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Opening extract from

How They Met and Other Stories

Written by

David Levithan

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book starts, bizarrely enough, with me in physics class.

It was my junior year of high school. Despite the best efforts of my physics teacher, I was continually bored out of my wits. I needed something to do besides pay attention, and passing notes to my friend Lynda only occupied about half the time. So I decided to write a story, going through the physics book (it would look like I was being studious!) and finding as many romantic notions as possible within its pages (I would not be studious at all!). I think I started in November, and by February I had finished the story. I decided to give it to my friends for Valentine's Day. The next year, they wanted another. And so on, for all the years after.

Not all of these stories are official valentine stories –

I can, it seems, write about love and its follies year-round. But when putting together this book of stories about love ("love stories" has the wrong feel to it – I prefer "stories about love"), I decided to go all the way back. As a result, this book contains that first valentine story ("A Romantic Inclination") and the one that came the year after ("Memory Dance," which is still my mom's favorite). Instead of trying to rewrite them as I'd write them now, I've decided to leave them as I wrote them in high school, give or take some punctuation and an awkward last line. "The escalator, a love story" (from college), "Intersection," "The Number of People Who Meet on Airplanes," "Flirting with Waiters," "Starbucks Boy," and "Miss Lucy Had a Steamboat" were also valentine stories, as were "The Good Witch," "Andrew Chang," "Lost Sometimes," and "Skipping the Prom," a medley of prom riffs that I turned into separate stories here. (My novels *Boy Meets Boy, The Realm of Possibility,* and *Are We There Yet?* also started as valentine stories.)

All of the stories in this book (indeed, most of the stories I've written) have been proofread by friends of mine. It is foolish to try to list them all, and I'm sure I'm going to overlook some of them, but I'd like to attempt to thank them for taking the time and helping to make me the writer I am. So thanks to the proofreaders, the

suggestion-makers, and the story-encouragers (in order of appearance): Mom and Dad, Adam, Mayling Birney, Lynda Hong, Jennifer Bodner, Eliza Sporn, Jennifer Fain, Cary Retlin, Michael Rothman, Andrew Farmer, Piper Hoffman, Shira Epstein, Jennifer Corn, Alistair Newbern, Karen Popernik, David Leventhal, Joanna Fried, Janet Vultee, Ellen Miles (I think all the pages are here this time), Nancy Mercado, Dan Poblocki, Nancy Hinkel, Brian Selznick, Billy Merrell, Nick Eliopulos, and Allison Wortche, as well as my friends (past and present, authorial and editorial) at Scholastic, my friends at Random House, my Teen Author Drinks Night cohorts, and the fine purveyors of Pink Drinks.

These stories aren't interconnected . . . but of course they are, in a way. They don't share characters, but they share many other things. I'm sure I don't even recognize all of the connections now. I know people are afraid of story collections – they don't get the same respect as novels – but I don't understand why. Together, these stories say much more than they would apart. *How They Met* refers not only to the characters in the stories but also to the stories themselves. Here they are, meeting for the first time. In the same way that paragraphs meet, and sentences meet, and words meet.

Enjoy the intersections.

D.L.

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STARBUCKS BOY

It was my aunt who pimped me out.

We had this arrangement: I would get to live with her for a few weeks over the summer and take a pre-college course at Columbia before my senior year. In return, I wouldn't have to do a thing besides stay out of the way. It sounded like a good plan to me, except that when I got to Columbia on the first day of summer classes, I found that my course had been dropped. Apparently, there'd been a notice that nobody in my family had bothered to notice.

I thought Aunt Celia would be mad. Or at least concerned. But instead she said, "Well, this could actually solve Elise's problem."

Elise was a friend of Aunt Celia's who lived in the same apartment building. She had a six-year-old daughter.

"I'm sure you're wonderful with children," Aunt Celia told me.

This was an especially strange statement coming from Aunt Celia, who (as far as I could tell) considered the continued existence of children to be something akin to a plague. We have a picture we love to look at in my immediate family, taken right after my brother, Jonathan, was born. It's Aunt Celia's turn to hold him, and from the look on her face and the positioning of her body, you'd think that someone had asked her to cradle a ten-pound turd. Nothing personal against Jonathan – I'm sure she was the same with me. As Jonathan and I grew up, Aunt Celia always gave us presents to "save for later." For my seventh birthday I received a pair of Tiffany candlesticks. For my eighth, it was a matching finger bowl. I freaked out, thinking a finger bowl was meant to hold fingers. (Aunt Celia left the room so my parents could explain.) When I turned thirteen, Aunt Celia actually seemed relieved. She finally stopped maintaining any pretense of treating me like a child, and started treating me like a lesser form of adult instead.

"Aren't you?" she now prompted. "Wonderful? With children?"

I didn't know where we were going with this, but I was sure that if I had no reason to stay in New York,

Aunt Celia would ship me back to suburbia faster than she could dial out for dinner. Even if I found a way to avoid being underfoot, she would be unnerved by the *concept* of me being underfoot.

"I'm wonderful with children," I assured her. Various instances of me "babysitting" Jonathan flashed through my head – we hadn't been allowed to have pets, so I'd often encouraged him to act like one. I thought it best not to mention the particulars of my sitting experience, which, at its most extreme, stopped just short of accidental lobotomy.

"Perfect," she said. Then she picked up her cell phone off the front table, speed-dialed, and told the person on the other end, "Elise, it's Celia. I have a solution for the whole Astrid affair. My nephew . . . yes, Gabriel. The one I was telling you about . . . escaping my sister, yes. Well, it seems that his course has been canceled. And I happen to know he's wonderful with children. A complete charmer. . . . Yes, he's entirely free. . . . I'm sure those hours would be fine. . . . He's delighted. . . . You'll see him then. . . . Yes, it's quite a loaded potato. . . . Absolutely my pleasure!"

She hung up and looked at me like I'd just been checked off a list.

"It's all set," she said. "Although you'll have to dress nicer than that."

"What's all set?" I asked. If I couldn't do it in a T-shirt, I was worried.

"Why, your job. For the next three weeks."

"Which is . . . ?" I coaxed.

She sighed. "To take care of Elise's daughter, Arabella. You'll love her. She's *wonderful.*"

No follow-up questions were possible. With an air kiss and a trail of perfume, Aunt Celia was off.

I started the next morning at eight. My class was supposed to have started at ten, and I'd looked forward to the extra hours of sleep. Instead, Aunt Celia came into my room at seven-fifteen, turned on the lights, released a low-octaved "Be ready by eight," and left before I could see her without the compensations of makeup.

Even after I cured my early-morning dayblindness with two cups of coffee and a shower prolonged by ten minutes of tangential thinking, I still wasn't fully awake when I rang the doorbell of apartment 8C. I looked presentable enough in my button-down shirt and khakis, but my mind felt buttoned-down and khaki as well. I was already starting to resent my new job.

Aunt Celia's friend Elise was three-quarters out the door when she opened it for me.

"You must be Gabriel," she said. "I've heard so much about you. Come in."

Elise was one of those women who exercised so often that she was starting to look like a piece of exercise equipment herself. She walked around the apartment as if she were still on a treadmill, telling me about emergency numbers and people to call and when to expect her back.

"I really appreciate you doing this," she said, putting on her jacket and leading me down a hallway. "Arabella's back here."

Arabella's door was decorated with a framed copy of the unicorn tapestry from The Cloisters. Elise knocked three quick raps into the door, then opened it for me. I was astounded, but not particularly surprised, by the room that was revealed to me. It was everything you might expect from a fairly rich New York City girl named Arabella. It was designed like a *Vogue* version of Disney, with a four-poster bed and no-poster walls. Pink was the dominant color, with blue and green playing the major supporting roles. My attention was caught by a number of wide-eyed dolls relegated to size-order rows on a magisterial display shelf, as if they were about to take a class picture and had dressed for the occasion. This was the room I had never dreamed about as a little boy, and still feared now.

Even though the light in the room was on, Arabella remained under the covers, reading by flashlight. I could

see the beam breaking through the comforter, and could hear the pages turn even as her mother called her name. Finally, as the calling grew more insistent, Arabella emerged. She was not, as I'd expected, sleek and steely like her mother. In fact, she was pudgy and flushed, her hair only making a halfhearted effort at curling. Her expression was sour, her clothing dour, and her anger at being interrupted was palpable. She held up her Berenstain Bears book and said, *"I'm trying to read!"*

Elise took it in stride.

"Well, I'm heading off, Arabella. Gabriel will take care of you until Manolo comes at two. *Comprenez-vous?*"

"Oui."

Arabella didn't seem to pay me any mind, and once her mother left the apartment, I remained standing there awkwardly. Arabella didn't return under her covers, but she continued to use the flashlight over every page.

Stupidly, I hadn't brought any reading material of my own. So I reached for a copy of *Pete's a Pizza,* only to be chastised when I picked it up.

"You should ask first," Arabella said.

I apologized.

"I don't go out until ten," she told me. "You can watch TV if you want."

"Do you mind if I read some of these instead?" I asked, gesturing to her bookshelf.

"Sure," she replied. "Just don't say them out loud."

I started with a few picture books, then found a copy of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and began to read that. Every now and then I'd look up and check on my babysittee. I could see her concentrating on each word of every page; only after a sentence was through would she look at the pictures. It was cool to see reading become such a transparent act – it was as if her face had a different expression for each punctuation mark, and when there was dialogue you could see her actually listening to it in her head. One time she caught me watching her and grimaced. I quickly returned to my own book, and didn't smile or even acknowledge it when she started to take books from the pile that I'd already read.

At precisely ten o'clock, Arabella announced, "It's time to go."

Elise hadn't said anything about whether or not we could leave the building, but I assumed it was okay. Arabella swiftly moved to the front door, undoing the locks and bolts as if they were pieces of an ancient Chinese puzzle. She pointed out the spare keys and then instructed me how to lock up once the door was closed again.

I had always secretly suspected that rich New York City kids acted twice as old as they really were. The

three-year-olds acted six, the six-year-olds acted twelve, the twelve-year-olds partied like they were twenty-four, and each eighteen-year-old took on a thirty-six-year-old's weariness. Because they had seen the city, they felt they'd seen the world. Whereas those of us in the suburbs had simply seen the suburbs.

I will admit: I was still somewhat amazed and intimidated by New York City and its complex hugeness. Back home when I wanted to go somewhere, I jumped in my car and drove there. But the city required the higher math of navigation, factoring in subway grids and bus paths and street maps, so many letters and numbers and names and letter-number combinations and number-name combinations. The basic act of considering a local distance in terms of east, west, north, and south was bizarre to me; those words, I felt, should be used to describe coasts or countries, not a place two blocks over and one block up.

Arabella didn't seem fazed. Even though she was barely taller than the hydrants, she knew exactly where she was going. Since we were near Central Park, I thought we might be heading for the zoo, or a museum, or a playground. It was a perfect July day – sunny, but with the feeling that God had left the windows open.

At the end of the first block, Arabella waited, even though there was a walk sign. I didn't understand, so

after a moment she said to me, a little impatiently, "You need to hold my hand when we cross the street."

Such a strange thing, to hold a six-year-old's hand. Especially a six-year-old you've only just met. A toddler will grab hold of your finger, and someone your own age will clasp on to your whole hand, but with six-year-olds it's something in between, this acknowledgment that they can't be the one to take hold, so you have to do all the holding, folding your hand around theirs, feeling so much bigger and responsible. It's weird and it's scary and it's nice. Neither Arabella nor I said a word, and as soon as we got back to the curb, she pulled away and I let go until the next curb.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"I want to try a new Starbucks," she replied.

"Are you sure you're allowed to go to Starbucks?"

"I go there *all the time*."

Elise had told me to call if there was an emergency, but I figured the prospect of undue caffeination didn't really count as one. In fact, Arabella made it seem like going to Starbucks was the most natural thing in the world, so I followed along. We only had to walk five blocks to hit the nearest one. It was now ten-fifteen, and the morning rush was over. Instead the seats were filled by the daytrippers, the patrons for whom the word *ensconced* was no doubt termed. Laptops were open,

bookmarks were orphaned on tables, and newspapers were set out to be read section by section. An idle idyll. Suddenly I felt more at home.

And then I looked behind the counter.

Now, it has to be one of Starbucks's more brilliant marketing strategies to maintain at least one completely dreamy guy behind the counter at any given shift. This guy is invariably known as Starbucks Boy to the hundreds of regular customers who have a crush on him, and the glory of it is that he always seems just accessible enough to be within reach, but never accessible enough to actually touch. Starbucks Boy wears short sleeves even in the winter, so you can study his arms when you're feeling too shy to stare at his face (in hopes of catching an eye sparkle or a dimple). Depending on the location of the Starbucks, you can imagine that the minute he gets off work, he heads off to rehearse some new songs with his band, or surf the big waves, or shoot an indie film. He is, unlike most beautiful people you've ever encountered, friendly – and you honestly believe it's not because that's a part of his job. He banters with the counter girls relentlessly, whether it's cornrowed Latisha, corn-fed Barbara, or corn-toed Betty. You listen in on their in-jokes, and then think that the way he says "Good morning" or "Have a good one" or "Here you go" to you is a little different from the way he says

it to anyone else. Or at least that's the hope.

The dreamy guy at this Starbucks wasn't working the counter. Instead he was working a broom behind it, smiling as he swept. At first I didn't get the smile, but then I realized he was listening to the radio, to Norah Jones sliding her voice around the notes. In his own way, he was dancing along.

I was so busy not-looking-but-looking that I didn't notice Arabella arrive at the front of the line.

"Can I help you?" the counter girl asked. She was about my age, with her hair pulled into a ponytail and her face pulled into a ponyfront.

Suddenly, Arabella became shy. She leaned into me and whispered, "I want a vanilla mocha decaf latte but with no mocha."

I figured the counter girl had heard, but instead of punching it in, she stared at me. So I said, "She'd like a vanilla mocha decaf latte, hold the mocha."

"You mean like a vanilla steamer?" the bored barista asked.

"No!" Arabella shouted. "I want a vanilla mocha decaf latte, *hold the mocha!*"

"One vanilla mocha decaf latte, hold the mocha," the bore-ista repeated.

Arabella pulled on my shirt. I leaned down and she whispered, "I have my purple cup." She rummaged

through the small Hello Kitty purse she'd brought and pulled it out.

I could sense a stop to the sweeping, and could imagine Starbucks Boy finally noticing me as I said to the counter girl, "And would you mind putting it in this purple cup?"

"I'm sorry, we can only refill Starbucks mugs," she said.

I looked down to Arabella and saw she was on the verge of an outburst.

"C'mon," I said.

The barista looked offended by this plea – I was violating the Starbucks Code of Customer Behavior. But she would be violating the Starbucks Code of Employee Behavior to tell me to piss off, so we were at a standstill.

Arabella chimed in with a "Pleeeeeeeease," and that's what did it. Starbucks Boy leaned in, took the cup out of my hand, and said, "No problem."

Then he smiled. At me. The kind of smile that feels like there's a wink attached to it.

I ordered an iced chai, then paid with my hard-earned (well, unearned parental) dollars. Arabella and I shifted over to the pickup counter, where Starbucks Boy was already waiting with her vanilla milk. Frustratingly, a Starbucks Boy never wears a name tag, so you just have to imagine his name is Dalton or Troy or Dylan. As my

Starbucks Boy handed Arabella her drink, I observed that he gave her the same smile he gave me. I realized how stupid I was being, thinking his attentions were anything more than routine. Then, when he handed over my drink and our hands accidentally touched, I forgot that realization entirely.

Arabella picked out one of the superlong straws to sip her milk with, and I drank the minute's worth of liquid that had been given to me with an afternoon's worth of ice cubes. When we were finished, I stole one last glance at Starbucks Boy, who was making some foam. I almost went up and purchased a mini bundt cake just to get another view, then I dismissed myself as too silly for words (this was a full conversation in my head) and ushered Arabella (who'd lost interest in her drink after six carefully spaced sips) outside. I proposed a stop at the Central Park Zoo, and she acted like she was humoring me by saying yes.

I found myself wanting to impress her, like we were on a date. I rattled off facts about polar bears and penguins, and was excited when she seemed mildly interested. She started asking me the names of each of the animals – not their scientific names, but their proper names, like Freezy or Gertrude. I gave her the answers, making them up as we went along, and it took a good dozen species before Arabella figured out I was kidding.