

Dear Reader,

This was the original opening of the novel. The major differences (and my memory is somewhat dim, ha!) were that Naomi lived in New York City and had dropped out of school entirely. A version of Ace Zuckerman appears in this chapter, only he is called Greg Mantis. Rosa Rivera also appears though she is NOT Naomi's father's love interest. The primary reason (there were many!) I abandoned this was because having Naomi drop out of high school cut the legs off of so much of the potential drama.

Yours,

Gabrielle

P.S. Read at your own risk - you may find this boring and you will certainly find it to be rife with typographical and grammatical errors.

I Was a High School Dropout

So, the official reason I left Monty in the middle of fall term was for Extracurricular Independent Study. Monty (or the Montgomery School if you didn't already know) is a very free-thinking, artsy sort of place, so people do this all the time. There's always somebody going to, like, Ecuador to study turtle mating rituals, or the middle of nowhere to build huts, or you know, some other impressive-to-college-type activity. Monty might be artsy and all that, but you shouldn't get the idea that they're not deathly serious about getting us into good colleges. That's probably why the list to get in is about a million people long and you basically have to be on it from birth.

As it turned out, I wasn't going to Ecuador or anywhere at all impressive to colleges or anyone else. My only plan was to not go back to Monty for as long as I could get away with it. Really, I was just a good, old-fashioned high school dropout. If it made

the school and Grant and everyone feel better calling it “Independent Study,” that was their business, I guess. But don’t start thinking I didn’t know what it was.

The first two weeks of my Independent Study involved a lot of television-watching and magazine-reading and after a while, it seemed like one long show and one long magazine. Practically the only time I left our apartment was to go to therapy twice a week, and if Grant would have let me quit that too, I definitely would have. Then, I wouldn’t have had to go out at all and besides, the therapy wasn’t doing crap anyway. Grant is my dad, by the way. Before I was born, he and Cass, my mom, had this big talk about children calling parents by their names and only saying Mom or Dad, when and if the hypothetical kids chose to. They thought it was more emotionally honest that way or something, I don’t know, I wasn’t there. So, I’m not saying I necessarily agreed with them, but it’s always been that my sister and I call our parents by their given names, Cass and Grant.

Eventually, Grant put his foot down and said that if I were going to be at home, I needed to find a better way to occupy my time. He said he didn’t really care what I did, so long as I left the apartment at least once a day. But you shouldn’t get the idea that Grant was saying this purely out of parental concern or something. See, he works from home (he’s a writer), and he definitely likes his peace and quiet.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked him.

“Take a walk, for God’s sake, I don’t know,” Grant said.

I started to worry that Grant might make me go back to school if I was around too much. So, since I couldn’t come up with anything better to do, I took Grant’s suggestion, and except for therapy days (Tuesday and Friday), I went on these long, boring walks to

nowhere. Our apartment is thirteen blocks and two avenues from Monty (in other words, walking distance), and I was careful to not go anywhere near it at a time when I might potentially run into anyone from school. That eliminated eight in the morning, twelve noon, or anytime between three and five in the afternoon when all the upper school kids tended to just hang out on the front stoop, basically doing nothing. Nine in the morning was probably the safest time, so that's when I usually went.

Not that anyone from school would have recognized me anyway. When I did have to go outside, I wore at least two coats and two scarves and two pairs of gloves and sunglasses and a hat. And no, I was not living in the North Pole. We lived in New York City. And no, it was not an unusually cold fall. But, ever since my injury, I pretty much felt like I was living in the North Pole in that I was constantly freezing and everything seemed incredibly bright, like I imagine the polar caps probably are in person. I felt like a vampire actually, but I guess this sort of thing isn't all that out of the ordinary with head injuries. As it was explained to me, the wires in your brain have to reroute, and sometimes they send out incorrect or too much information. The upshot was that I was cold when it was warm, and weirdly sensitive to light, even when it really wasn't all that bright. In other words, laziness was not the only reason I preferred to be at home, just because that's what some people may have thought. Actually, one of the reasons I left Monty in the first place was because everyone kept hassling me about why I was wearing sunglasses inside some of the time. Like, they thought I was trying to be cool or something. In my opinion, if a person wants to wear sunglasses, I don't see why it's anyone else's goddamn business. But that's how Monty was: everything there was everyone's business.

While I was out on my mandatory walks, I'd sometimes catch a glimpse of myself, reflected in a store window or something. With all my layers, I basically looked homeless, like the kind of homeless person who wears everything they own at once, like a walking suitcase. It was probably not the most attractive look, I realize, but at least, I was pretty warm.

For whatever reason, I would sometimes go past Monty anyway, even though I really had no desire to run into anyone *at all*. (I mean, the whole point of leaving school had been to get away from those people.) But one day (I think it was a Friday around 10:30, so that really should have been a fine time), who should be out on the front steps, but Greg Mantis? As Greg was one of the other reasons I had decided to drop out, I hurried past Monty, turning my head the other way and hoping that he wouldn't recognize me under all my layers.

"Hey Nomy!" Greg called out.

I kept walking and pretended I didn't hear him. I was actually across the street from the school, so it wasn't completely inconceivable that I hadn't.

"NAOMI PORTER! OVER HERE! NAOMI! PORTER!"

"Hi, Greg," I said as I turned around real slow.

"SO, HOW THE HELL ARE YOU?" Greg yelled.

"Fine."

"NOMY, I CAN'T REALLY HEAR YOU!" Greg pointed to his ear, which I suppose was meant to illustrate not hearing. "DO YOU WANT TO CROSS THE STREET?"

I shook my head.

“WELL, I FEEL KIND OF DUMB YELLING ACROSS THE STREET TO YOU,” Greg said.

“It’s okay; I really have to go anyway,” I said.

I guess Greg didn’t hear me, because the next thing he said was “JUST STAY THERE! I’LL COME TO YOU,” and then he was running across the street.

“Why aren’t you in class?” I asked.

“I’m taking a college trip this weekend. With my dad”—he rolled his eyes—“but at least I get to leave early.” He smiled at me. “You wanna come with?”

“No.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged. “I heard you were doing Independent Study for the rest of the semester, but no one knew where you had gone. No one’s seen you anywhere.”

I nodded.

“So, where in the world have you been, then?”

“Um. You know. Here. There,” I replied.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I don’t know why, but I was a little embarrassed to say that I hadn’t been in Ecuador. “I’ve just been around,” I said. “I mean, I’ve just been here.”

“That’s cool.”

“I guess.”

“Look”—Greg lowered his voice— “I’m not mad about you slapping me.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate that.” I tried to say this as sarcastically as possible, but Greg didn’t seem to notice.

“And I’m sorry about surprising”—he lowered his voice even more, to the point where you could barely understand what he was saying—“sticking my tongue in your ear. I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I mean, you obviously did mind, I know that now. But I’m not this disgusting person, if that’s what you think. That’s just... well, that’s the sort of friendship we used to have. Like, we used to do these things as, um... I guess you’d call them jokes,” Greg said.

“You’ve got a pretty interesting sense of humor,” I said.

Things were starting to get incredibly awkward, so I pushed up my two coat sleeves and then my sweater and shirt sleeves and pretended to look at my watch, even though the battery had run out about a week earlier. “Look Greg, I really have to run actually.” He looked a little glum, so I added, “Have a nice trip, okay.”

And then a cab conveniently turned onto the street. At that moment, I felt really happy that I lived in New York City and not Minnesota, because I bet in Minnesota a cab never shows up at just the right moment. I hailed it.

“Naomi, can’t you just wait a minute?”

“The cab’s almost here,” I said.

“There’ll be about fifty other cabs.” Greg put his hand on my hailing arm.

“STOP THAT!”

“I’m sorry.” He pulled his hand away. “I’m sorry.”

I don't know why I yelled at him. His hand on my arm, it really shouldn't have been that big a deal. I guess I don't like people trying to tell me what to do, though. "It's fine. I just don't like... I just need... Look, I'm sorry, too. It's just that... the cab's here."

And it was. It had stopped right beside us. Then, stupid Greg actually opened the car door for me, and when I reached to close the door behind me, he was still standing there. He looked like he might follow me into the cab.

"I really have to go," I said, grabbing the door handle.

"Well, at least I can shut the door for you, then. At least let me do that."

"Fine," I said.

"You have to take you hand off the handle first," Greg said.

So, I took my hand off the door handle. What felt like ten minutes later but was probably only ten seconds, Greg closed the door.

The cabbie asked, "Where to?"

I thought about saying, "Just drive" which is what people always say in the movies. I probably should have told the cabbie to go to our apartment, but I guess I didn't want to have to explain to Grant why I had taken a cab in the first place. So instead, I gave the cabbie the address of my godfather Sonny's place downtown, which was the first thing that popped into my head. I hadn't seen him in a while, so I had no idea if he would even be home.

But I sure hoped he'd be there, because it was at least a twenty dollar cab ride from Monty to Sonny's place and I didn't have a single penny on me that day, not a one. I was always going out of the house and forgetting my wallet or something else important, God knows what.

As we drove away, the cabbie looked at Greg, then at me in the rearview mirror. “Your boyfriend’s still waving at you,” he said.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I replied.

The cabbie stopped at the red traffic light at the end of the block that Monty was on. He looked in his rearview mirror again. “He’s standing in the middle of the street now,” he said. “Still waving,” he added.

I guess the cabbie expected me to turn around and wave back or something, but I don’t know, I just couldn’t.

Despite the fact that the cabbie had thought Greg freaking Mantis was my boyfriend, I decided to shoot the breeze with him just in case we got downtown, and it turned out Sonny wasn’t around to pay the fare. My reasoning was that maybe if the cabbie believed I was a really nice person, he would be less likely to have a really nice person arrested for failure to pay. And I don’t know why, but I often find it easier to talk to total strangers.

“So, how long have you been driving a cab?” I asked.

“Fifteen years, give or take,” he answered, then looked at me in the rearview mirror. “Nearly as long as you’ve been alive, I suspect.”

“I’m sixteen,” I told him.

“Sixteen, huh? Shouldn’t you be in school, Sixteen?” the cabbie asked.

I smiled. “Yeah, probably, but I’m a dropout.”

“You’re no dropout, I can tell.”

So I told him that he was right, that I was really on “independent study.” He preferred this answer, same as everyone else.

We kept talking, but the conversation wasn't too strenuous. I've always been able to keep up a conversation while thinking about something else entirely. And what I was thinking about was Sonny. His name wasn't even Sonny; it was actually Jake Osborne, but everyone just always called him Sonny, I'm not sure why. And before he was my godfather, he was my mom Cass's first husband. Before Grant and also before her current husband (obviously). Mom's current husband was called Nigel (*Nigel*. I'm not kidding.), although I'd never met him. They lived in California in a place called Topanga Canyon, where I'd never been and had no plans to go.

Cass married Sonny when she was really young, like nineteen or something. So, not that much older than I am now actually. And Sonny was in his forties then, maybe older. It's weird to think of Cass with a much older man. Like, I could never imagine myself with someone my dad's age. Nigel, for your information, was her boyfriend from high school, so you sort of have to wonder what she was doing messing around with either Grant or Sonny for all that time. I also wondered how a person called Nigel (*Nigel!*) can be the love of anyone's life.

I tried to remember the last time I'd seen Sonny. I think it was probably around the time of Cass's Signs Show, which was at a warehouse in Brooklyn. My mom's a photographer, and her Signs Show was basically all these pictures of different signs from across the country. Pretty self-explanatory, I guess, but it wasn't all that bad. Cass made her real living photographing for the ads, though. Like, dog food and detergent and your basic total crap.

So, Sonny was at her show (he's an artist, too), and he was wearing his typical Sonny going-out uniform that night: a grey flannel suit, a boutonniere (a callalily, but it

varied depending on the season), a bowtie, and a porkpie hat. Before he left the show, Sonny slipped a fifty-dollar bill in my pocket and said, “Spend it foolishly, kiddo, even if it’s just on peanuts and rum. Make sure it’s nothing you particularly need or will ever use again.” I couldn’t tell you how I spent that money. I was twelve then, so it was probably something pretty foolish. Truthfully, I couldn’t tell you if I’d seen Sonny since then either. My mind is like Swiss cheese, filled with more holes than you’d ever think to look at me.

Back in the cab, we were discussing the cabbie’s daughter’s upcoming wedding and whether the cabbie should have to pay for the whole thing when we finally stopped in front of Sonny’s place. (And no, I hadn’t been paying all that much attention, so I could not even begin to tell you how we had arrived at this topic.) As nicely as possible, I asked the cabbie, if he wouldn’t mind leaving the meter running while I went upstairs to get money from my godfather. I told him I’d leave my watch with him even, so he could be sure I’d come back. (And I wasn’t trying to stick the guy with a broken watch if that’s what you were thinking – it was still valuable even without the battery.) He said that it wasn’t necessary to leave my watch since I had a nice, honest face and blah blah blah. I thought to myself that there were plenty of nice, honest faces who, when it came right down to it, would still stiff you for the fare.

I rang Sonny’s bell, which was attached to an intercom. A woman answered. It was Rosa Rivera, Sonny’s second wife after Mom. And man, was I ever glad that she was home! My nice, honest face was in no mood to be arrested, if that’s even what happens to people who don’t pay their fares.

“Hi, Rosa Rivera,” I said. Everyone always called Rosa Rivera by her first and last name. When I was little, I asked Sonny about it, and he told me that it was because she had a stepsister growing up who had also been Rosa (Rosa Marquez or something.) So the other Rosa was Rosa Marquez and Rosa was always Rosa Rivera. But that might have just been one of Sonny’s stories, I don’t know. “Um Rosa Rivera, this is Nomy. I have a cab outside, and I need to borrow some money to pay the guy.”

There was a pause, long enough to make me a tad nervous, and then she said, “My God, Naomi Porter! I have not seen you in ages and ages. My baby, I will be right down.” She didn’t have much of an accent, but even over the squeaky intercom, all her y’s came out sounding like j’s – *I haven’t seen jew.*

I could hear the freight elevator lumbering toward the ground floor, and then Rosa Rivera emerged from the elevator. Sonny always said, “That woman certainly knows how to make an entrance,” and it was true I guess. She had her hair in a bun and was wearing her work clothes, which consisted of black tights, a black leotard, a black shawl tied around her waist, high-heeled shoes, and a whole lot of red lipstick. Rosa Rivera was a professional tango dancer and tango teacher. She really had excellent posture, too. I stood up straighter just thinking about seeing her.

“Naomi,” she said, throwing her arms around me and kissing me on both cheeks. Despite all her lipstick, Rosa Rivera was pretty skilled at kissing a person in such a way that it didn’t leave marks. “How are you, my baby?”

“Um, would you mind paying the cabbie? The meter’s still running,” I said.

“Yes, of course!”

Rosa Rivera was the type of person you had to remind to pay the cabbie even if you'd just told her two minutes ago. She paid the cabbie, and then we rode back up to Sonny's studio where they both lived.

"Darling, how are you?" she repeated in the elevator.

I thought about the question. "Cold," I said finally.

She laughed. "I'll make a cup of tea to warm you up. Is Chloe still dancing day and night?"

Chloe is my younger sister by one year. She used to be a ballerina before she blew out her knee, I'm not sure when. "No, she got hurt," I said.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rosa Rivera said. "She was exquisite; she really was."

If you hadn't noticed by now, I come from a family of artists. Like, they all just do things. Personally, I have never been particularly artistic. And no, my injury did not give me some amazing, extraordinary talent that I didn't know I had. I've met some people like that, though. Like, people who can no longer speak or see, so they start to paint or sculpt or whatever they can come up with to express themselves. But my own injury was neither that bad nor that good. Sometimes I think I'd like to be an actress, but not the kind in the movies. One on the stage with all these great words in my head. It would be pretty relaxing being someone else every now and again. And also, to be able to memorize everything you are and to know exactly what everyone expected from you all the time and how they would react. I doubt that makes any sense to you, though. Before I dropped out, I was supposed to be in the English Department's production of *Hamlet*. My main part was the Player Queen, but I had to play other parts, too. The only way you got the lead part at Monty was if you kissed everyone's ass.

Sonny's place was the whole floor. When the elevator doors opened, you were there. And from the moment the elevator doors opened, I sort of thought something was wrong. What you'd usually find when you first walked in were canvases or video monitors or old carburetors or buckets of glue or whatever Sonny happened to be working on at the time. But on this day, the whole place was just cleared out, empty.

"Is he in?" I asked Rosa Rivera.

"Is who in?" she asked.

"Sonny, of course."

"Mi querido, Sonny es muerto!"

I didn't speak Spanish (not that I know of, at least), but somehow I knew what she was saying. "He's dead?"

"He has been gone almost two years now," she said this as gently as possible.

"You know that!"

And I suppose this information should have been pretty shocking. And you're probably thinking I should have started crying and pulling out my hair and banging the walls with my fists and screaming WHY, WHY, WHY, like a normal person would. But to be honest, this sort of thing had been happening to me a lot lately, and I was getting pretty used to it. I was getting pretty freaking fantastic at being numb to everything. So, I just nodded and said, "Oh, I guess I forgot."