This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Silver Linings Play Book

Matthew Quick

An Infinite Amount of Days Until My Inevitable Reunion with Nikki

I don't have to look up to know Mom is making another surprise visit. Her toenails are always pink during the summer months, and I recognize the flower design imprinted on her leather sandals; it's what Mom purchased the last time she signed me out of the bad place and took me to the mall.

Once again, Mother has found me in my bathrobe, exercising unattended in the courtyard, and I smile because I know she will yell at Dr. Timbers, asking him why I need to be locked up if I'm only going to be left alone all day.

"Just how many push-ups are you going to do, Pat?" Mom says when I start a second set of one hundred without speaking to her.

"Nikki—likes—a—man—with—a—developed—upper—body," I say, spitting out one word per push-up, tasting the salty sweat lines that are running into my mouth.

The August haze is thick, perfect for burning fat.

Mom just watches for a minute or so, and then she shocks me. Her voice sort of quivers as she says, "Do you want to come home with me today?"

I stop doing push-ups, turn my face up toward Mother's, squint through the white noontime sun—and I can immediately tell she is serious, because she looks worried, as if she is making a mistake, and that's how Mom looks when she means something she has said and isn't just talking like she always does for hours on end whenever she's not upset or afraid.

"As long as you promise not to go looking for Nikki again," she adds, "you can finally come home and live with me and your father until we find you a job and get you set up in an apartment."

I resume my push-up routine, keeping my eyes riveted to the shiny black ant scaling a blade of grass directly below my nose, but my peripheral vision catches the sweat beads leaping from my face to the ground below.

Copyright © Matthew Quick 2009
Published by Picador

"Pat, just say you'll come home with me, and I'll cook for you and you can visit with your old friends and start to get on with your life finally. Please. I need you to want this. If only for me, Pat. Please."

Double-time push-ups, my pecs ripping, growing—pain, heat, sweat, change.

I don't want to stay in the bad place, where no one believes in silver linings or love or happy endings, and where everyone tells me Nikki will not like my new body, nor will she even want to see me when apart time is over. But I am also afraid the people from my old life will not be as enthusiastic as I am now trying to be.

Even still, I need to get away from the depressing doctors and the ugly nurses—with their endless pills in paper cups—if I am ever going to get my thoughts straight, and since Mom will be much easier to trick than medical professionals, I jump up, find my feet, and say, "I'll come live with you just until apart time is over."

While Mom is signing legal papers, I take one last shower in my room and then fill my duffel bag with clothes and my framed picture of Nikki. I say goodbye to my roommate, Jackie, who just stares at me from his bed like he always does, drool running down off his chin like clear honey. Poor Jackie, with his random tufts of hair, oddly shaped head, and flabby body. What woman would ever love him?

He blinks at me. I take this for goodbye and good luck, so I blink back with both eyes—meaning double good luck to you, Jackie, which I figure he understands, since he grunts and bangs his shoulder against his ear like he does whenever he gets what you are trying to tell him.

My other friends are in music relaxation class, which I do not attend, because smooth jazz makes me angry sometimes. Thinking maybe I should say goodbye to the men who had my back while I was locked up, I look into the music-room window and see my boys sitting Indian style on purple yoga mats, their elbows resting on their knees, their palms pressed together in front of their faces, and their eyes closed. Luckily, the glass of the window blocks the smooth jazz from entering my ears. My friends look really relaxed—at peace—so I decide not to interrupt their session. I hate goodbyes.

In his white coat, Dr. Timbers is waiting for me when I meet my mother in the lobby, where three palm trees lurk among the couches and lounge chairs, as if the bad place were in Orlando and not Baltimore. "Enjoy your life," he says to me—wearing that sober look of his—and shakes my hand.

"Just as soon as apart time ends," I say, and his face falls as if I said I was going to kill his wife, Natalie, and their three blond-haired daughters—Kristen, Jenny, and Becky—because that's just how much he does not believe in silver linings, making it his business to preach apathy and negativity and pessimism unceasingly.

But I make sure he understands that he has failed to infect me with his depressing life philosophies—and that I will be looking forward to the end of apart time. I say, "Picture me rollin' " to Dr. Timbers, which is exactly what Danny—my only black friend in the bad place—told me he was going to say to Dr. Timbers when Danny got

Copyright © Matthew Quick 2009

out. I sort of feel bad about stealing Danny's exit line, but it works; I know because Dr. Timbers squints as if I had punched him in the gut.

As my mother drives me out of Maryland and through Delaware, past all those fast-food places and strip malls, she explains that Dr. Timbers did not want to let me out of the bad place, but with the help of a few lawyers and her girlfriend's therapist—the man who will be my new therapist—she waged a legal battle and managed to convince some judge that she could care for me at home, so I thank her.

On the Delaware Memorial Bridge, she looks over at me and asks if I want to get better, saying, "You do want to get better, Pat. Right?"

I nod. I say, "I do."

And then we are back in New Jersey, flying up 295.

As we drive down Haddon Avenue into the heart of Collingswood—my hometown—I see that the main drag looks different. So many new boutique stores, new expensive-looking restaurants, and well-dressed strangers walking the sidewalks that I wonder if this is really my hometown at all. I start to feel anxious, breathing heavily like I sometimes do.

Mom asks me what's wrong, and when I tell her, she again promises that my new therapist, Dr. Patel, will have me feeling normal in no time.

When we arrive home, I immediately go down into the basement, and it's like Christmas. I find the weight bench my mother had promised me so many times, along with the rack of weights, the stationary bike, dumbbells, and the Stomach Master 6000, which I had seen on late-night television and coveted for however long I was in the bad place.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I tell Mom, and give her a huge hug, picking her up off the ground and spinning her around once.

When I put her down, she smiles and says, "Welcome home, Pat."

Eagerly I go to work, alternating between sets of bench presses, curls, machine sit-ups on the Stomach Master 6000, leg lifts, squats, hours on the bike, hydration sessions (I try to drink four gallons of water every day, doing endless shots of H2O from a shot glass for intensive hydration), and then there is my writing, which is mostly daily memoirs like this one, so that Nikki will be able to read about my life and know exactly what I've been up to since apart time began. (My memory started to slip in the bad place because of the drugs, so I began writing down everything that happens to me, keeping track of what I will need to tell Nikki when apart time concludes, to catch her up on my life. But the doctors in the bad place confiscated everything I wrote before I came home, so I had to start over.)

When I finally come out of the basement, I notice that all the pictures of Nikki and me have been removed from the walls and the mantel over the fireplace.

Copyright © Matthew Quick 2009

I ask my mother where these pictures went. She tells me our house was burglarized a few weeks before I came home and the pictures were stolen. I ask why a burglar would want pictures of Nikki and me, and my mother says she puts all of her pictures in very expensive frames. "Why didn't the burglar steal the rest of the family pictures?" I ask. Mom says the burglar stole all the expensive frames, but she had the negatives for the family portraits and had them replaced. "Why didn't you replace the pictures of Nikki and me?" I ask. Mom says she did not have the negatives for the pictures of Nikki and me, especially because Nikki's parents had paid for the wedding pictures and had only given my mother copies of the photos she liked. Nikki had given Mom the other non-wedding pictures of us, and well, we aren't in touch with Nikki or her family right now because it's apart time.

I tell my mother that if that burglar comes back, I'll break his kneecaps and beat him within an inch of his life, and she says, "I believe you would."

My father and I do not talk even once during the first week I am home, which is not all that surprising, as he is always working—he's the district manager for all the Big Foods in South Jersey. When Dad's not at work, he's in his study, reading historical fiction with the door shut, mostly novels about the Civil War. Mom says he needs time to get used to my living at home again, which I am happy to give him, especially since I am sort of afraid to talk with Dad anyway. I remember him yelling at me the only time he ever visited me in the bad place, and he said some pretty awful things about Nikki and silver linings in general. I see Dad in the hallways of our house, of course, but he doesn't look at me when we pass.

Nikki likes to read, and since she always wanted me to read literary books, I start, mainly so I will be able to participate in the dinner conversations I had remained silent through in the past—those conversations with Nikki's literary friends, all English teachers who think I'm an illiterate buffoon, which is actually a name Nikki's friend calls me whenever I tease him about being such a tiny man. "At least I'm not an illiterate buffoon," Phillip says to me, and Nikki laughs so hard.

My mom has a library card, and she checks out books for me now that I am home and allowed to read whatever I want without clearing the material with Dr. Timbers, who, incidentally, is a fascist when it comes to book banning. I start with *The Great Gatsby*, which I finish in just three nights.

The best part is the introductory essay, which states that the novel is mostly about time and how you can never buy it back, which is exactly how I feel regarding my body and exercise—but then again, I also feel as if I have an infinite amount of days until my inevitable reunion with Nikki.

When I read the actual story—how Gatsby loves Daisy so much but can't ever be with her no matter how hard he tries—I feel like ripping the book in half and calling up Fitzgerald and telling him his book is all wrong, even though I know Fitzgerald is probably deceased. Especially when Gatsby is shot dead in his swimming pool the first time he goes for a swim all summer, Daisy doesn't even go to his funeral, Nick and Jordan part ways, and Daisy ends up sticking with racist Tom, whose need for sex basically murders an innocent woman, you can tell Fitzgerald never took the

Copyright © Matthew Quick 2009

time to look up at clouds during sunset, because there's no silver lining at the end of that book, let me tell you.

I do see why Nikki likes the novel, as it's written so well. But her liking it makes me worry now that Nikki doesn't really believe in silver linings, because she says The Great Gatsby is the greatest novel ever written by an American, and yet it ends so sadly. One thing's for sure, Nikki is going to be very proud of me when I tell her I finally read her favorite book.

Here's another surprise: I'm going to read all the novels on her American literature class syllabus, just to make her proud, to let her know that I am really interested in what she loves and I am making a real effort to salvage our marriage, especially since I will now be able to converse with her swanky literary friends, saying things like, "I'm thirty. I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor," which Nick says toward the end of Fitzgerald's famous novel, but the line works for me too, because I am also thirty, so when I say it, I will sound really smart. We will probably be chatting over dinner, and the reference will make Nikki smile and laugh because she will be so surprised that I have actually read *The Great Gatsby*. That's part of my plan, anyway, to de¬liver that line real suave, when she least expects me to "drop knowledge"—to use another one of my black friend Danny's lines.

God, I can't wait.

Copyright © Matthew Quick 2009