellow and pink.

That day, neither Dr. nor Mrs. Cone appeared to go to work. And they didn't get dressed till around noon. In my own house, both of my parents were showered and dressed by six thirty. My father walked out the door Monday through Friday at seven a.m. Dad was a lawyer. He wore a tie every day, and only removed that tie at the table after we'd thanked the Lord for our food *and* prayed for President Ford and his wife. A framed color picture of smiling President Ford hung on the wall just behind my father's head. Ford's gaze in the picture was aimed directly at me. His eyes were a feathery suede blue. His teeth looked like short little corn nibs. An American flag undulated behind his head. Sometimes, when I thought *father* or when people talked about their dads, I envisioned President Ford.

My mother's work was mostly in the home. I'd never seen anyone busier than Mom. She made the beds every day, vacuumed every other day, swept every day, grocery shopped every Friday, made breakfast and dinner every day, and mopped the kitchen floor each night. She also taught Sunday school at the Roland Park Presbyterian Church. And she was really good at it. Sometimes the kids colored pictures of Jesus while Mom read them Bible verses. Sometimes she played Bible bingo with them. But the best part of Sunday school was when Mom played the guitar. Her voice was thick and husky, like her throat had been carved from a hollowed-out log.

Mom said Jesus didn't care that she didn't have a pretty voice, but he did prefer it when I sang along. Harmony came naturally to me and it made my mother proud when I harmonized. So every Sunday, with an audience of eight to fifteen little kids (depending on who showed up), Mom strapped on her guitar and we stood together at the front of the church basement classroom and belted out songs about Jesus. The kids were supposed to sing along, but only half of them did. Some just played with their shoes, or nudged and whispered to their friends, or lay on their backs and stared at the water-stained ceiling. When they really started to lose attention, we sang "Rise and Shine," because all kids love that song.

There was a thirty-minute break between Sunday school and church services. During that time, Mom went home to drop off her guitar and fetch Dad, while I ran off to practice with either the youth choir (during the school year) or the summer choir (during the summer). I preferred the summer choir, as it was made up mostly of adults and only a few teenagers—the majority of whom rarely showed up. I didn't feel self-conscious with the adults as I did the youth choir. Singing with my peers, I never let my voice go too loud, as I didn't want to be teased for my vibrato, or for slipping into a harmony when my ear told me that it would be right to do so.

We were always home before noon on Sunday. After lunch, Mom either did prep work for the meals she would serve during the week, or worked in the garden. Our lawn looked like a green shag rug. In front of the house were blooming azaleas, all trimmed to the exact same height and width. In the backyard were more blooming trees, and flower beds that curved around rocks and outlined the property like a plush purple-and-pink moat. Gardeners came once a week, but no one could keep it as neat as my mother. Weeds that dared to poke their pointy green heads out from the soil were immediately snatched from life by my mother's gloved hand.

Every spring, a team of men showed up to wash our house's white clapboard, repair the loose black shutters, and touch up the paint where necessary. It was only after this touch-up that my mother planted the window boxes that hung below each window on the front of the house. When I was around Izzy Cone's age, my mother hired an artist to paint a picture of our house. That painting now hung above the sofa in the living room. Sometimes when I helped pull weeds or water the flower boxes or plant new annuals in the beds, Mom would say, "We're obliged to live up to the painting, Mary Jane. We can't let that painting be fiction!"

The Cones seemed uninterested in how their house or yard looked. The only thing that appeared to concern them was turning the third floor into a guest suite, which they were discussing every time they passed me and Izzy—in the TV room, in the kitchen at lunch, and on the front porch, where Izzy and I played with her Erector Set.

At five, when it was time for me to go, Izzy and I wandered around the house, looking for her parents.

"Mom! Dad!" Izzy yelled.

I was growing accustomed to the yelling but couldn't bring myself to do it. I quietly sang out, "Mrs. Cone? Dr. Cone?"

On the second floor, the doors except for Izzy's were open.

"Why is your door the only one that's ever shut?" I asked her.

"To keep the witch out," Izzy said. "Mom! Dad!"

"What witch?"

"The one that haunts the house. If I shut my door, she doesn't go in when I'm not there." Izzy walked straight into her parents' bedroom. I stood in the hallway and waited.

Izzy came out a minute later. "They're not in there. I'm hungry."

We went downstairs, through the living and dining rooms, and back through the swinging door into the kitchen. In my own house, the kitchen belonged to my mother and it was up to her if it was "open" or "closed." Most

days, it closed at two p.m., as she didn't want anyone to lose their appetite before supper. Though sometimes it closed right after lunch.

I wondered if Mrs. Cone planned to make dinner that night. There was nothing in the Cones' oven, nothing defrosting in the sink, nothing in a saucepan on the stove. There was no indication that plans had been made to feed the family.

I had a feeling that Dr. and Mrs. Cone wouldn't be angry if I made dinner for Izzy. "Lemme call my house," I said. I looked around the kitchen for the phone. I'd seen one somewhere earlier but couldn't remember where.

"Where's the phone?"

Izzy found the cable plugged into the wall below the counter and followed it with her hands as high as she could reach. "It's here somewhere!"

I pushed aside the bathrobe that was on the counter, and found the phone.

"Can I dial?" Izzy climbed up onto the orange wooden stool and balanced on her knees. She removed the handset from its cradle and rested it on the counter.

"Four." I watched as Izzy carefully examined the holes in the number dial, found the four, and inserted her chubby little finger. There was a line of black dirt under her nail and I made a note to myself that I'd give her a bath after dinner, if I ended up staying that long.

"Four!" Izzy rotated the dial until it hit the silver comma-looking thing, then released her finger as the dial clicked around back to the start. We went on like this for six numbers. On the seventh number, I glanced away and looked back, only to see Izzy had inserted her finger into the 9 instead of the 8. When the dial finished its slow *click-click-click*, I picked up the handset, placed it back in its spot to disconnect the call, then took it out again so we could start once more.

When we finally got the numbers dialed, I put the phone to my ear. Izzy leaned in and I tilted the receiver toward her.

"Dillard residence," my mother said.

"Hey, Mom, I need to stay and feed Izzy dinner."

"Oh?" Mom's voice screeched up.

"She needs to feed me dinner!" Izzy shouted. I stood up straight and pulled the handset from Izzy's ear.

"Is that Izzy?"

"Yes," I said. "She's a goofball."

"Sounds like it. Why do you need to feed her dinner? Where is her mother?"

I didn't want to admit that I couldn't find Dr. or Mrs. Cone. I turned away from Izzy so she wouldn't hear, and whispered, "Her father is stuck with a