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Opening extract from

Denton Little's Death Date

Written by

Lance Rubin

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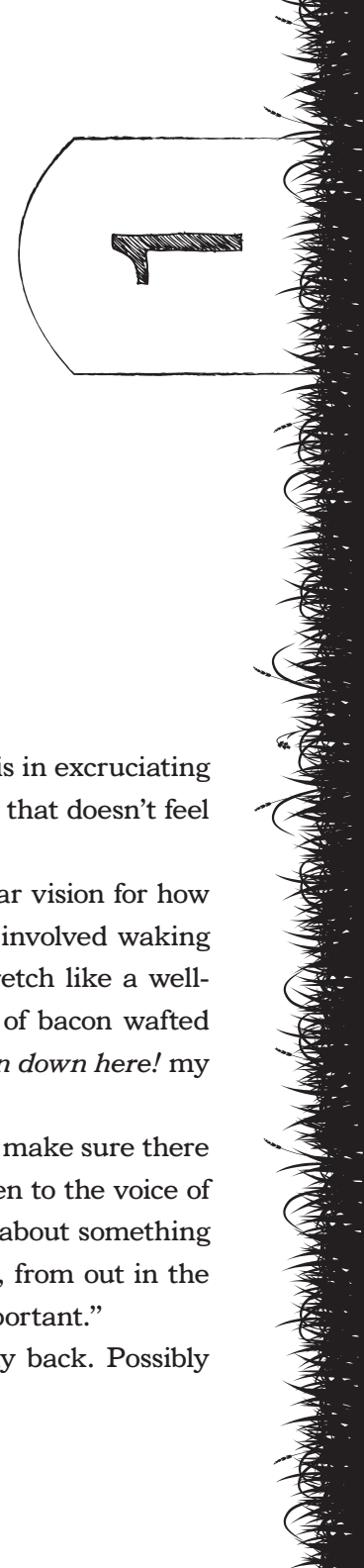

I don't think this is my bed.

It's hard to know for sure, as my head is in excruciating pain, but there's something about this bed that doesn't feel like me. It's got extra fluff.

This is disappointing. I had a very clear vision for how the day of my funeral would start, and it involved waking up in my own bed. I would yawn and stretch like a well-rested comic strip character as the smell of bacon wafted up from downstairs. *There's so much bacon down here!* my stepmom would shout.

But instead, I'm swiping at my skull to make sure there aren't any knives sticking out of it as I listen to the voice of some lady who's not my stepmom talking about something that is not bacon. "Nothing yet," she says, from out in the hallway. "Yes, trust me, I know this is important."

Ow. Something's lumped up under my back. Possibly

my old faithful companion, Blue Bronto. Maybe this *is* my bed after all!

Nope.

It's a pink koala.

I have never owned a pink koala.

"Well, I'm doing everything I can," the woman in the hallway says.

Of course. It's Paolo's mom. I'm in Paolo's house.

I make a halfhearted attempt at sitting up, and as the room slowly spins, I look around. My eye lands on a poster for the National Sarcasm Society. LIKE WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT, it reads under the logo.

This is not Paolo's room.

It's a room I've been in approximately three times before, the room of Paolo's older-but-not-by-much sister, Veronica. So: I just woke up on the day of my funeral in my best friend's sister's bed. This was never part of my plan.

"Denton . . . Are you awake in there?" Paolo's mom says from just outside the door.

I shoot back down and pull the blanket up over my head. She doesn't seem to care that I'm in her daughter's room, but I'd prefer to hide.

"No, he's still out cold," she says as she walks away.

I shrug the blanket off, noticing a Band-Aid on my right index finger. I have no idea why it's there. I must have hurt my finger.

At least my critical thinking skills are firing on all cylinders.

I need to mobilize. I turn onto my stomach, and my face mashes deep into the pillow, getting a full-on blast

of girl smell. The scent—a mysterious amalgam of soap, peaches, and . . . mint?—travels up my nasal passages and slams into my brain.

Wait.

Veronica's face appears in my mind, speaking as she gets within kissing distance: "It's just because I feel bad for you."

I remember. I made out with my best friend's sister in my best friend's sister's bed last night. That's incredibly exciting.

But waitasecond. I have a girlfriend. A girlfriend who is not Veronica.

I lift up the covers and look down at myself. My plaid shirt is unbuttoned. Thankfully, I am still wearing jeans. But pants or not, I have completely betrayed my girlfriend, Taryn. Who I really like. Her face pops into my brain: "You're really cool and great and fun, but I don't think I can do this."

Hold on.

Did my girlfriend dump me last night? I put my hands on my face and joggle my head back and forth, hoping to ease my brain-pain and settle my thoughts into some logical arrangement.

She totally did.

I made out with Veronica and got dumped by Taryn last night. Hopefully not in that order.

My headache pulses. My mouth is sand.

"Don't be *ridiculous,*" I hear Paolo's mom say in a sharp tone. "He's just gonna mess this up." Her intensity is sobering, but only for a fleeting second.

Time to go. I roll to the other side of the bed. A rotting-fruit smell collides with my nose, and I vomit. Right on Veronica's pillow.

Oh man. Through throw-up tears, I see an almost-empty bottle of peach schnapps on the carpet near the bed. Gross.

I hear a scary buzz from under the covers, and I spring into action, legs scrambling wildly as I propel myself back against the thin metal columns of Veronica's headboard. Approximately two seconds later, I realize the buzz was my phone, and not some sort of hostile bug.

I am a cool, manly dude.

Hey you awake yet? Paolo has texted.

Yes. You in your room? I text back, wondering if he's writing to me from across the hall. As I wait for a response, I push the vomit-pillow onto the floor, where it lands amongst a tiny village of bags and crates, detritus from Veronica's first year at college. She just got home a few days ago.

Ha no we got school today bro, Paolo texts. *Well you don't haha.*

Right. Of course I don't.

Because my funeral is at 2 p.m. this afternoon.

For the first time since opening my eyes, I don't think about what I'm doing in this room, what happened last night, or when the construction crew in my brain is going to let up.

What I think is: *Tomorrow is the day I'm going to die.*

2

I don't mean to be dramatic about it. Well, I do, because I think it's funny and it makes people uncomfortable, which I like, but it's really not that dramatic.

People have known that tomorrow is the day I will die since I was born. Just like almost everyone else in the world knows the date when they will die, thanks to the group of doctors, scientists, statisticians, and astrologers led by the Nobel Prize–winning, featured-in-every-science-textbook-ever Herman Mortensky, who pioneered the field of Astro-ThanatoGenetics (ATG).

Is it still weird and anxiety-provoking that my death-date is tomorrow? Hell to the yes. But do I need to get movie-preview-voice-over-guy intense about it? Probably not. Which isn't to say people shouldn't feel bad for me if they want. In my entire senior class at MHS, there are only three kids with deathdates during high school, and one of them is me. The other two are Ashley Miller, who

died from a weird brain thing during our freshman year, and Paolo, my best friend, whose deathdate is twenty-six days after mine. Delightful coincidence, right? Best friends dying within one month of each other! I'd think that, too, if I didn't know that our close deathdates are a big part of why we became friends in the first place.

During our first week of kindergarten, I was minding my own business in the book corner, reading a story about this bear that bakes a birthday cake for the moon, when suddenly this slightly chubby, smiley little guy was looking over my shoulder. (I guess I was also a little guy at that point, but you get the idea.) At first, I was annoyed, like, *Let me read in peace!* But then he said, "The bear should give the moon a cake for his deathday, too," which struck me as the funniest thing ever on so many levels, just the wisest, most insightful words I'd ever heard. (In retrospect, it doesn't hit quite as hard, but to a kindergartner, it killed.) (Pun maybe intended.)

We cracked up for a long time, and then we started talking about deathdates. "My mom told me you're an Early," Paolo said. An Early is anyone whose deathdate comes before the age of twenty-one. "Yeah," I said, looking down at the carpet. "Me too!" he said. I was elated. I'd never met another Early before.

So there we were: laughing at the same things and both on the road to being dead before even leaving the public school system. If that's not a solid foundation for friendship, I don't know what is.

My phone buzzes again, and this time I'm only terrified for the briefest of milliseconds.

Everyone is talking about your funeral, texts Paolo. *Gonna be a good turnout dude! Hope you're feeling ok haha man you were WASTED last night. So proud*

So I can now definitively say that this horrible headache/dry-mouth/overall badness of feeling is a hangover. My first ever, how exciting. And just in time.

I've had the past week off from school, though of course I could have stopped attending way before that. But then it would have been me hanging out in my empty house or with my parents when they're not at work. No thanks! At least Paolo's played hooky with me the past few days, both because he's a good friend and in anticipation of his own earthly departure. (I remember now that he said he was going to school today to "build some good buzz" for my funeral.)

Most people spend their DeathWeek doing the things they most love to do. For people my age, that often amounts to a crazy spring-break-style marathon of mindlessness. I'm not against that, but it's not exactly my style, and drinking has never really appealed to me. It was only Paolo's strong persuasive abilities ("Don't you wanna know what it feels like?") that finally convinced me to ditch our original plan to go movie-hopping (one of our favorite pastimes, already featured earlier during my DeathWeek) in favor of hanging around in Paolo's house and enjoying the now-gone peach schnapps. (As well as, apparently, the now-gone Veronica.)

I don't know if I should feel encouraged or nervous or what that most of my high school will be at my funeral. If we're going to be brutally honest, people are probably

"talking about my funeral" because they're excited it's going to get them out of eighth period and end the school day early.

There's also the whole Veronica-Taryn situation. If this is that "blackout drunk" thing kids are always talking about, I'm not a fan, as it would be helpful to go into my funeral knowing who I made out with, who I broke up with, and anything else I did that's awesome/horrible.

What exactly happened last night? Paolo's mom had told me earlier in the evening that she would give me a ride home so that I could spend my last guaranteed night of life in my own bed. I had planned to start my funeral day—today—with a morning run to clear my head. That's not happening. Not to mention that my stepmom is probably freaking out that I chose to sleep somewhere other than under her roof.

"Okay, Dent . . . You awake yet?" Paolo's mom says from just outside the door.

"Morning," I say. "I'll, uh, be out in a minute."

"Oh!"

I realize now she was actually speaking to the door of Paolo's room, across the hallway. Until I just responded from Veronica's room. My b.

"Didn't know you were in V's room, sorry about that!" she continues, sounding as chipper and friendly as ever. Why *she* is apologizing to *me* for my being in her daughter's bed, I have no idea. Until I remember that my dying tomorrow may be a strong incentive for people to treat me well today.

"Not a problem! Just wanna, uh . . ." I'm staring at Veronica's semi-ironic Smurfs pillowcase lying on the floor.

Some of my throw-up has caked into Papa Smurf's beard. " . . . make the bed and stuff."

"Sounds good. I have some Tylenol out here, in case you need it."

"Okay, great. Thanks, Cynthia."

I hobble out of bed, make it to the bathroom, look in the mirror, dislike what I see, splash water on my face, try to barf some more in the toilet, sort of succeed, grab some toilet paper, wet it, attempt to clean up Veronica's pillow, sort of succeed, decide instead to take the pillowcase off, throw it into the closet, return the bare pillow to Veronica's bed, and make said bed, feeling a sense of victory when the comforter reaches all the way past the pillows, making it seem like I'd never even been here.

As I survey my work, I notice a piece of paper on Veronica's nightstand. *Off to work,* it says, in Veronica's delightfully feminine and loopy handwriting. *That was fun. Kinda. Make my bed please. See you at the funeral.*

I smile at this note, the kindest words Veronica has ever directed at me. I've always thought our aggressive banter masked a genuine affection for each other. But I am wrong about a lot of things. So it's possible these words, and our making out, came purely from a place of pity.

And why not? I pity me, too. I've spent so much of my life trying to be one of those guys who are so *chill* and *cool* with everything that happens, able to roll with anything, my death most of all. I've prided myself on impressing people with how mature and accepting I am of my situation. ("Wow, you have such a great perspective on it; it's really amazing.") After all the hours of death counseling, I'd come to think that, as my death got closer, I would only

grow more accepting—more resigned to my fate. But in this moment, with my funeral hours away and Veronica's note in my hand, I don't feel very *chill* or *cool* about any of it. Emotions mingle with my still-very-much-existent hangover, overloading my body's circuitry. I throw up on Veronica's comforter.

3

"Well, look who decided to come home and spend some time with his family on his last day," my stepmom says to me seconds after I cross the threshold of our house, as if she's been perched by the door for hours, a patient eagle waiting to sink its talons into an unsuspecting fish. "It's already past eleven."

"Hi, Mom," I say, failing in my efforts to keep out any guilty inflection. "Sorry I ended up staying at Paolo's last night. I really meant to come back here. But then we . . ." I rifle desperately through my brain-files for any shred of last-night memory I can safely insert into this sentence.

"Oh," my stepmom interjects, "I talked to Cynthia this morning. I know all about what went on in that house."

Yipes. Care to fill me in?

"And I understand," she continues. "Don't like it, but I understand. Apology accepted, my sweet son."

"Thanks, Mom. And this isn't exactly my last day; we've got all tomorrow to be together, too, so . . ."

"Yes, but we don't know *how much* of tomorrow we have. You could be gone minutes after midnight tonight."

"Thanks for the reminder."

"Oh, Denton," my stepmom says, starting to get a little tearful and bringing me in for a huge hug, which is actually not unwelcome at this moment. "I never wanted this day to come. I love you so much."

"I know. I love you, too."

My stepmom sniffs my neck. "You smell like liquor."

"What?"

She pulls back to look at me, her hands on my shoulders like they're a steering wheel. I can tell she wants to lecture me on the dangers of underage drinking but realizes that's pointless. "You look terrible, Denton."

My stepmom has never been as chill as Paolo's mom (I'm required to text her any slight change in my plans, our house has a strict no-junk-food policy, and I had to wait until I actually turned seventeen to watch R-rated movies), but I think that's because she cares about me so much. She's insanely supportive in a bajillion ways, which, considering I'm not her son by blood, makes me feel lucky.

"I'm really fine, Mom." Which is almost true. The combination of the repetitive, involuntary cleansing of my system and Paolo's mom's magical Tylenol has worked wonders.

"Well, go take a shower. We'll eat in a half hour."

"Are you rhyming on purpose?"

"What?"

"Guess not."

"I have to go check on your father," my stepmom says, and she glides deeper into the house and up the stairs to their bedroom. I find myself staring at the framed family photo, taken years ago at my aunt Bess's wedding, that sits on the white table in the foyer. I've always enjoyed trying to find some resemblance between my stepmom and me that might convince people we're actually related.

I was convinced myself for a number of years, until my dad sat me down for a little talk when I was eight and told me that my biological mom died giving birth to me. It sorta blew my mind.

"Wait, so who's my mom?"

"She died."

"Yeah, no, but I mean, who's the lady I know?"

"Oh, Raquel, right, she's your stepmom. I got married to her when you were three."

"But some other lady had me."

"Right."

"Were you married to that lady?"

"Cheryl, yes, I was."

"Did you love her?"

"I did, yes."

"Was it sad when she died?"

"It was."

My actual mom's deathdate fell on my birthdate, which is poetic in a way, but mainly just sad. Some days I feel guilty and responsible for my mom's death. My dad did imply that my conception was "sort of an accident," but he also said my mom was really excited that she would have a second child before she died. Apparently, she was nervous up until the moment I was born, though, worrying that she

would end up dying from complications before I came out or that her deathdate would also be mine.

Once I knew the deal, I wanted to stop calling my stepmom Mom, but my dad said that wasn't an option. And I'm glad he did. For all intents and purposes, Raquel is my mom, and I love her like one. In fact, anytime someone even utters the word *mom,* it's her reddish-brown, chin-length hair, her jangly pendant necklaces, and the perpetually hopeful yet disapproving expression on her face that come to mind. At her most annoying moments, does it occur to me that my actual mother might have been more relaxed, more like Paolo's mom? Sure. But at the end of the day, Raquel's my mom. And I feel bad for her that she's about to lose a son.

"Dentooon," my stepmom calls from upstairs in her typical singsongy way.

"Yes?"

"Do you need help picking out what to wear?"

"Nope, I'm fine," I half shout so she can hear me. "I'm just gonna wear my suit. Like we talked about."

"You and Raquel talk about suits?" says my older brother, Felix, suddenly appearing, in a suit of his own.

"Always."

"Us, too. Sometimes I'll give her a random call between classes just to talk about button variations. But then we end up talking for hours, I miss class, and my professors get mad at me."

I'm ninety-six percent sure he's joking. "That's lame. I feel like law school should be more supportive of your right to discuss menswear with your stepmom."

"I know, right?"

"Yeah."

"How are you doing?" He pulls me into a hug.

"I'm all right."

Felix is nine years older than me, and I honestly don't know him that well. I was eight when he went away to college, and he's only home about five days a year. That's not an exaggeration. Partly because there's this ever-present, low-level friction between him and my stepmom (his stepmom, too), but also because he lives in the city and is always busy. I feel flattered that he's here now. I assumed he would make it to my funeral, but I really wasn't sure.

He pulls himself back to look at me, almost fully replicating my stepmom's pose from moments ago. I feel like it's going to be a popular one today.

"It's gonna be okay," he says, staring into my eyes with an intensity I don't think I've ever seen from him. It makes me uncomfortable. "You know that, right?"

"I . . . guess so. . . ."

"Wait, look at me."

"Okay."

"Life works in strange ways sometimes."

"Right." He means well, but it's irritating. "Kinda easy to say when you're gonna live to be sixty-two, but right."

"Yeah, I know. This is a challenging time. Let yourself feel that."

"Can you not lecture me right now?"

"I'm not lecturing; I'm trying to help you. I'm sure your death counselor has told you—"

"My death counselor is a weird-smelling old dude!" Who happens to have been genuinely helpful to me in the past months. But I'm eager to end this conversation any

way I can. Anger is not something I do often or well, so I usually greet it like a moth that's landed on my shirt: shake it off shake it off shake it OFF!

"Whoa, all right, Dent," Felix says, his hands in the air. "It's all good."

"I need to go get dressed," I say, avoiding his eyes and heading up the stairs. I guess even as you approach the end of your life, your family can still annoy the crap out of you.