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Written by Laura Lippman

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LAURA LIPPMAN

Don't Look Back

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For Dorothy and Bernie

PART ONE

I'D KNOW YOU ANYWHERE

Chapter One

‘Iso, time for—’

Eliza Benedict paused at the foot of the stairs. Time for what, exactly? All summer long – it was now August – Eliza had been having trouble finding the right words. Not complicated ones, the things required to express strong emotions or abstract concepts, make difficult confessions to loved ones. She groped for the simplest words imaginable, everyday nouns. She was only thirty-eight. What would her mind be like at fifty, at seventy? Yet her own mother was sharp as a tack at the age of seventy-seven.

No, this was clearly a temporary, transitional problem, a consequence of the family’s return to the States after six years in England. Ironic, because Eliza had scrupulously avoided Britishisms while living there; she thought Americans who availed themselves of local slang were pretentious. Yet home again, she couldn’t get such words – *lift*, *lorry*, *quid*, *loo* – out of her head, her mouth. The result was that she was often tongue-tied, as she was now. Not at a loss for words, as the saying would have it, but overwhelmed with words, weighed down with words, drowning in them.

She started over, projecting her voice up the stairs without actually yelling, a technique in which she took great pride. ‘Iso, time for football camp.’

‘Soccer,’ her daughter replied in a muffled, yet clearly scornful voice, her default tone since turning thirteen seven months ago. There was a series of slamming and banging noises, drawers and doors, and when she spoke again, Iso’s voice was clearer. (Where had her head been just moments ago, in the laundry hamper, inside her jersey, *in the toilet*? Eliza had a lot of fears, so far unfounded, about eating disorders.) ‘Why is it that you called it soccer when everyone else said football, and now you say football when you know it’s supposed to be soccer?’

At least I remembered to call you Iso.

‘It’s your camp and you’re the one who hates to be late.’

‘Football is better,’ said Albie, hovering at Eliza’s elbow. Just turned eight, he was still young enough to enjoy being by – and on – Eliza’s side.

‘Better as a word, or better as a sport?’

‘As a word, for soccer,’ he said. ‘It’s closer to being right. Because it’s mainly feet, and sometimes heads. And hands, for the goalie. While American football is more hands than feet – they don’t kick it so much. They throw and carry it.’

‘Which do you like better, as a sport?’

‘Soccer for playing, American football for watching.’ Albie, to Eliza’s knowledge, had never seen a single minute of American football. But he believed that affection should be apportioned evenly. At dinner, Albie tried to eat so that he finished all his food at about the same time, lest his peas suspect that he preferred his chicken.

Isobel – *Iso* – clattered down the stairs, defiant in her spikes, which she wasn’t supposed to wear in the house. At least she was ready, in full uniform, her hair in a French braid, which she had somehow managed to do herself. Eliza couldn’t help raising a hand to her own head of messy red curls, wondering anew how she had given birth to this leggy

creature with her sleek hair and sleek limbs and sleek social instincts. Isobel had her father's coloring – the olive skin and dark hair – but otherwise could have been a lanky changeling.

'Are we snack family today?' she asked, imperious as a duchess.

'No—'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes—'

'It would be *horrible* to forget,' Iso said.

'Horrible?' Eliza echoed, trying not to smile.

'Almost as bad as the first time we were snack family and you brought that disgusting jerky.'

'Biltong from Daddy's trip to South Africa,' Albie said, dreamy with remembering. 'I liked it.'

'You would,' his sister said.

'Don't squabble,' Eliza said.

'I don't.' Albie was not only keen to be fair, but accurate. His sister was the instigator in almost all their disagreements. Iso rolled her eyes.

They never used to fight, even in this one-sided fashion. They had been close, if only because Albie worshipped Iso, and Iso enjoyed being worshipped. But when they left London, Iso decided she had no use for Albie's adulation. To Eliza's dismay, she appeared to have conducted a ruthless inventory of her life, jettisoning everything that threatened her newly invented self, from her little brother to the last syllable of her name, that innocuous and lovely 'bel.' ('Iso?' Peter had said. 'People will think it's short for Isotope. Shouldn't it be Izzo?' Iso had rolled her eyes.) A freckled, redheaded little brother – prone to nightmares and odd pronouncements, not English, but not quite American again, not yet – did not fit Iso's new image. Nor did her mother,

but Eliza expected no less. It was the slights against Albie that she found unbearable.

‘Did you remember our chairs?’ Albie asked his mother.

‘They’re in the—’ She stopped herself from saying *boot*. ‘Trunk.’

Iso was not appeased. ‘It’s not a trunk. It’s a luggage compartment.’

Eliza hustled the children into the car, a Subaru Forester in which she already spent much of her days, and would probably spend even more hours once school started.

At 8:30 A.M., the day was already hot; Eliza wondered if the camp would cancel, after all. There was some sort of formula, involving temperature, humidity, and air quality, that mandated the suspension of outdoor activities. Other mothers probably checked the Internet, or had an alert programmed into their mobiles – *cell phones* – but Eliza had long ago accepted that she was never going to be that kind of a mother.

Besides, this was a private camp, and a very macho one, with serious aspirations and a pronounced Anglophilia. Iso’s six years in London provided her great cachet, and she pretended to a much grander knowledge of UK soccer than she had acquired while living there. Eliza had marveled at how she did it: a few sessions at the computer, reading the UK newspapers and Wikipedia, and Iso could pass herself off as quite the expert, chatting about Manchester United and Arsenal, professing to be a fan of Tottenham Hotspurs, which she breezily called the Spurs. Eliza was torn between admiration and disapproval for her daughter’s social ambitions, not to mention her ability to execute them. She tried to tell herself that Iso’s adaptability would keep her safe in this world, yet she worried far more about calculating Iso than she did about trusting Albie. Cynics fooled themselves into thinking

they had sussed out the worst-case scenarios and were invariably surprised by how life trumped them. Dreamers were often disappointed – but seldom in themselves. Eliza had installed spyware on the computer and monitored Iso’s IM sessions, which appeared benign enough. Now Iso was pushing for her own phone, but Eliza wasn’t sure if she could track text messages. She would have to seek the advice of other mothers – assuming she eventually made friends with any.

On the shade-deprived field, she set up the portable camp chairs, casting a covetous glance at the in-the-know mothers who had umbrellas attached to their chairs or, in the case of one superprepared type, a portable canopy. Eliza wished she had known, back in June, that such things existed, but she probably wouldn’t have availed herself of them anyway. She had felt decadent enough purchasing chairs with little mesh cup holders. She and Albie settled in under the unforgiving sun, Albie reading, with no sense of self-consciousness, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, Eliza pretending to follow Iso’s progress through the drills. She was actually eavesdropping. Although the other mothers – and it was all mothers, with the exception of one laid-off father who inhabited his Mr Mom role with a little too much gusto for Eliza’s taste – were kind, they had quickly ascertained that Eliza’s children were not attending the same schools as theirs, which apparently meant there was no reason to befriend her.

‘– on the sex offenders list.’

What? Eliza willed the other ambient noises to fall away and honed in on this one conversation.

‘Really?’

‘I signed up for telephone notification with the county. The guy lives five doors down from us.’

‘Child sex offender or just regular sex offender?’

‘Child, third degree. I looked him up on the state’s site.’

‘What does that mean, third degree?’

‘I don’t know. But any degree has to be bad news.’

‘And he’s in Chevy Chase?’

Long pause. ‘Well, we do have a Chevy Chase mailing address.’

Eliza smiled to herself. She knew from her family’s own real estate search how people fudged certain addresses, that even within this very desirable county, one of the richest in the United States, there were hierarchies upon hierarchies. Which was worse: having a child sex offender on your block, or admitting you didn’t live in Chevy Chase proper? The Benedicts lived in Bethesda, and Peter had made sure there wasn’t a sex offender, child or adult, within a six-block radius, although one of their neighbors, a sixty-year-old civil service employee, had been picked up for soliciting in a bathroom at the Smithsonian.

The game done – Iso won it for her team on a penalty kick, a victory she carried lightly, gracefully – the Benedicts got back into the car and headed into the long, endless summer day. The heat was pronounced now; it would reach into the upper nineties for the third day in a row, and the lack of trees in this raw, new development made it feel even hotter. That was one thing Eliza loved unreservedly about their new house, the greenness of the neighborhood. Full of mature shade trees, it felt five to ten degrees cooler than the business district along nearby Wisconsin Avenue. It reminded Eliza of Roaring Springs, the revitalized Baltimore mill village where she had grown up, which backed up to a state park. Her family didn’t even have air-conditioning, only a series of window fans, yet it was always cool enough to sleep back then. Then again, her memory might be exaggerating. Roaring Springs had taken on a slightly mythic air in the

Lerner folklore. It was to them what Moscow had been to Chekhov's three sisters. No, Moscow was a place where the sisters were always intending to go, whereas Roaring Springs was the place that the Leners were forced to leave, through no fault of their own.

Eliza stopped at Trader Joe's, which the children considered a treat in the way the 'real' grocery store was not. She let them pick out one snack each while she roamed the aisles, bemused by the store's arbitrary offerings, the way things came and went without explanation. At summer's beginning, she and Albie had discovered the loveliest ginger cookies, large and soft, but they had never appeared again, and it seemed wrong, somehow, to inquire after them. 'It must be a relief,' the wives of Peter's new coworkers had said upon meeting her, 'to have real grocery stores again.' American attitudes about England seemed to have gelled circa 1974, at least among those who hadn't traveled there. The wives assumed her life abroad had been one of cold deprivation, huddling next to an inadequate space heater while being force-fed kidney pie and black puddings.

Yet the same Americans who believed that England was a land of material deprivation gave the UK too much credit for culture, assuming it was nothing but Shakespeare and the BBC. Eliza had found it even more celebrity-obsessed than the US. Germaine Greer had appeared on *Big Brother* during their time there, and it had depressed Eliza beyond reason. But then all television, the omnipresence of screens in modern life, depressed her. She hated the way her children, and even her husband, froze in their tracks, instantly hypnotized by a television or a computer.

'Some people,' Albie announced from the backseat, 'have DVD players in their cars.' He had an eerie knack for picking up Eliza's wavelength at times, as if her brain were

a radio whose dial he could spin and tune. His voice was sweet, wondering, sharing a fun fact, nothing more. Yet he had made the same point once or twice every week since they had bought the new car.

‘You’d throw up,’ Iso said. ‘You get motion sick *reading*.’ Said as if the very act of reading was suspect.

‘I don’t think I will here,’ he said. ‘That was just in England.’ For Albie, England was synonymous with being a little boy, and he had decided that whatever troubled him there had been left behind, that it was all past. No more nightmares, he had decreed, and just like that, they were over, or else he was doing a good job of white-knuckling his way to morning. A picky eater, he also had decided to reinvent himself as an adventurous one. Today, he had chosen chili-pepper cashews as his treat. Eliza had a hunch he wouldn’t like them much, but the rule was that the children could select whatever they wanted, no recriminations, even if the food went to waste. What was the point of giving children freedom to experiment and fail, if one then turned it all into a tiresome object lesson? When Albie picked a snack that was, for him, inedible, Eliza sympathized and offered to substitute something from the nearby convenience store. Iso, meanwhile, stuck to the tried-and-true, almost babyish snacks like Pirate’s Booty and frogurt. Iso was a thirty-five-year-old divorcée in her head, a three-year-old in her stomach.

Yet – *mirabile dictu* – Albie liked the cashews. After lunch, he put them in a bowl and carried them out to the family room with his ‘cocktail,’ a mix of Hawaiian Punch and seltzer. Peter had entertained a lot in his former job, and Eliza worried that London’s more liquid culture had made too vivid an impression on her son. But it was clearly the ceremony, the visuals, that excited him – the bright colors of the drinks, the tiny dishes of finger food. Eliza could stomach

very little alcohol. It was one of those changes that had arrived during pregnancy and never went away. Pregnancy had also changed her body, but for the better. Bony and waistless into her twenties, she had developed a flattering lushness after Iso's birth, at once curvy and compact.

The only person who disapproved of Eliza's body was Iso, who modeled herself on, well, models. Specifically, the wannabe models on a dreadful television show, an American one that had been inexplicably popular in England. Iso's sole complaint about the relocation to the States was that the show was a year ahead here and therefore a season had been 'spoiled' for her. 'They give away the winner in the opening credits!' she wailed. Yet she watched the reruns, which appeared to be on virtually every day, indifferent to the fact that she knew the outcome. She was watching an episode now while Albie stealthily tried to close the distance between them, advancing inch by inch along the carpet.

'Stop breathing so loud,' Iso said.

'Loudly,' Eliza corrected.

The afternoon stretched before them, inert yet somehow demanding, like a guest who had shown up with a suitcase full of dirty laundry. Eliza felt they should do something constructive, but Iso refused the offer of shopping for school clothes, and Peter had asked that they hold off the annual trip to Staples until this weekend. Peter loved shopping for school supplies, if only because it allowed him to perform his own version of the commercial, the one in which the parent danced ecstatically to 'The Most Wonderful Time of the Year.' (Peter could get away with things that Iso would never permit Eliza to do.) The Benedicts didn't belong to the local pool, which had a cap on memberships, and it was too hot to do anything else outdoors. Eliza got out drawing supplies and asked the children to sketch ideas for their

rooms, promising that they could paint the walls whatever colors they desired, pick out new furniture at Ikea. Iso pretended to be bored but eventually began using the computer to research various beds, and Eliza was impressed by her daughter's taste, which ran toward simple things. Albie produced a gorgeous jungle forest of a room, filled with dinosaurs, his current passion. Probably not reproducible, at Ikea or any other store, but it was a striking feat of the imagination. She praised them both, gave them Popsicles, indulged in a cherry one herself. Perhaps they should save the sticks for some future project? Even before Peter had taken a job at an environmentally conscious investment firm, the Benedicts had been dutiful recyclers.

Mail clattered through the slot, a jolt of excitement on this long, stifling afternoon. 'I'll get it!' Albie screamed, not that he had any competition. A mere six months ago, his sister had scrapped with him over an endless list of privileges, invoking primogeniture. Fetching the mail, having first choice of muffin at breakfast, answering the phone, pushing elevator buttons. She was beyond all that now.

Albie sorted the mail on the kitchen counter. 'Daddy, bill, junk, catalog. Daddy, junk. Junk. Junk. Daddy. Mommy! A real letter.'

A real letter? Who would write her a real letter? Who wrote anyone real letters? Her sister, Vonnie, was given to revisiting old grudges, but those missives usually went to their parents via e-mail. Eliza studied the plain white envelope, from a PO box in Baltimore. Did she even know anyone in Baltimore anymore? The handwriting, in purple ink, was meticulous enough to be machine-created. Probably junk mail masquerading as a real letter, a sleazy trick.

But, no, this one was quite authentic, a sheaf of loose-leaf paper and a cutting from a glossy magazine, a photo of Peter

and Elizabeth at a party for Peter's work earlier this summer. The handwriting was fussy and feminine, unknown to her, yet the tone was immediately, insistently intimate.

Dear Elizabeth,

I'm sure this is a shock, although that's not my intention, to shock you. Up until a few weeks ago, I never thought I would have any communication with you at all and accepted that as fair. That's how it's been for more than twenty years now. But it's hard to ignore signs when they are right there in front of your face, and there was your photo, in Washingtonian magazine, not the usual thing I read, but you'd be surprised by my choice of reading material these days. Of course, you are older, a woman now. You've been a woman for a while, obviously. Still, I'd know you anywhere.

'Who's it from, Mommy?' Albie asked, and even Iso seemed mildly interested in this oddity, a letter to her mother, a person whose name appeared mostly on catalogs and reminders from the dentist. Could they see her hands shaking, notice the cold sweat on her brow? Eliza wanted to crumple the letter in her fist, heave it away from her, but that would only excite their curiosity.

'Someone I knew when I was growing up.'

It looks as if they'll finally get around to completing my sentence soon. I'm not trying to avoid saying the big words – death, execution, what have you – just being very specific. It is my sentence, after all. I was sentenced to die and I am at peace with that.

I thought I was at peace across the board, but then I saw your photo. And, odd as it might seem to some, I feel

it's you that I owe the greatest apology, that you're the person I never made amends to, the crime I was never called into account for. I'm sure others feel differently, but they'll see me dead soon enough and then they will be happy, or so they think. I also accept that you might not be that interested in hearing from me and, in fact, I have engaged in a little subterfuge to get this letter to you, via a sympathetic third party, a person I absolutely trust. This is her handwriting, not mine, in case you care, and by sending it via her, I have avoided the problem of prying eyes, as much for your protection as for mine. But I can't help being curious about your life, which must be pretty nice, if your husband has the kind of job that leads to being photographed at the kind of parties that end up in Washingtonian, with him in a tux and you in an evening dress. You look very different, yet the same, if that makes any sense. I'm proud of you, Elizabeth, and would love to hear from you. Sooner rather than later, ha-ha!

Yours, Walter

And then – just in case she didn't remember the full name of the man who had kidnapped her the summer she was fifteen and held her hostage for almost six weeks, just in case she might have another acquaintance on death row, just in case she had forgotten the man who had killed at least two other girls and was suspected of killing many others, yet let her live, just in case all of this might have slipped her mind – he added helpfully:

(Walter Bowman)