

Your Sneak Preview •

THE OPPOSITE OF LOVE by Julie Buxbaum



Prologue

Your picture is already hanging on the fridge. Black and white, 3 x 5—unposed, unselfconscious—you, curled up and in profile. You, wholly contained inside of me.

*Here's what I know: I eat mass quantities of red meat, curse religiously, sing out of tune but with conviction. I cry when it suits me, laugh when it's inopportune, read *The New York Times* obituaries and wedding announcements, out loud and in that order.*

You: You weigh less than a pint of milk. You are no longer theoretical. You are a girl.

When the doctor told us today, he clapped, as if taking credit for the whole shebang. As if he were the one to transform you into an exclamatory event, from the intangible to the concrete, an it into a baby girl. I didn't want to disappoint him, but we knew I was having a daughter all along, from the first second we found out I was pregnant, just as we knew we would name you Charlotte. (Your dad keeps correcting me—we are pregnant, he says, not just you—but are his ankles so swollen that it looks like he's under house arrest? Are his breasts hanging like water balloons? He may be expecting, but I am pregnant.)

"A million women have peed on these sticks. You can do it, Emily." That's what your dad said to get me into the bathroom to make what we suspected official. I was nervous, though, and it took a good hour and a half until I went anywhere near the toilet, and then another one after that, because he came in with me and I got stage fright. But I did it, like the millions of women before me, and then there was a plus sign, which, after triple-checking the box and confirming with a 1-800 number and peeing on a few more sticks, told us all we needed to know.

I understood then, in a way that went beyond want, in a way that may have bordered on need, that you were going to be a girl. I understood, too, that nights like tonight were coming, almost looked forward to them, when I would sit up while your dad slept, when my emotions would waver between excitement and fear.

Your dad, who is made of sunnier material, who sings in the shower and doesn't knock on wood, whose body is curved toward mine now, eyes twitching in time to dreams filled with superheroes and award-acceptance speeches, thinks my need to document my life for you, by words and by photographs, is a morbid indulgence. He wonders why I flirt with life's shallow paradoxes—the line between love and its opposite, the line between holding on and letting go.

But it's not that simple, really. This chronic chronicling, this eulogizing of sorts, falls outside my conscious choice. Sometimes I try to rewind twenty weeks, to before, to remember when you were an idea, something we dreamt up in darkness when sleep wouldn't come. But even then— even in that pre-you world—I felt this compulsion to preserve us all into a pile of memory and render us indelible. One way to guarantee the crossing of any future temporal divide: You will always find me here, in these pages, even long after I am gone.

And let's be honest, who knows how long I'll be around? We Haxby women aren't known for our lengthy life spans. But that is somewhat beside the point, because no matter when I go, be it when I am forty-two or eighty-two, you will forget whole parts of me. That's the blessing and the curse of loss: You don't get to choose what falls within the inevitable dissolution of recollection or what lingers and haunts you late at night, your head heavy with memories, while your husband dreams of scaling walls in spandex tights.

My own mother, for whom you are named, has been mostly lost to recycled anecdotes and left behind to the angles of a few arbitrary photographs. Not so much lost and left behind, then; more distorted and distilled. And though I often find comfort in this airbrushed facsimile of who she once was, I long for the real thing on nights like these.

The real thing. The flesh and the bones.

Maybe the aftermath of loss—the crumbs of memory—has, in some ways, scarred me more than the loss itself. The truth is I've never learned to ride a bicycle, because, among other reasons, it is something you can never forget. This is who I am: someone who simultaneously longs for and fears the commitment of remembering. There is the forgetting, the disintegration of memory, morsel by morsel; and there is the impossibility of forgetting, the scar tissue, with its insulated layers of padding. Both haunt me in their own way.

You will never get to meet the person who I once was, the one pre-you, before in some ways I was even me. But it is your legacy as much as mine, this story of how you came to be, this story of us.

And now that your portrait is on the fridge, now that I got to play my part as a Russian nested doll, now that there will be no living for me in a world without you, I pass along all that I can preserve: this story of how we became a family—of your dad and me, of Ruth and Grandpa Jack, of my own father, who is awake right now too, busy assembling a crib with pink trim. This story of the dividing line I love and live and bequeath, the one that lies between remembering and forgetting, commitment and liberation, getting left and leaving behind.

The line, always the line, the same line that separates me from my mother. The same line that separates me from you.

One

Last night, I dreamt that I chopped Andrew up into a hundred little pieces, like a Benihana chef, and ate them, one by one. He tasted like chicken. Afterward, I felt full but slightly disappointed. I had been craving steak.

I plan to forget this dream. I will block out the grainy texture of moo shu Andrew. The itch of swallowing him dry. I will erase it completely, without lingering echoes or annoying déjà vu, despite the possibility that my dream led me inexorably to this moment.

Because I already know that, unlike the dream—this dead end—this one is going to stick. I am living an inevitable memory.

Today, I break up with Andrew in a restaurant that has crayons on the table and peanut shells on the floor. A drunken young woman in the midst of her bachelorette party, wearing little more than a cowboy hat and tassels, attempts to organize a line dance. I realize now that I should have waited for a better backdrop. It looks as if I think our relationship adds up to nothing more than a couple of beers and some satisfying, but fiery, Buffalo wings. This is not the effect I was going for.

I had imagined that disentangling would be straightforward and civilized, maybe even a tiny bit romantic. The fantasy breakup in my head played out in pantomime; no explanations, only rueful smiles, a kiss good-bye on the cheek, a farewell wave thrown over a shoulder. The sting of nostalgia and the high of release, a combustible package, maybe, but one we would both understand and appreciate.

Instead, Andrew looks at me strangely, as if I am a foreigner he has just met and he can't place my accent. I refuse to meet his eyes. I quell the overwhelming desire to run outside into the swill of Third Avenue, to drown in the overflow of people spilling out from the bars and onto the street. Surely that would be better than feeling Andrew's confusion reverberate off his skin like a bad odor. I lock my legs around the bottom of my bar stool and stare at the bit of barbecue sauce that clings to his upper lip. This helps assuage my guilt. How could I be serious about a man who walks around with food on his face? In all fairness, Andrew is not walking around anywhere. He perches there, stunned.

And I, too, am adorned in condiments. The ketchup on my white tank top makes it look like my heart is leaking.

“This was never going to be a forever, happily-ever-after sort of thing. You knew that,” I say, though it is clear from his silence and from the last few days that he did not. I wonder if he wants to hit me. I almost wish he would.

Seems strange now that I didn’t realize this moment was coming, that I hadn’t started practicing in my head before yesterday. I’m usually good at endings—pride myself on them, in fact—and I always find people disingenuous when they claim that a breakup came out of nowhere. Nothing comes out of nowhere, except for, perhaps, freak accidents. Or cancer. And even those things you should be prepared for.

I guess I could have just let the weekend unfold, followed the original plan with military precision, and woken up tomorrow with Andrew in my bed and his arm thrown across my shoulder. Later, at work, I would have been able to tell some funny Labor Day anecdote around the proverbial water cooler, the weekend always better in rose-colored instant replay. But though I firmly believe that a tree does not fall in the forest until someone later tells an amusing story about it, I realize now that there will be no tidbits to share tomorrow. At least not funny ones. I have made sure of that.

Today, during the last moments of the Labor Day weekend, I find myself sitting across from Andrew, the man with whom I have spent the past two years, attempting to explain why it is we need to stop seeing each other naked. I want to tell him it is merely our ages—I am twenty-nine, Andrew is thirty-one—that are at fault here. We are acting under a collective cultural delusion, the one that demands random connection after the quarter-life mark, a handcuffing to whoever lands by your side during a particular game of musical chairs. This is the only way I can explain how Andrew went so out of bounds yesterday, with his intimations of a ring and permission, with his hints of an impending proposal. But I don’t say any of this out loud, of course. The words seem too vague, too much like an excuse, maybe, too much like the truth.

We had never been one of those fantasy-prone couples who presumed a happy ending or named their unborn children on their first date. Actually, our first date was at a restaurant remarkably similar to this one, and rather than talking about the future, or even ourselves, we had a fierce competition over who could eat more hot wings. We left the restaurant with lips so swollen that when he kissed me good night I could barely feel it. Four months later, he admitted rushing the date because the wings gave him diarrhea. It took me two more months to confess that I had let him win. He didn’t take that so well.

Whenever the future did come up, though, we always included convenient “ifs” in our language, deflating whatever followed into something less loaded.

“If we ever have kids, I hope they have your eyes and my toes,” I would say, while tracing circles on Andrew’s stomach with my fingertips.

“If we ever have kids, I hope they have your intestines. That way, we could enter them in competitive eating contests and retire to Mexico on their winnings,” he would say, and gather my hair into a ponytail and then let it slip back through his hands, like the strands were only on loan.

Perhaps the lesson here is to pay attention. There is always a lesson, isn’t there? There has to be, because without one, what would be the point? So maybe this time it is to be vigilant, to watch out. Because somehow, sometime yesterday, without my noticing, without my perceiving, our fault line shifted.

The plan was to walk up to Central Park with our friends Daniel and Kate, to jointly celebrate our limited free time by wantonly wasting it. The curtain of Manhattan humidity had been replaced with a whistling breeze, and after a choking August, we were relieved to be balancing between seasons. Since the rest of the city had better places to be over the holiday weekend, we took advantage of having the sidewalks to ourselves. Andrew and I weaved back and forth, elbowing each other in the ribs, sticking out our feet to trip the other, pinching sides in a game of gotchalast. I was feeling pure pleasure, not dithering happiness. No

buzz of anxiety or free fall in my stomach to warn of what was to come.

Daniel and Kate walked in front of us. Her engagement ring, whose presence loomed out of proportion to its size, would occasionally catch the sun and paint shadow shows on the sidewalk. Our closest friends—we could still say “our” yesterday, we were still a “we” then—and somehow, more than that, they were also symbols of how things can be for some people, how effortless commitment can look. Daniel and Kate were the adults leading this brigade, though at a languid pace, since it was clear that we should savor this last bit of summer before the trees shed their leaves to make room for the snow.

After I caught Andrew in a sneaky gotcha-last move—the neverfail distract-and-mislead maneuver—he ended the game by lacing his fingers in mine. We walked that way for a while, hand in hand, until I felt him start to toy with my empty ring finger, wrapping it with the whole of his palm in an infant grip. And though he kept quiet, it was as if he said the words out loud. He was going to ask me to marry him.

His thoughts, I could tell, were wholly methodical—the hows of proposing, not the ifs or the whys. Finding a free day to take the train out to Connecticut to get my father’s permission or to Riverdale to ask my Grandpa Jack. Conjuring up the name of my favorite restaurant and his family jeweler. No meditation on whether he knows me well enough to zip together our futures, no concern that he can’t decipher the infinite thoughts that run through my inaccessible brain at any given moment. But that’s who Andrew is, ultimately; someone not overly bothered by the ifs and the whys.

Before I could wonder if my rising panic was merely the result of an illusion, he pulled me toward a jewelry-shop window, his arm cupped around my back. I imagined the rings winking at me, laughing at my discomfort.

“Do you like anything?” he asked.

“That bracelet is pretty,” I said. “Oh, and those earrings are gorgeous. I like how dangly they are. I never wear dangly. And, look, they have a one hundred percent money-back guarantee. I like when you can get your money back.”

“How about those rings?”

“Too sparkly. I prefer the dangly earrings.”

“Come on, what kinds of cuts do you like? Princess, oval, marquise?” The man had clearly done his homework. This is not the first time he has thought about this, I realized.

Fuck.

“I don’t know the difference. It’s not my sort of thing,” I said, which was true. I thought Marquise was an island in the Caribbean. And then, because I didn’t know what else to do, I pointed far into the distance.

“Look!” I said, like a child who has just learned a new word. “A puppy.”

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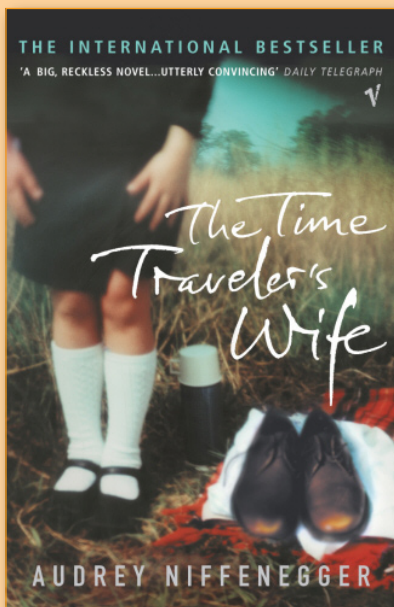
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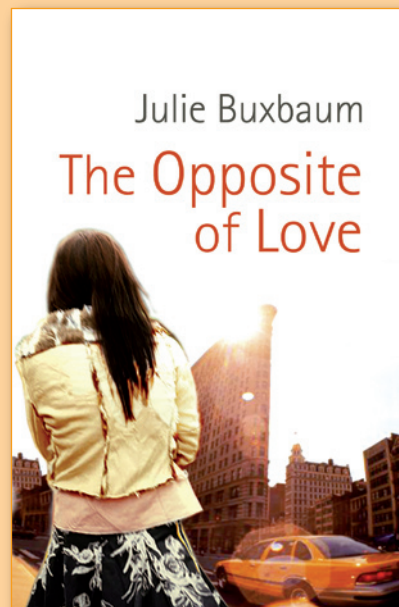
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