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This Beautiful Life

Written by Helen Schulman

Published by Atlantic Books

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THIS BEAUTIFUL LIFE

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Atlantic Books
London

First published in the United States of America in 2011 by HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

First published in trade paperback in Great Britain in 2012 by Atlantic Books, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978 085789 623 0
E-book ISBN: 978 085789 624 7

Designed by Jennifer Ann Daddio/Bookmark Design & Media Inc.

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

For Bruce, Zoe, and Isaac

Lord, give us what you have already given.

— *Ilya Kaminsky, "Envoi"*

THIS BEAUTIFUL LIFE

Her mouth filled the screen. Purple lip gloss, clear braces.

"Still think I'm too young?"

She leaned over, the fixed lens of the camera catching a tiny smattering of blemishes on her cheek, like a comet's spray. Her hair had been bleached white, with long blond roots, and most of it was pulled back and up into a chunky ponytail above the three plastic hoops climbing the rim of her ear.

The song began to play, Beyoncé. *I love to love you, baby.* She stepped aside, revealing her room in all its messy glory. Above the bed was a painting; the central image was a daisy. A large lava lamp bubbled and gooed on the nightstand.

She was giggling offstage. Suddenly, the screen was a swirl of green plaid. Filmstrips of color in knife pleats. Her short skirt swayed along with her round hips. A little roll of ivory fat nestled above the waistband. She wore a white tank top, which she

took off, her hands quickly finding the cups of her black bra. The breasts inside were small, and at first she covered them with her palms, fingers splayed like scallop shells. Then she unhooked the bra in the front and they popped out as if on springs. Her hands did a little fan dance as they reached below her hemline and lifted up her skirt.

She'd done all of this for his benefit. To please him. To prove him wrong. She reached out for the little toy baseball bat and the next part was hard to watch, even if you knew what was coming.

Except it wasn't.

As with so many things of consequence, it all began with a party.

Two parties. Both of Elizabeth Bergamot's children had parties to go to. Jake, the eldest—his longish brown hair suddenly grazing his collarbones, his eyes the color of muddled mint—was on his own that night, of course. His party was up in the Bronx, in Riverdale, somewhere near his school. He was fifteen and a half the previous Friday. It was pretty ridiculous that the Bergamots continued to celebrate this increasingly minor milestone—his half birthday—with half a cake and half a present. Richard, Liz's husband, had started the whole business ten years earlier, when he'd surprised them both by bringing home half a deck of cards that year, the other twenty-six miraculously appearing overnight under the boy's pillow.

"He's five and a half on Cinco de Mayo," Richard had said, by way of explanation. "Is there a better cause for celebration?"

Since the gesture was so touching, so sweet and fatherly, and Richard was a Californian by birth, Liz had trusted him on the import of such things, Mexican things. Plus, it seemed fun—a fun family tradition! It was what Liz had always hungered after despite generations of contrary evidence: relatives as respite, home as haven, a retreat from the rest of the dangerous, damaging world.

Last Friday, *this* Cinco de Mayo, Jake got half a set of car keys in the morning over his Lucky Charms. The true key to the kingdom was to be delivered, along with tuition for driver's ed, on his actual birthday, in November.

But for tonight's party, Jake would have to rely on some cocktail of public transportation—bus, subway, bus, subway, subway, cab—although there was always the possibility that some other love-addled mom like Liz would drive him home. Liz herself was otherwise occupied. It was his job to figure it out.

As Liz watched him hunch over his breakfast (two bowls of cereal, a yogurt, *and* a peanut butter sandwich), it seemed to her that Jake had grown several inches in just those seven days. The curve of his back was so long. It was as if, suddenly, three extra vertebrae had been added to the staircase of his spine. These days, it often seemed to Liz that Jake grew before her eyes, like kudzu maybe, the way he had as an infant, when Richard, a still awe-stricken young father, used to take pictures of him as he slept, in an effort to document the phenomenon, as if Jake were Bigfoot or a UFO.

As for the other kid—Coco, her baby—she would require parental accompaniment to her midget soirée: a six-year-old's birthday, at the Plaza Hotel, no less; a sleepover! For Liz's whole

life, prior to drinks in the Oak Room last year when Richard was interviewing for his gig at the university, she had been inside the Plaza only when she was in Midtown and in need of a public restroom. As Coco's designated lady-in-waiting, she saw tonight as her night to howl. This year Coco was in kindergarten for the second time, a condition of her admission to Wildwood Lower when they moved to the city. A private school. An apartment in Manhattan. The Plaza. Born and raised in the Bronx, in Co-op City, Liz couldn't always believe her new life.

In Ithaca, where they'd lived pretty fucking happily the last ten years—Richard and his meteoric rise at Cornell, Liz's dipping in and out of the Art History Department, the campus's dramatically stunning landscape, the low-key community vibe—irrepressible little Coco had been the life of the party. Here in New York, Coco was both a bad influence and intensely popular. In the last seven months she had had more invitations, and to swankier spots (boat rides around Manhattan, screenings at Soho House, grab-what-you-cans at Dylan's Candy Bar) than Liz had received in her entire lifetime.

Coco was one of three adopted Chinese daughters in her class—one of whom was also named Coco. Their Coco was now Coco B., the way Liz had been Elizabeth C. (née Cohen) all her grade-school life. The whole purpose of naming Coco "Coco" had been to avoid the initial, and yet there, like a wart at the end of a nose, it was. Poor Jake had been Jake B. so long and so often, in Ithaca, and now in New York, that some of the kids at Wildwood Upper had taken to calling him Jacoby—like those ambulance-chaser lawyers who, Liz was amazed to find, after all these years still ran their ads in the subways: "Hit by a

truck? Call Jacoby and Meyers." (What if you just *felt* like you'd been hit by a truck? Liz wondered. What if you just *felt* like you'd been hit by a truck day after day? Could you call Jacoby and Meyers then?)

Tall, thin Jake was lanky now, with shoulders. Men's shoulders. When did he get such shoulders? Liz wondered, as he sidled past her to put his cereal bowl in the sink in the galley kitchen, where she was pouring her second cup of coffee. And then, when he brushed past her again, Liz resisted the urge to touch them. Instead, as he grabbed his backpack, called out, "Bye, guys," and hurried down the long, skinny hallway that led to the apartment's front door, she mentally dropped a dollar in the "shrink" jar, the imaginary fund she kept for the future therapy Jake would require as a result of her outsize adoration.

"Bye-bye, sweetie! Have a great day," Liz yelled down the hall.

"Hang tough, slugger," said Richard from the other room, perhaps ironically. One couldn't always tell.

Jake was rushing to meet his friends at the Ninety-sixth Street subway station and he apparently did not have time to kiss her goodbye. The commute was very convenient, although this would change when they moved again in the summer. Right now, Jake and a bunch of other Wildwood high schoolers from the Upper West Side schlepped up to the lush and lovely Riverdale campus en masse, and Liz was grateful he was part of a crowd. "I travel with the guys, Mom," he said, not in annoyance per se, but to reassure her, whenever Liz gave voice to some quasi-ridiculous worry. What if you get mugged? What if terrorists attack again?

In Ithaca, where they'd lived most of his life, Jake biked on

his own from fourth grade onward, from school to Collegetown to Ithaca Falls. He'd take Ithaca transit, just like Nabokov had, whenever he ventured up the hill to meet Richard for lunch on campus, placing his little silver two-wheeler on the rack on the bus's front bumper alongside the big ones belonging to the college students and the earthier, crunchy professors (the ones who lived "off the grid"). In Ithaca, Jake had often been on his own, unless Liz was ferrying a Boy Scout troop full of his friends to the cool, blue stage of the lake for swim practice, and none of them, not Richard, not Jake, not Liz, had ever given this healthy independence a second thought.

Jake was fifteen and a half last Friday, which meant almost sixteen. As the door slammed behind him, that fact hit her, as it did every once in a while, out of the blue.

"Richard," Liz said, walking out into the hall, still in the old KISS T-shirt she liked to sleep in and her pajama bottoms. "Do you think that the way I feel about Jakey being a teenager is similar to what it's like to awaken from being drugged and find that an organ trafficker has stolen your kidney?"

"That's exactly what I was thinking," said Richard. He was standing in the living room, at the dining table he used as his desk, sorting through piles of papers, cutting a ridiculously handsome figure, Liz thought, for that hour of the morning. No matter the level of dishabille the rest of the household suffered—Liz sometimes wearing the T-shirt she'd slept in to take Coco to school—Richard looked *fine*: freshly shaven, crisp white shirt, sports coat, black jeans, green eyes bright, his silvering hair cut close to his well-formed head. Making order out of chaos.

Their apartment was a month-to-month sublease; the living

room was living, dining, and den, plus Richard's office, all rolled into one. The gleaming brand-new faculty housing the university had dangled in front of them, part of its full-blown Richard-recruitment package, wasn't completed yet.

"Coco and I will be going straight *to the Plaza* after pickup," Liz called out. She was back in the kitchen arranging Coco's meal. She said "to the Plaza" in a faux-snooty voice, both impressed and embarrassed by how impressed she was by the x factor of their evening. "After school, Jake will probably stay up in the Bronx anyway, so it's okay if you work late." As if Richard ever came home at a decent hour.

"He's not a kid anymore, Lizzie, he'll be fine," Richard said.

"He'll probably grab something to eat on Johnson Avenue, or hang out in a friend's basement waiting for the party to start," Liz said. She stood on tiptoe to reach the microwave oven and zapped the Tater Tots. Coco's hot breakfast.

Jake's party was in a mansion in the Fieldston section of the Bronx, that much Liz knew. Her son's Bronx was not her Bronx. "Marjorie says the party is definitely a chaperoned event, with parents ready and eager to taste-test the punch bowl." Liz had been assured this much over the phone the night before by her tenth-grade-class source, a fast-talking, well-meaning real estate agent mother.

"Deep Throat," Richard said, as she handed him the Tater Tots and a toaster waffle for Coco, who was already stuffing organic strawberries the size of golf balls into her exquisite little mouth.

"Deep Throat," Liz murmured. A nom de guerre in the mother wars. "Richard, that's perfect."

"Coco, how much do you think you cost me in strawberries

a year?" Richard asked. "These things are like six dollars a box and she must eat a box a day, right, Lizzie?"

"Daddy," said Coco, her wide smile pink with berry jam.

"At least one box," said Liz, "sometimes two, although thank God she's eating something not 'white food,'" she said.

"I eat not 'white food,'" said Coco.

"Bagels, pasta, waffles," said Liz, listing Coco's meals of choice. "Dumplings."

"Tater Tots," crowed Coco, picking one up in victory. "They're brown."

"Indeed they are," Richard said, cherry-picking the darker ones out of her hand and popping them into his own mouth.

He sort of listened now as Liz went on and on about her anxieties about the evening—What should I wear? "Hippie chic?" said Richard. Should we really be accepting such a lavish invitation? "Why not? It will be fun for both of you." It was part of their daily rhythm, him soothing her while glancing at the headlines of the *New York Times*. Every once in a while, Richard helped Coco with her "math" homework as well, by eating more of her Tater Tots. "Two minus one equals a very hungry Coco," said Richard, while assembling his breakfast shake at the other end of the table: bananas, peanut butter, protein powder, Matcha green tea—tea that "matchas your eyes," Liz told him when he first brought it home. He exuded competence. He was a self-cleaning oven. And even after all these years, Liz was not immune to the power of his good looks.

"One of the moms asked me to be on the Multicultural Festival committee for next fall—do you think I should?" asked Liz.

Wildwood prided itself on "diversity," which was one of the

reasons she and Richard had picked it last year. In Coco's class there were five other Asian girls, an African American boy, a West Indian boy with a lyrical lilt in his voice—Liz volunteered on class trips just to hear him speak—one tow-headed born-wearing-a-blazer WASP, and the rest a motley crew of half-Jewish kids. Like Jake.

"Might be a way to meet people," said Richard, nodding.

"Marjorie says, 'Sure there's diversity. There's millionaires . . . and then there's billionaires.' "

"I'm glad you've made a friend, honey," said Richard. As if it were possible that she might not have.

Marjorie was divorced and had suffered, and therefore was imbued with enough compassion to welcome in a newcomer. A tiny, wiry pinwheel of a person, she also lived on the Upper West Side, hence the affinity between the two mothers, and she'd been exporting her own kids to the Bronx to Wildwood for years, so she definitely had wisdom to share. Her twins were named Henry and James. Fraternal, they still looked an awful lot alike, although Henry was lankier and his features were finely etched, while James's face looked similar but thicker, as if it had been stretched by Silly Putty.

Henry, the nice twin, had become Jake's best friend in a New York minute. He was one of those kids who always had a broken arm. But soulful, Liz thought.

It was Henry who introduced Jake to McHenry, Davis, and Django. His "posse." Liz was relieved that Jake had so quickly made friends who could guide him through this foreign, urban terrain.

"Okay, Coco-bear, brush your teeth and grab your stuff,"

said Richard. It was one of the rare days he was taking her to school. He'd usually left for the office by this point, but because the girls were spending the night out, he was adding a half hour of quality time with his kid by escorting her on the morning commute.

Liz was standing like a sentry at the door, Coco's backpack in hand. "C'mon Coco," she called. "Get the lead out." She could hear the water in the bathroom sink running.

"What do you have up today?" asked Richard as he organized his briefcase.

"Yoga, food-shop, packing for tonight, bills, the car inspection, those stupid summer camp health forms . . . stuff," she listed a little defensively. There was plenty to do.

Coco came loping down the hall. "Bring my Chinese pajamas," she said as she offered her forehead to Liz for a goodbye smooch.

"You got it," Liz said. Then she leaned over to Richard. "Aren't you forgetting something?" She said this every morning, and once in a while, like today, elicited a less-than-abstracted kiss.

It was a pleasure to see them go, and to close the door behind them.

It was heaven really to be alone in that cramped apartment. And yet, as she had felt almost every day since they'd moved in, when she came back from dropping Coco off at school, or yoga, or errands, or coffee, Liz took one look at her messy home and was overwhelmed by how much there was to do and how little she wanted to do it. Finding that first step into an amorphous day, a day without bones, was always the hardest.

She walked over to her laptop. It was on the coffee table in

front of the couch, where she'd left it late last night. She typed in "feigenbaum/blogspot.com."

Hours later, most of her tasks accomplished and tucked away behind her, Liz sat on Wildwood Lower's marble front steps with her old duffel and Coco's Barbie Overnight Bag resting between her knees, her head tilted back to capture the warmth of the spring sun. A yummy buttery light permeated her closed eyelids—all winter long she had craved this. The school was located in the East Nineties, between the smoky gray branches of trees that rimmed Central Park on Fifth Avenue and the bright yellow splashes of taxi traffic east on Madison. It was housed in a limestone fortress, a former home of some robber baron, probably destined to go to a hedge fund guy in the near future when the Wildwood capital campaign hit its mark and they broke ground on a new building. She was early for pickup, ever eager to find out if Coco's day had been thumbs-up or thumbs-down—it had been a roller-coaster transition to Manhattan life for all of them. Except Richard.

Although, through years of experience, Liz knew that if all the calm, focused energy he had displayed day in and day out these last few months were to be translated into a normal person's emotions, the result would actually look something like excitement and anxiety.

"They made you an offer you can't refuse," Liz had said, late some fragrant, sultry night the summer before, back in Ithaca, after they'd had sex, when they were sitting barefoot on their front porch drinking beers like kids, talking over the pros and cons of

taking the job, their children safely asleep inside. It was obvious how much he'd wanted it.

"It's not the same city you grew up in," Richard had said, to reassure her.

It was a thought she'd held on to.

"Just think of all the museums and the galleries," he said.

He was right about that, Liz thought as she waited for Coco—the Upper East Side in this new moneyed century was not the New York she'd grown up in at all. Hyacinths in spun sugar colors bloomed in the window boxes of the town houses across the street. Cherry blossoms wept snowy petals in the breeze. The stoop she sat on was a far cry from the benches she'd hung out on in Section Five of Co-op City, the soulless middle-class housing project where Liz twisted in the winds of boredom during her own rather turbulent adolescence. All those concrete towers and windswept sidewalks, the outdoor shopping centers and indoor garages, the basketball courts without basketball nets, like chain-linked prison yards where the boys played shirts and skins all afternoon before feeling you up in some dank, stinky stairwell later that evening. The absolute dearth of trees. That hard, unyielding concrete universe that her adult world would determinedly negate and her children would not grow up in.

With her eyes closed, Liz could hear the chitchat chattering background hum of the other mothers, the way she used to hear the *ch-ch-ch* of the lawn sprinklers while she sat in her car by the curb across from the ball fields in Ithaca and waited for her offspring to explode out of school when the final bell rang.

Liz had loved all that: living in the country, the cocoon of her car with her music on. Teenagery stuff like Lucinda Williams. Yo-Yo

Ma and the music of Ennio Morricone from all those Sergio Leone spaghetti westerns—the CD finding its way into her Hanukkah stocking last year alongside a pretty carnelian red bangle with a little lump of ironic coal lodged in at the toe. Oh, the bennies and compromises of a mixed marriage! The cello had been so awesomely beautiful it seemed to actually bend her insides. She'd arrive early and park, just to savor the music a little longer, idling outside of Cayuga Heights Elementary after half-day nursery, or the Dewitt Middle School later in the afternoon, waiting for Jake post-soccer. In the passenger seat next to her always was a pack of healthy snacks—lady apples and cucumber slices, peanut butter and banana sandwiches on wooly bread—anticipating the kids' descent. Homemade. Local. Organic. (Well, the peanuts weren't local, but they'd been crushed into mush at the local food co-op; the bread was homemade there, too, homemade at the store.) This happy, lazy array of nourishing, nutritional foodstuffs made Liz feel maternal, nurturing, and beneficent, practically winged. That station wagon was like a little mobile home for her and the children: Mother Ginger and her skirts. She'd reveled in the privacy. That was life in Ithaca, and it did not suck.

Since the move, Liz spent her time mostly ferrying Coco around town, from Wildwood to occupational therapy to play dates to ballet class to Chinese school. What had happened to all the gallery hopping Richard had dangled as bait? Liz did more commuting here in the city than she'd ever done in Ithaca. Picking up and dropping off. Picking up and dropping off. It sounded like the lexicon of drug dealers.

Today at Wildwood Lower, like all days when it wasn't raining, the stay-at-homes gathered in little cliques for kindergarten

pickup at their various stations along the sidewalk: the JAPs with the JAPs, the head-banded preppy moms with the preppies, the stray earth mother in Birkenstocks with a baby in a sling, singing softly to herself and swaying her hips to rock the baby to sleep.

Next on the food chain, the "caregivers": a couple of grad students reading Kierkegaard or Sartre and listening to their iPods; the pierced and tattooed European au pairs staring off into space, dreaming of a night in the dance clubs; and the small dark fortress of the Caribbean nannies, with their slow, sexy patois as they greeted one another on the opposite side of the staircase from the mothers, the two groups almost never commingling, a tale of two cities, two pickups.

Liz opened her eyes and saw a clutch of yummy mummies at the foot of the steps; she'd been part of this scene for only nine months but she knew queen bees when she saw them. They were tall in their metallic sandals; their skinny yoga butts trim in their designer jeans, their long, shiny, blown-out, streaked hair (Breck Girl hair, Liz thought, silently dating herself) flowing halfway down their backs in glossy sheets. Only experience told her that when these ladies turned away from their gabby circle to place a cell phone call to their driver or decorator or art consultant, that the skin on their faces would be pure leather. "It's just like high school," Liz wrote to her best friend, Stacey, in an email, "the scene at pickup. The blond girls. Everybody else. Me."

In the nine months her kids were at Wildwood, Upper and Lower, Liz had met literary agent mothers and banker mothers, cancer researcher mothers and former microbiologists; she'd met a lot of formers. Former lawyers and former investment bankers and former PR people. Wasn't she a former art historian herself?

The husbands worked too much and traveled too much—they were always in Mumbai opening up offices. They earned too much money for their wives to justify being away from the kids the long hours their former careers required. The "formers" made up the bulk of the PTA.

Case in point was Casey, Juliana's mom, the hostess of tonight's slumber party at the Plaza. Casey was the PTA president. She used to oversee concessions for all the Loews movie theaters in the country. A former concessionaire. Meanwhile, her husband, an ophthalmologic surgeon, was always flying around the globe heroically saving the sight of some corrupt third world leader.

The Plaza Hotel was going to be shut down for two years; a developer was remodeling it into condominiums. "It's our girls' last chance," Casey, mouth full of cheese cubes, had whispered into Liz's ear over warm white wine on curriculum night. It would be just three girls plus Juliana, three girls and their moms. "So don't tell anyone." Wildwood had a no-cut policy regarding birthday parties; it was simply verboten not to invite the entire class to absolutely everything. And preferably, the entire grade.

Juliana was a sweet kid, all button nose and sass and a sprinkling of cinnamon-colored freckles. The girls had had a few play dates, and Liz liked Juliana; she said her *please*s and *thank-you*s and, like Coco, was able to play on her own. Some of the kids Coco brought home required play instruction. They needed art projects or cookie baking or Build-A-Bear Workshop, Xbox, constant supervision. Sometimes, when Liz was exhausted and sick of writing the script of their activities, she'd resort to popping in a video, cracking a beer, and watching the girls zone.