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# Taking Pictures

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*For Theo and Eileen Dombrowski*

NATALIE

So Natalie put me straight. Who knows what Natalie wants or what she likes, but we know what she doesn't like, that's for sure. At least we do now.

'Well,' I said, after I put the phone down, 'I won't be getting in your way again.'

Natalie should be a star. When she grows up, that is. Natalie should be something really impressive. Because if she isn't, then it'll get pretty lonely, won't it? I mean, how many friends has she got, to lose?

I will be a writer when I grow up and I will put it all down on the page, the tangle between Natalie and me, which is supposed to be about Billy's mother, but I don't think it is, really. Billy is Natalie's boyfriend. I nearly went out with him once, but that is so long ago, and it wasn't even a proper thing. Now he's best friends with my boyfriend, who couldn't care less, and neither could Natalie, so that isn't what this is about, either.

I wake up in the middle of the night I am so upset. I mean, when I put down the phone I didn't know what to think – Natalie is so polite, you could hardly call what we had a fight – and then I'm lying there with my eyes wide open; looking at what turns out to be the ceiling (duh!), wondering what terrible thought just woke me up.

My sister is asleep across the room – she has a kind of glowing pebble night light that changes colours, very slowly, and she is lying in this sea of stuff: books and broken Nintendos and inflatable Bratz cushions, and God knows what else is in the pile, except from somewhere deep inside

the heap, her breathing. And it makes me think of the milk inside a coconut, and I also think of Natalie's room that I was in once, and it was really tidy. That's all. It was just really tidy.

Natalie is an only child. She says it's OK. She says she doesn't know if her parents really, really love her or really, really couldn't care less. She has nothing to compare it to. They never shout at her anyway, they just have 'little conversations' – which sounds like hell to me but she says it's OK.

Here are the four of us: I am the fat, jokey one with the flaking nail polish, though it is always interesting flaking polish, like mirror silver or navy blue – still, you can tell by the way the stuff jumps off me that I don't really mean it. Natalie is more a *Rouge Noir* sort of girl. She might have her doubts, but that polish stays put.

Natalie has the kind of looks you have to get used to – but once you do, it is as though you have personally discovered her. Her features are sort of see-through, her skin is really pale and she has thin white-blond hair. Which is why I say she should be a star, because the camera loves all that, close up. She hasn't a single open pore. Though she needs to get her eyelashes dyed professionally. She did it herself once and all around her lids went pink, so she had to stop using anything for a while. Which made her look sort of blinky and peeved.

When I say I am fat – even though, statistically speaking, I'm an eight and a quarter stone *midget* – my boyfriend says that I am not actually fat, I am just sleek. So that's the new word for fat – 'sleek'. But before I go completely self-hating, I do actually like my hair, which is black and really glossy, especially when it is, like, totally saturated with grease.

Who else?

Billy is a lot of trouble and I like him a lot. Hey, I like trouble. Or so I say to my boyfriend when he rolls his

eyes up, the way he does. Billy has the kind of looks I used to go for a couple of years ago when I was about fifteen; soulful and soft, with absolutely no hair on his chest.

Though when I say Billy is my boyfriend's best friend, I don't think my boyfriend has a best friend, actually. So maybe that's the real question – Who knows what my boyfriend wants, or who he likes? Does he even like me? It's a mystery.

I am so in love with my boyfriend – at least I know that. He has eyes like George Clooney and beautiful hands. At least, the backs of them are beautiful; inside, they are a bit dry and shattered looking. I tried to get him to use some cream, but that's like trying to put him in a tutu, as far as he is concerned. I literally had to chase him around the room, and he ended up pushing my hand with the cream on it all over my face, even though it is handcream and like lard, basically.

My boyfriend has his own room and his parents gave him a gas heater to help him study in there, and I don't know if it is the smell of the gas or the heat of it that made us feel so fuggy, all last winter. We did a lot of kissing in front of that heater – and yes, we have gone 'all the way'; but that's only when his parents are out, which, these days, is never. But I don't mind. We kiss until we are dizzy, and my boyfriend is just so gorgeous and gentle about it. We tried to go further in the park but it was freezing and dark and I didn't find it sexy at all; in fact, I think it made me a bit upset. (I am not saying I am leaving my boyfriend mad with lust, I am not that sort of person. And, actually, that's all I am going to say about that.)

Our debs' dance was on Friday evening, and I'm still getting flashbacks; it's like a nightmare – that guy getting sick over my shoulder, and Natalie smiling like some kind of nun. But I am not even thinking about all this, as I

lie there in the changing pink light. I am thinking, *It is something else again.*

It all started with Billy's Terrible Time last year, just a little while after he hooked up with Natalie. And we were all delighted he had her, because she is like a flame in the daylight – that's what I think – unwavering, you can hardly see her, but she is always there. And after that mad bitch and, excuse me, cocktease 'Peony' Mulvey, we were really glad he had someone sane. Natalie is above all things sane.

In the middle of the night I think, *Maybe she's not sane at all.*

Anyway.

Billy's mother (who I really like, actually) got cancer last year and she came home from her first chemo session high as a kite from the steroids and she told Billy – told them all, in fact – that she didn't love their father any more, had never loved him in the first place, and once her chemo was over then her marriage was too. It was like, 'I'm alive! I'm alive! I'm not going to waste my life any more!!!' At least, that's how Billy described it. Then all her hair fell out and she was sick as a parrot, and Billy's just looking at his da and his da is looking at him – and you know, there is nothing wrong with Billy's da, he's a genuinely lovely man – and he is bringing her four hundred cups of green tea a day while she lies on the sofa with a face on her that says, As soon as this is done, then I am out that door.

The minute we hear the diagnosis, my boyfriend looks it up online and he says ovarian cancer is a complete doozey – and who's going to tell Billy? Like who is going to tell him that her percentages are basically on the floor? We are sitting in the chipper waiting for Billy to get off the phone to his mother – he is outside the plate-glass window trying to get good reception and he is looking at the sky and his face looks so difficult, so old and childish

at the same time, that the sight of him is like a pain for each of us. It is like each of us has a pain in our side.

Then Natalie says, 'Fuck the statistics. You just have to be in the right per cent. That's all. You just have to be in the per cent that survives.' And I understand she's a bit defensive, I mean she is literally, actually defending her new boyfriend's peace of mind here, but another part of me thinks that she is also marking her territory, which I completely respect, except I've known Billy's mother for five years now and if she dies, I too will cry.

His mother, incidentally, is what made Billy bonkers – long before she got sick, his mother was what made Billy interesting and unhappy, so she's a bit of a bitch, too, but I don't say that to Natalie, I say, 'You think she is going to survive?'

'I think,' says Natalie after a minute, 'that we don't know. And until we do know, then there's not much point getting in a fizz.'

Which is so like something my boyfriend would say that I think they'd be better off with each other really, they could roll their eyes up to heaven and not get in a fizz together – while having sex, for example. And afterwards, Natalie could make tea.

So, all the way back to his place, I accuse my boyfriend of fancying her, but that is just to get him going – that's just to clear out the memory of Billy coming back in after the phone call, saying, 'No, no. Just the usual,' and pushing his chips away. It is also to distract me from the fact that Natalie's aversion to 'fizz' is not something reasonable, and considered and right; that what she is actually saying is, You don't own Billy's mother.

Dead or alive.

It was only a tiny moment, you know?

As I say, I really did respect Natalie for holding the line, and somehow we seemed to feel all through that long winter that if Natalie didn't flicker, if she didn't blink, and

if we all stayed nice, and stayed separate, and only had emotions that were appropriate to our actual situation vis-à-vis Billy's mother, then Billy's mother would survive.

I just thought, *What a great sense of decorum Natalie has* – and God knows there's not much of that around. And I really admired her, that's all. I began to see how beautiful she is close up and I started asking her advice on chip-proof nail polish, even though these things don't interest me as much as I think they do. And that makes it worse, the fact that I don't give a fuck about *Rouge Noir*, really, so a sort of wheedling, messy thing starts to happen, and it is a while before I realise that what I want is for Natalie to *be my friend*.

I say this to my boyfriend and he says, 'She is your friend,' which just shows how much he knows about these things. And after a while she does start to like us, though it's not like she has much choice. It can't have been easy: her boyfriend up to ninety, and his mother lying on the sofa, and me gabbling on about some day, maybe, getting my legs waxed – I mean, Natalie just does things, she doesn't talk about them first, and it seems that all those months were about getting nothing done at all.

Then, in the spring, Billy's mother gets her hair back, and it has this amazing red glow that she had as a child, so we are all in and out of Billy's kitchen again, returned from our months as refugees in the chipper, and Billy's mother stays married, and she also stays as mad as she ever was, and also superbly happy, and I just admire her so much for all of this. The next few months are a blur for Billy and my boyfriend, because they both have their last exams, so me and Natalie hang out a little, and the thing about Natalie is, she is a really nice person. It's like I'm making her out to be some kind of bitch or something, but she really isn't. She is actually very cool, and nice.

In the summer, my boyfriend gets a job in the local garage so his clothes smell of petrol, and his hands smell

of money, because the guy who owns the place hasn't put soap in the toilets for three months, even though they serve coffees there as well. I say why doesn't he take his own soap in, but my boyfriend just looks at me like I am trying to turn him into a queer.

He is saving for college. And I know that I will lose him, when he goes. So I am on the strictest possible diet, and I am talking non-stop to Natalie about the Dress; the one that I will wear to the debs' dance. I mean, I know he loves me, but I will wear this dress and my boyfriend will take one look at me and he will realise that this is what he will lose. All this.

Billy has been accepted into two colleges in England, but I don't think they have the money really, and with his mother still in remission he wants to stay close to home. September is Billy and Natalie's first anniversary, and it is also the anniversary of his mother's diagnosis, and it is the month of our last dance, before the boys go off to war. But I feel so grateful for the turn of the leaves, somehow. I walk through the woods and remember where we nearly did it one time, my boyfriend and me, and I think – a bit like Billy's mother – that when we go, we will go down swinging.

I'm texting Natalie one day and she idly mentions that she has her dress already. 'White! white! white!' And it takes me about two years to spell out, 'very Renée Zellweger!!!'

Eventually I have to bring my little sister into town with me – which feels like a sad-bastard thing to do, but actually she's a demon when it comes to clothes, it's like bringing the entire line-up of a girl band. Between us, we solve everything with a sub-Westwood, sub-goth bustier and my mother's long silk skirt, and a gorgeous second-hand – or should I say vintage – lamé shawl.

Billy's mother says we should go over to their house

before the dance so she can frisk us down for naggins of whiskey, and besides, she says, she wants to see me in all my finery. And I say, 'Mrs Casey, I can't even take the smell of whiskey, vodka's the only way to go.'

So when Natalie rings, I ask her to bring her hair straightener and she says, 'Like, it's sort of large.'

'Not to the hotel,' I say. 'Just over to Billy's before we go.'

'Uh . . . OK,' she says, like 'whatever'. So I arrive at Billy's with everything in a huge bag, and Billy's father answers the door.

I don't know where I got it from, this idea that we were going to do it all there: the fake tan and the fake eyelashes and the bow-ties and the zips. When I text Natalie, she just comes back with, '???!!?' and Billy's da looks a bit embarrassed, because not even Billy is home. He shows me upstairs into his own bedroom, which is a funny place to be, and I sit at Billy's mother's dressing table, which is a sort of alcove in the fitted wardrobe, and I look at Billy's mother's stuff: lipsticks gone off and pressed powder with one of those pads that look sort of orthopaedic, and industrial-strength night cream. And I know I have to skip the tan for a start, there's no one to do my back. I get a really glossy face on and then I just sit there, looking at myself in Mrs Casey's mirror. After a while there's nothing for it except put on the damn dress. Then I sit on Mr and Mrs Casey's bed, and look at the wallpaper. The bed isn't made. The sheets are a really dark green. I lie down for a moment – just for two seconds, I lie down. Then suddenly everyone's arriving, so I jump up and stuff all the gear into my bag, and I make my grand entrance, sweeping down the stairs and into the hall.

Natalie jigs up and down and screams, and she hugs me from four feet away, not to muss. Then we go into Billy's front room, and his father takes a picture, and then she's there – Mrs Casey. I was wondering what the silence in

the house was all about, but there she is, flattened against the wall. Actually first she swings into the room like a broken gate. She holds the door frame with one hand and slams the other one flat against the wall. Then she goes rigid, and looks to the left, as if there's someone after her, and they're in the hall.

'Hi, Mrs Casey,' I say.

She's really drunk.

'Hiiiiii,' she says.

'What do you think?' I do a pathetic little twirl and she lowers her head at me and gives a sort of grunt of approval, then she swings her head around to find Natalie.

She looks at the dress.

'Hnnnn,' she says – which is, actually, the way it comes out of her, quite a friendly and ironic sound. It's a 'White? Interesting choice!' sort of sound, but Natalie just looks at her.

Then she picks up her white skirt with her Rouge Noir nails and 'Billy!' she says, like he's a dog or something. She doesn't look to the left or the right. She puts that nun's smile on her face, walks past Mrs Casey, and keeps walking until she is out the front door.

'People die,' that's what Natalie said to me on the phone tonight. Because of course, we had a big surge when we got to the hotel and the boys got really trashed. At least, I got really trashed so I assume the boys did too, and I ended up snogging – not Billy, thank Christ – but someone else altogether. There's a little splash of puke on the back of my mother's silk skirt, and I'm pretty sure the guy got sick over my shoulder, and Natalie must hear it in my voice on the phone, the way I blame her for all this. Because when she picked up her white skirt and walked past Mrs Casey, something broke. Something between the four of us broke, for good.

'And anyway she's not dying,' says Natalie, who has



no intention of dying, ever. 'She was just drunk.' Which is true.

Like we weren't drunk?

Which I don't think of saying, at the time. I think of saying it now, though – in the middle of the night, when I've just woken up in a sweat of pure shame. Apart from anything else, it's so *gay* – this trailer fantasy I had of me and Natalie swapping mascara, and spraying each other's hair, and fixing the boys' ties. Mrs Casey, downstairs, being tough and smart about my dress; giving me a tough, smart kiss on the cheek before we go. And it's a while before I realise that a) it isn't hairspray that makes you gay, it's sex that makes you gay, and b) I don't even like hairspray.

So that's all right, then.

For a while I just lie there and let all the little moments fly round in my head. Like months ago in the chipper, when Natalie said, 'There's not much point getting in a fizz.'

And I think that Billy's mother will live or die whether or not we get in a fizz. So I say, *fizz away*. You might as well play it as it feels, *Natalie*.

My sister's night light thinks about shifting from blue to lilac, and then seems to change its mind. What do I tell her – precocious brat that she is – what do I tell her, at the age of twelve and a half?

*We are not connected.*

Because this is what Natalie is saying, isn't it? That we are alone. That there is no connection between me and her, or between Billy and me, or between any of us and Mrs Casey, who might live or who might actually die. Between human beings.

And of course she isn't saying this at all.

I mean, I will still hang out with Natalie. And I know I'll get to like her in some different way – probably her way, actually. And I know the thing I have for my boyfriend isn't love, it's just a stupid kind of bliss. I know

all these things – they're not what woke me up. What woke me was a feeling like a horror film – except really boring.

It was the sheets. When I lay down, just for a second, on Mr and Mrs Casey's moss-green sheets. Before the dance, when I was all dolled up in my silk skirt, and I pushed my hands along them and put my cheek against the dark cotton, just for a second. It was the smell of those sheets – cool, unwashed; like something I really wanted, going stale.

That is what woke me up.