

The Funny Thing about Norman Foreman

Julietta Henderson



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Lyric on p. 162 from 'My Way' by Frank Sinatra, lyrics by
Claude François and Jacques Revaux. Lyric on pp. 161 and 163
from 'Amazing' by Alex Lloyd, lyrics by Alex Lloyd

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For the original Big AI

1

Sadie

When I was born my insides lay outside my body for twenty-one days. Which is unexpected, but not nearly as unusual as you might think. For every 3,999 babies that come out with everything tucked in neatly and sealed away exactly where it should be, there's one like me. Nobody really knows why. Luck of the draw, my father used to say.

For those three weeks, while I lay spreadeagled in an incubator like a Nando's special, a crowd of doctors gathered every morning to discuss their cleverness and, as my organs shrank to their correct size, bit by bit they gently posted a little more of the me-parts that had made a break for it back inside.

Well, that's the way my mother told it anyway. The way my father told it, the doctors gathered around the incubator every morning to discuss whether they'd be having my large intestine or my liver for their lunch, and whether it'd be with chips or salad. And that right there might tell you almost everything you need to know about my parents.

On my insides' final day of freedom the head surgeon pushed the last bit through the slit in my stomach and stitched it closed,

presumably with everything in its rightful place. I was declared whole and sent home to begin life almost like nothing had ever happened.

Except that even when the regular hospital check-ups stopped and the scar on my stomach that I'd never lived without faded to a thin silver seam, I can always remember still feeling the tugging behind it. Something I could never quite name, nudging at the fleshy edges whenever things were going badly, or too well. Or just for fun. To remind me how easily those parts of me that never quite fitted could come sliding out. *Any time we like, Sadie. Any time we like.*

It wasn't until I held my own son for the first time that the constant, dull pressure of keeping the scar together receded. When a nurse placed that slippery, crumpled-up bundle of boy on my chest, I tightened my grip on a handful of hospital sheet as my world creaked on its axis, bumped into a comfy spot and was finally facing the right way.

I didn't feel the tug on the scar again until a different boy died, and to say I wasn't ready for it isn't even the most important thing. Because by then there was a whole lot more at stake than just my own stupid insides spilling out into the world. I was as scared as hell and I had no idea how to fix any of it. And that right there might tell you almost everything you need to know about me.

2

NORMAN

First rule of comedy: Timing is everything.

Timing is everything. First rule of comedy, Jax says. Because when push comes to shove, if you can get the timing right, you can get a laugh. He says. Well I don't really know how to tell when push is coming to shove, but I'll tell you something I do know. That rule works the other way too. Because when the you-know-what starts to hit the fan, if your timing's wrong there's pretty much zilcho you can do to stop it from splattering all over the place.

Stare straight ahead and think about nothing. That's a world-famous Jax Fenton tactic for what to do when you get yourself into a bit of a mess. Works every time he reckons, and he should know. Only maybe it doesn't. Because when I stare straight ahead all I can see is that big, shiny wooden box and instead of nothing I'm thinking about everything. And loads of it. Like does any light get in through the joins and did they let Jax wear his Frankie Boyle Tramadol Nights tour T-shirt. And does whoever put him in there know he only likes to sleep on his side.

The massive scab on my chest feels so tight that I'm scared to breathe too deep in case it splits down the middle and bleeds all over my new shirt. *Stare straight ahead.* I move just a bit so I almost can't see the box behind a couple of heads, and my arm touches Mum's. When I feel her, straight away the mess on my chest relaxes and lets me take half an almost good in-breath. Nearly a whole one. Right before it stabs me all the way through to my back and kazams like a rocket down to my toes. I'm pretty sure I can hear it laughing. *Timing is everything, sucker.*

And by the way, that's another thing I know. That you can't trust your timing, no matter how good it's been in the past. Not even for people as excellently funny as Ronnie Barker or Dave Allen or Bob Mortimer. Or Jax.

Because even if you nick a little bit of money for sweets every weekday morning from your mum's purse, even if you accidentally-on-purpose leave your stepfather's car door open so the cats get in and wee on the seats, and even if you're the naughtiest kid in the whole school by a long shot, when you're eleven years, 297 days and from what the paramedics can tell anything between twelve and sixteen hours old, it's definitely not a good time to die.

Stare straight ahead and think about nothing.

3

Sadie

Squashed into the end of the pew with my body leaning into the shape of the space that Norman's made, I could feel the tense and release of his arms as his small-boy hands curled in and out of fists. The buttoned-down cuffs of his sleeves rode up ever so slightly with every movement to reveal the trail of psoriasis that spread triumphantly down to the second knuckles. His face was blank as a brick. Dry eyes staring straight ahead.

'Just hold on. Hold on, son. You'll get through this,' I murmured reassuringly. Telepathically. But Norman's hands kept on curling and flexing and then I noticed his chest was keeping time, rising and collapsing with the movement of his hands. I knew what was lying in wait underneath the thin fabric of his shirt, so then I had another thing to worry about.

I had to admit, it looked like he wasn't getting my message, possibly because my best telepathic motherly voice was being all but drowned out by the other, very much louder one that lived in luxury inside my head. *Fuck you, Sadie. You can't even get this right.* As usual, it wasn't pulling any punches.

The priest who had never met him declared the end to Jax's life

and people began shuffling out of the pews as fast as they could, as if death might still be hanging around, looking for company. They knocked our knees, murmured apologies and spilled their overflow of sadness all over us. Like we needed it. The moving huddle in the aisle parted from the back as Jax's parents set off on their million-mile walk, and without turning my head I felt more than saw Josie Fenton hesitate ever so slightly as they passed us. But then they were gone. And my son's eyes remained fixed on some invisible point that I could only hope lay somewhere far, far beyond the awfulness of the moment.

A good forty minutes after the last person had left I reached for Norman's nearest hand and closed it gently between mine. The chill of the empty church had sidled deep into my bones and I was shocked at the heat of his raw knuckles on my palms. The voice in my head began stage-whispering nonsense louder and louder and Norman's hand stayed rigid in its fist. But I didn't need that voice to tell me what I'd already figured out about thirty-eight minutes before. I wasn't going to be nearly enough for this.

4

There's a good chance Norman's father is one of four people. Now I know how that makes me sound, but it's a fairly reasonable alternative to the other scenario, which is that he would quite possibly have been one of several more if circumstances had allowed.

But anyhow, who provided the champion Y chromosome that coasted up a lager-and-lemonade river to victory in my ovaries never really came up in Norman's first twelve years of life. Mainly because I'd pretty much convinced myself that I was all the parent he needed. I was enough. And, to be fair, Norman had never given me any reason to question my conviction, no matter how many mistakes I made on the job. And there's been a lot, believe me. Which you probably do, based on first impressions.

I never knew a thing about boys until I became the mother of one, even though, in theory, a boy is just a smaller version of a man and clearly I thought I knew quite a lot about them at one point. As a general rule, I've found men don't really require any complicated directions, so you're pretty much guaranteed to get exactly what's on the tin when you bring one home. And serves

you right, most of the time. But it turns out a boy is nothing like a man at all, because they could definitely do with coming with some directions. And when you bring one of them home, before you even get him through the front door he's already got your heart scrunched up in his fat baby fist like a bad betting slip. And he's starting to squeeze.

I named my son Norman because there was nobody to tell me not to. And because I liked it. That could have been my first mistake and, who knows, maybe I would have listened if someone had told me that Charlie or Harry or Freddie might be a lighter load for a kid to swing on to his back and carry around for an entire lifetime. That other children, and even adults who should bloody well know better, might find a thousand cruel ways to use a name chosen with love to try to bring your boy down. That maybe, just maybe, naming a post-millennial baby after a 1950s comedian was not the best idea I'd ever had. Although you should know that it also wasn't the worst.

The fact that his name had to attach itself to the caboose of our surname was probably my second mistake. And although I've always thought that Norman Foreman has a certain resonance to it, I've yet to find someone that wholeheartedly agrees. Except Jax, of course.

'Coolest name ever, Normie boy!' Coolest kid ever.

Norman never had a best friend before Jax. In fact, if I'm honest, he never really had a proper friend at all. But when Jax showed up at Alverton Community Primary wielding a truncheon of six-year-old East London bravado over his shell-shocked Cornish classmates, for Norman it was love at first sight. Just like he always does, though, even when he wants something really, really badly, he sat back politely and waited his turn.

It took Jax less than a week to alienate every kid in his class, and most of the teachers as well, before noticing Norman and deciding that he could well be his last chance in the best-friend saloon. That was six years ago, and from the moment the deal was sealed over a shared two-week detention for switching around the contents of the entire Year 3's school bags (verdict: Jax guilty as hell; Norman guilty of being an inexperienced and therefore ultimately unsuccessful lookout), you couldn't separate those two with a scalpel. I'd lay money that there weren't two more different boys on the planet and yet, somehow, they just clicked. They were 'The bloody Rolls-bloody-Royce of bloody best friends,' as Jax so eloquently put it.

But Jax died. And so it came to be that on the kind of day sons should be out in a park kicking a football, or chasing dogs down on the beach with their mates, I sat next to my good boy in a church full of damp cheeks. Trying hard not to think about that other rude, grubby, magnificent bad boy lying just a few metres away. And even though there was no chance in hell of it coming true, I'd still half expected to hear a kicking at the lid of that coffin at any moment, and a wild-haired, laughing kid to splinter through and shout, '*Gotcha, suckers!*'

Because that was Jax's approach to life, the universe and everything, really. Feet first, break the door down and damn the consequences. He'd arrive at our house nearly every day like that, body lengths ahead of Norman, bullying our front-door handle nearly off its thread and following up with a totally unnecessary karate kick to make sure the job was done. Then he'd charge straight down the hallway on a direct route to the biscuit tin, leaving Norman to catch hold of the twanging door and close it softly as he brought up the rear.

It used to drive me crazy every time I'd catch sight of the

mortally injured wall where the front door handle bounced, day after day. But in the weeks after Jax died I saw the way Norman glanced over at that crumbling hole in the plaster as he passed, and it made me give silent thanks for lying, no-good, unreliable tradesmen that don't know their four o'clocks from their fourth of Junes.

That hole is all that's left of Jax in our house now, and it's eating away at the wall like it's got teeth.