Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Are We There Yet?

written by

David Levithan

published by

Harper Collins

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

DEPARTURE



The phone rings at an ungodly hour. Elijah looks at the blur of his clock as he reaches for the sound. Eleven in the morning on a Saturday. Who can be calling him at eleven in the morning on a Saturday? Cal, his best friend, stirs from somewhere on the floor. Elijah picks up the phone and murmurs a greeting.

"Oh goodness, did I wake you?" Elijah's mother asks, her voice so much louder than the dream he'd been having.

"No, no," he says, disguising his own voice to sound awake. "Not at all."

"Good, because I have some great news for you..."

His mother is talking about Italy and Elijah's brother Danny and luxury accommodations. He thinks his brother has won a prize on a game show or something. Cal starts hitting his sneaker like it's a snooze button. He tells her to go back to sleep.

"What did you say?" his mother asks. "Will you go?"

"Does Danny want me to go?"

Elijah doubts highly that Danny wants him to go.

"Of course he does."

Elijah still doubts that Danny wants him to go.

Cal is awake now, rubbing her eyes. Elijah's boarding school frowns on having overnight guests, but Elijah doesn't really care if it frowns.

Elijah covers the receiver and whispers to Cal, "It's my mom. I think she wants to know if I want to go to Italy with my brother."

Cal shrugs, then nods.

That's enough for Elijah.

"Sure, Mom," he says. "And thanks."



Elijah always says thank you, and oftentimes says please.

"You're such a relic," Cal will taunt him playfully.

"Thank you," Elijah will reply.

Elijah learned quickly that saying thank you garners a variety of reactions. Some people (like his brother) can't handle it. Other people (like Cal) are amused. Most people are impressed, whether consciously or not. He'll be offered the last slice of pizza, or the last hit from the bong.

"You're a relic, not a saint," Cal will continue, dragging him to the next party, parties called *gatherings*, dances called *raves*. Where she leads, he will follow. She tousles his blond-brown hair and buys him blue sunglasses. He playfully disapproves of her random boyfriends and girlfriends, and gives her flowers for no reason. They smoke pot, but not cigarettes. At the end of most parties, they can be found woozily collecting cans and bottles for the recycling bin.

Elijah had planned to spend the summer hanging out with Cal and their other friends in Providence. At first, his parents weren't too thrilled about the idea. ("Hang out?" his mother said. "Sweetheart, *laundry* hangs out.") Now he's being sent to Italy for nine days.

"I'm going to miss you," Cal says a few nights before Elijah is scheduled to leave. They are walking home from a midnight movie at the Avon. The June night is warm and cool, as only June nights can be. The air is scored by the faint whir of cars passing elsewhere. Elijah inhales deeply and takes hold of Cal's hand. Her hair – dyed raven black – flutters despite itself.

"I love it here," Elijah says. He is not afraid to say it. "I love it here, this moment, everything." He stops looking at the sky and turns to Cal.

"Thank you," he whispers.

Cal holds his hand tighter. They walk together in silence. When they get back to school, they find four of their friends on the common room's lime-green couch. Mindy, Ivan, Laurie and Sue are playing spin the bottle – just to be playful, just to be kissed. The moment shifts; Elijah is still happy, but it's a different happiness. A daylight happiness, a lightbulb happiness. Cal arches her eyebrow, Elijah laughs, and together they join the game.

Elijah is the first to grow unconquerably tired, the first to call it a night. Cal is still laughing, changing the CD, flirting with the lava lamp. Elijah says his goodnights and is given goodnights in return. The world already misfocusing. He makes his way to bed.

Ten minutes later, there are two knocks from the hallway. The door opens and Cal appears, brightness behind her. It is time for their ritual, their nightly ritual, which Elijah thought Cal had forgotten. Sometimes she does, and that's OK. But tonight she

is in the room. Elijah moves over in his bed and Cal lies down beside him.

"Do you wonder...?" she begins. This is their game – D*o you wonder*? Every night – every night when it's possible – the last thing to be heard is the asking without answer. They stare at the glow-in-the-dark planets on the ceiling, or turn sideways to trace each other's blue-black outlines, trying to detect the shimmer of silver as they speak.

This night, Cal asks, "Do you wonder if we'll ever learn to sleep with our eyes open?"

And in return, Elijah asks, "Do you think there can be such a thing as too much happiness?"

This is Elijah's favourite time. He rarely knows what he is going to say, and then suddenly it's there. Above them. Lifting.

A few minutes pass. Cal sits up and puts her hand on Elijah's shoulder.

"Goodnight, sleep tight," she whispers.

"Don't let the bedbugs bite," he chimes, nestling deeper under the covers.

Cal smiles and returns to the party. Elijah rearranges his pillows and fits himself within the sheets. And as he does, he wonders. He wonders about goldfish asleep with their eyes open. He wonders about Italy, about his parents, about whether the stars will be brighter in Venice. He hears voices at a distance, the lively sound of voices from the common room. Like the spots of colour whenever he closes his eyes. He closes

his eyes. He thinks about what a wonderful friend Cal is. How lucky he is to have such friends, all of his friends. He is happy. He is almost empty with happiness...



As Elijah "hangs out" for the summer, as he smokes and dopes and lazes and does who knows what else (according to his brother), Danny toils and roils away at Gladner, Gladner, Smith & Jones. The two senior Gladners (of no relation – they sat next to each other at Harvard Business School) have taken Danny under their wingtips. Their secretary saves him a seat in the boardroom and provides him with an ample supply of Mark Cross pens. He walks the halls with a boy-wonder halo, the recipient of enough gratitude to deflect all but the pettiest begrudgements. He is twenty-three years old.

People at work pay attention to Danny Silver because he single-thoughtedly saved the Miss Jane's Homemade Petite Snack Cakes account (Gladner, Gladner's largest). Danny specialises in crisis control, and the crisis faced by Miss Jane's was a doozy: a bored and crusading *Washington Post* reporter discovered that the neon-pink frosting on Miss Jane's most popular snack cake ("the Divine") was made with the same ingredients as the nation's bestselling lipstick ("Pink Nightshade"). Consumers were not pleased. Miss Jane's stock plummeted; the company's profits seemed poised to go the way of a dung-coated Twinkie.

Enter Danny Silver. (Imagine this to be a grand entrance – the boardroom door opens, Miss Jane's directors all turn in unison to see their fair-haired saviour. In truth, Danny Silver first appeared to the cupcake conspirators via e-mail, and his hair isn't fair. But the effect was the same.) While others advised refusal and rebuttal, Danny suggested humility and humour. A press conference was announced, during which the company president expressed shock and dismay, and pledged an overhaul of the Divine, wherein the frosting would be made from purely organic sources. He also made clear that the rest of the snack cakes in the Miss Jane's family were "one hundred per cent cosmetic-free." As soon as Danny heard the reporters laugh with this, he knew everything would be OK.

But OK wasn't good enough. The company had to emerge triumphant.

In a mere thirty-nine hours, Danny had come up with his masterstroke. It came to him as he paced his Upper East Side apartment, throwing clothes into the hamper, figuring out which kind of pasta to boil for dinner. (He loves to tell this story; it's one of his best stories.) As Danny paced, he thought of cakes, cream fillings, cafeterias and childhood. The idea appeared. It wove itself brilliantly within him. He did not hesitate. He called Jones, who called Smith, who paged Gladner, who woke up Gladner at his girlfriend's apartment in the Village. Three hours later, the bigwigs gathered – a war room – as Danny bounced among them. A conference call was placed to "Miss Jane" (aka

Arthur Swindland, 61, renowned throughout the world for his collection of celebrity polo sticks).

A scant two weeks later, America and Europe witnessed Miss Jane's First Annual Bake Sale. (The rest of the world would continue to eat lipstick frosting.) Miss Jane's employees and certain grandmothers-for-hire set up tables in supermarkets across the land, all selling snack cakes. The profits would go to the newly formed Miss Jane's Homemade Petite Snack Cake Centre for World Peace. Katie Couric herself bought a snack cake on live television. Oprah invited Miss Jane to be her guest on a programme stressing "corporate responsibility in the kinder, gentler age." (When Mrs Silver saw this show, she knew her son had arrived. Making corporate billions was one thing – but to be on *Oprah*! was true accomplishment. Elijah didn't bother to watch.) Miss Jane (née Mr Swindland) was so impressed with Danny that he earmarked .01% of the MJHPSCCWP's profits to the charity of Danny's choice. (The rest would be distributed to Shriners organizations around the world.)

As his star rises, Danny finds himself working longer and longer hours. By the time he leaves the office, the wastebaskets have been emptied and the floors have been vacuumed. He has begun to forget what his apartment looks like. (His friends might say the same about him.) Gladner and Gladner (both devotees of Ted Newness, the management guru) tell Danny they will give him a raise – as long as he takes a vacation in the month of July.

Three days later, Mrs Silver calls with her offer.

Danny Silver doesn't doubt for a second that he's being tricked into taking a trip to Italy.

"It's all *prepaid*," his mother proclaims. "I know this is such short notice. But I just don't think that your father can go. Italy isn't a place for sitting. And his leg – well, you know your father's leg. We had hoped it would be OK by now. But who can know such things?"

Danny's father is fine. The day before, he played eighteen holes of golf.

"How are you feeling, Pop?" Danny asks once his mother has passed over the phone.

"Oh, I don't know. The leg's been acting up."

"But you were playing golf yesterday."

"Yes, yes, yes. I must have overextended myself. A damn shame. About Italy, I mean. But Mom tells me you and Elijah are going to go..."

Aha, Danny thinks. *The hitch*.

There is a whisper and a shuffling noise as Mrs Silver takes back the phone.

"I know, I know," Danny's mom says as her husband recedes to the couch. "I hadn't mentioned that part. But it's only fair. We have two tickets. Two sons. And it's prepaid. Nonrefundable. Your father can't go. So I can't go."

"Ask the Himmelfarbs," Danny offers. "They're your best friends, after all."

"The *Himmelfarbs*? Do you know how much this trip costs?" Mrs Silver takes a deep breath. "No. You and Elijah should take the tickets. It's a week. Nine days."

Nine days with Elijah. Nine days with Quiet Boy, Mr Virtue, Boy Misunderstood. Elijah, who never seemed to change. Not since he was ten or so and started to grow quiet. His mind seems to be working on two levels at once – *pass the salt* and *contemplate the pureness of the clouds*. He is always dazed, and he is always kind. Faultlessly kind.

Danny can't stand it.

"Have you asked Elijah how he feels about this?" Danny is hoping that Elijah might still say no. Since Elijah is still in high school and Danny is in the Working World, the two of them rarely have to see each other.

"Yes," his mother replies. "He thinks it's a great idea."

Danny can hear his father chuckle in the background. He can imagine his father giving his mother a thumbs-up sign and his mother smiling. *Prepaid. No refunds.*

His mother continues. "It's over the week of July Fourth. You'd only have to take six days off from work. And you haven't been *anywhere* this year."

"OK, OK, OK," Danny relents. He wonders if it counts as being tricked if he knows what's really going on.

"You'll go?"

Danny smiles. "There is nothing in the world I would rather do."

There is still a chance that Elijah will back out...



But no.

At one in the morning the night before departure, Danny wakes up with a start.

He hasn't talked to Elijah since their mother made the offer. He should have talked to him, and has tried to, but whenever he's called, someone else has answered. Probably some pothead incapable of taking a message. Danny wants to be well-Fodored and well-Frommered by the time he sets down on Italian soil. But what will Elijah want to do? What does Elijah *normally* do?

I'll have to talk to him. For a week. Nine days.

But about what?

How's life? (Two-minute answer.) *How's school?* (Five minutes, tops.) *How's life with the dope fiends?* (Maybe not a minute – maybe just a Look.) *What do you want to do today?* (That one could stretch out – maybe twenty minutes each day, depending on the repetition of shrugs.) *So isn't this a fine mess we're in?* (Rhetorical – no help.)

Danny gets out of bed, switches on the light and squints. He counts his traveller's checks; he's bringing extra spending

money, assuming Elijah won't have any. He takes out the list of gifts he has to buy, makes sure it's in his wallet, and makes sure his wallet is on the bureau by the keys.

He knows he is missing something. He is always missing something. He can never get past the first step of finding it, which is knowing what it is.

He stays up most of the night, doing things like this. He doesn't want to forget anything. And, more than that, he wants to think of something to say.



Seven years apart. Danny can remember the moment his father called to say Elijah had been born. Elijah can't picture Danny younger than ten, except from the photographs that hung around the house long after Danny left for college.

They never had to share a room, except when they went down to the shore. Spending the day by the pool, broken by stretches of playing on the beach. Danny was the Master Builder of sandcastles, Elijah his ready First Assistant. No two castles were the same, and in that way no two days were ever the same. One day would bring the Empire State Building, the next a dragon. Danny always sketched it first on the surface of the beach. Then Elijah dug, providing sand and more sand and more and more sand until he hit the water beneath and had to move a little bit over to start again. As Danny created windows out of Popsicle sticks and towers out of turned-over buckets, Elijah would wander wide to collect shells. Sometimes the shells would be decoration and other times they would become the residents of the castle. Extended shell families, each with a name and a story. As Danny dipped his hand in water to pat the walls smooth, Elijah would explain what went on inside, making

the shape and the hour more real than Danny could have ever made alone.

There would always be extra shells, and at night Elijah would line them up on the dresser, sometimes according to size, sometimes according to colour. Then he would crawl into his bed and Danny would crawl only two feet away into his own bed. From there, Danny would read Elijah a story. Whatever older-kid books Danny was reading – Narnia being chronicled, time being wrinkled – he would send through the stillness to his brother. This was supposed to put Elijah to sleep, but it never did. He always wanted to find out where his brother would take him next.



Cal drives Elijah down from Providence in her bitchin' Camaro. It was buck-naked white until she and Elijah covered it with the primary-colour handprints of all their friends. It's a 1979 model, the transmission is crap, and it goes from 0 to 60 in just under four minutes. But, man, once it gets to 60! The Camaro is, joyously, a convertible. Cal and Elijah zoom down I-95, blasting pop from the year of the car's birth, swerving from lane to lane. When they can hear each other over the wind and the music, they speak Connecticut: I *will not* Stamford *this type of behaviour.* What's Groton *into you?* What *did* Danbury *his* Hartford? New Haven *can wait.* Darien't *no place I'd rather be.*

As they reach the New York state line, Elijah feels the urge to turn back. He can't pinpoint why. It seems the wrong time to be leaving. He doesn't want to step out of the present, this present. Because once he does, there will be college applications and college acceptances (just one will do) and the last of everything (last class, last party, last night, last day, last goodbye), and then the world will change forever and he will go to college and eventually become an adult. That is not what he wants. He does not want those complications, that change. Not now.

He tells himself to get a grip. Cal is driving him forward. Cal and everyone else will be here when he returns. It's like he's travelling into another dimension. Time here will stop. Because he is entering Family Standard Time. None of it will carry over to Cal, to the Camaro, to the state of Connecticut.

He will go with his brother. He will have a good time. Life will be waiting for him when he gets back. Not a bad deal.

Elijah smiles at Cal. But Cal isn't looking. Then she turns to him as if she knows. She smiles back and blasts the music louder.