

LAST
YEAR
WITH
MADDY

by Anna Rosner



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For Sarah Holmes and her brother, Tim
and
for the Victoria Street Girls

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CHAPTER 1

by Aviva Adelman

I didn't mean to lose my only friend.

Even though I just turned twelve, I've apparently lost more than a few. According to my mother, at least. She says that when I was in kindergarten, I would invite a different friend home from school every week to play on my swing set. When she saw a new girl walk through the door, my mother would just look at me sideways and ask where last week's friend went.

I don't actually remember any of that, but I do remember losing Henrietta Schultz in grade one. She said my red overalls made me look like Elmo. I wasn't really sure who Elmo was until I watched *Sesame Street*, and that was it. I never spoke to Henrietta Schultz again.

I lost Amelia Frank when she cancelled our playdate

for a better deal, which is to say a party at Kim Plotnik's house. Kim was popular, even though she had bad breath, and she didn't invite me. So that was the end of Amelia. Her mother made her call me and say she was sorry, but I just hung up the phone.

My mother says I'm *too sensitive*. She also says I overuse italics when I do assignments for school. So for *revenge*, I'm going to use *lots* in this *book*.

Which brings me to an important point: why I'm writing this book at all. I did have one friend, for a long time. A best friend. It must have been destiny, because Madeline Li-Quinn, or Maddy, was my neighbour from birth. I think her name sounds like a poem because it has lots of different "i" sounds. Her mum is Chinese and her dad is Irish, but Maddy looks more like her mum. Apparently when Maddy and I first met as babies, I reached over and pulled her black hair, which was sticking straight up from her head, and she smacked me in the nose. My mum says I was probably jealous because I was still bald. To be honest I think I'm still kind of bitter about the hair thing, because my curly hair makes me look like I stuck my head in a blender.

So Maddy was the first playdate I ever had, and as soon as I could dial, the first friend I ever phoned. Since

grade one, we called each other every day, even though she lived three houses away. If our parents told us to get off the phone, we'd just meet outside and sit on the curb, sometimes in our pajamas. There were almost no cars in our neighbourhood. Every once in a while, if one came, Maddy and I would stare down the driver and give them *nasty eyes* so they wouldn't come back and disturb our street. Maddy made nasty eyes better than me. She could do it without her eyes rolling back in her head.

Maddy was a different kind of girl, like me. When I say *different*, I mean we didn't like any of the things the girls in our grades liked. Especially Petite Pennies, which were *everywhere* in grade two. Petite Pennies were these weird dolls that fit in your pocket, and you could carry them around, like hamsters, only they had a way creepier face than a hamster. Maddy's mother said that if she ever needed to perform an exorcism, she would use a Petite Penny. You could buy the dolls clothes and exchange them to declare your undying love to a friend, but if anyone ever asked me if I wanted a Petite Penny, I would suggest they give me their cookie instead. I mean, at least the cookie would serve a purpose.

So Maddy and I, we never bought in to the latest

craze, or as Maddy used to say, the latest *crazy*. And there have been lots of them over the years. Petite Pennies were replaced by Tinkle Trinkets, which were ugly plastic bracelets (*definitely* toxic), and then Bobble Babies, which were just stuffed animals. We saw absolutely no reason to call them “babies.” Girls at school would squeal, “Look at my new baby!” and cradle it in their arms like an actual baby, but Maddy and I, we’re more *literal*. So we would just roll our eyes and pretend to barf, because we’d already donated our stuffed animals to Goodwill years ago.

After the Petite Pennies and the Bobble Babies, the Regular Kids in our grade started doing the Skanky Leg, which is a weird dance that makes people look like they have to go to the toilet. So Maddy and I just decided we’d better check out of elementary school for good. Mentally, anyway. I mean, that stuff was *weird*.

Maddy and I liked other things. I guess those things made *us* kind of weird. What made Maddy different from the Regular Kids is that she was a musician. I don’t mean she took violin or piano like any Regular Kid did, playing horrible scales out of tune until the neighbours turned on their hairdryers to drown them out. I mean Maddy was a real musician, like one that

gives concerts. She started playing the violin when she was three. *Three*. She had this tiny little violin that had stickers on it to show her where to put her fingers, but after a while, she didn’t need the stickers anymore. Her hands just knew where to find the notes, and she almost never played out of tune. So she graduated from playing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” in about a month, and now she plays Bach and Mozart and lots of other FDGs, as she calls them, which means Fossilized Dead Guys. But since we’re *staunch feminists* Maddy always learns pieces by women, too, like Clara Schumann and Rebecca Clarke. Sometimes Maddy even plays music by women who aren’t dead. You don’t have to be dead to be good, she says. Or maybe I should say she *said*.

I figured out Maddy was special after I went to this violin competition with her when we were six. She played in the finals of the Kiwanis Festival and there was a grey-haired judge and everything. He looked like he was about five minutes from a quadruple bypass, which is probably what happens when you have to listen to little kids play the violin all day. He never smiled at the competitors and just pressed his fingers together like he was listening to the Pope in church or something. Anyway, all these kids got on stage one by one and played

so badly I could have sworn there was a narwhal dying in there. I mean, the way Maddy played was just totally different. She sounded like *music*. And while we were waiting for her turn, my eyes just got bigger and bigger because I knew she was going to win. And when she went on stage to accept her trophy, which was silver for some reason, even though it was first place, I clapped so hard my hands hurt. They were still red when I got home.

Even though I didn't play an instrument, I started to learn about all the stuff Maddy was doing because I spent a lot of time at her house. She practised before and after dinner, sometimes two hours a day. And I guess I got used to classical music, even though the only thing my mother ever listens to is Nina Simone and Aretha Franklin, who are from the sixties. I like them, too. They are *staunch feminists*.

My father, on the other hand, has no time for music. He's busy searching the universe. No kidding. My dad is a professor in the Department of Astronomy. You would not believe the nerds in there. My mother and I always giggle about the professors who wear the same brown clothes every day for months. My dad changes his shirts (I think), from one brown shirt to another, and

on special occasions he might go wild and bust out a blue shirt, but there is no one less interested in fashion than my dad. The annual department photos are hilarious. Maddy and I always try to guess how long it's been since they've had a shower.

Anyway, my father researches the *composition of stars*, which are sometimes filled with gold and silver. That's a fact. As far as dads go, mine isn't mean but he literally has his head in the clouds. My father loves space, and I think most of him will be up there forever and never come down. The stars are serious business.

The truth is I like stars, too. We rent a cottage in Muskoka in the summertime, where I am now. Here, away from the city lights, you can see millions of stars. They're beautiful. Sometimes there are shooting stars, which are actually meteors. My dad says that some stars are so far away that by the time we can see their light, the star is already burnt out. I don't really understand the science of that, but I know it makes me sad.

And another factoid about my dad: he's old. Not like my Bubby Clara old, who's my mum's mother, but he's old for a dad. My friends' fathers are all about forty or a bit more, but my dad is almost sixty. Nineteen years older than my mother. Now that I understand where

babies come from, a big part of me wants to know if my three-year-old brother, Ethan, was an *accident*. Which is a word that never made sense to me. Accidents are for cars and for when you drop your sandwich. Anyway.

When she isn't taking care of my brother, my mother is busy painting in her studio, which is downtown in the slummiest part of London, Ontario. Artists like to have their studios in slummy areas because it makes them feel *authentic*. My mum's a famous artist, or kind of. She has exhibitions all over Canada and sometimes in the US. Once she even went to France, where she showed at a gallery in Lyon. I've only seen photos, because she didn't invite me.

I didn't want to see France anyway.

My mum's also one of those people who became a mother because that's what people are *supposed* to do, but in truth I don't think it appeals to her all that much. She'd rather be thinking about art. In fact, the very first exhibition she ever had was about the *oppression of motherhood*. She took my diapers and painted them all sorts of colours and hung them on a clothesline. Weird if you ask me, but the newspapers thought it was *genius*. So she's busy a lot, and I can't bug her when she's working at home, because she sometimes paints in the basement,

too. *Not now, Aviva*, she says, *just give me a few more minutes*. But minutes always turn into hours. So I learned a long time ago that if I had a problem, I had to go to Maddy.

Only now I can't anymore.

I have to start grade seven without her.

I wonder if she'll even look at me.

CHAPTER 2

Missing Maddy Metaphors (or MMMs) #1: It feels like there's a hole inside of me I can't fill.

Wow, I typed nine pages yesterday. Pretty good. I typed so late that my mother got annoyed and came into my cottage bedroom (which is more like a broom closet) and gave me this whole dramatic *Aviva-Marilyn-Adelman-it's-almost-midnight* sigh. So I gave her back a *Rebecca-Hannah-Adelman-did-you-forget-it's-summer* whine. My middle name is Marilyn because she was my dad's mother, who died before I was born. And my parents called me Aviva because my dad likes palindromes, or words that are spelled the same backwards and forwards. I have no idea why that's a good thing, but whatever floats your boat.

I noticed that it's getting dark earlier in Muskoka.

School is only a few weeks away, and the thought of it is giving me a stomachache, but that could also be the weird fish we had for dinner. I guess I haven't told you the reason I am a *different* kind of girl at school, and maybe everywhere else. Actually there are probably *reasons*, plural, and most of them are depressing. My brother might be part of the reason, because windbag Sophie Lalonde has a sister in Ethan's daycare and Sophie blabbed the whole story, but I'll get to that.

So one reason I'm different is that I'm not allowed to have a phone like most kids in my grade, and neither is Maddy. Our parents say we have to wait until we're in high school. I don't really care that much because I have a computer in my room for the Internet, and Maddy and I are always together anyway. Well, we *were* always together.

The second reason I'm different is way worse. I don't know why, but I always say the *wrong thing* when I don't mean to, and then after, I feel like shrivelling up like a raisin and disappearing into the floor. Sometimes kids roll their eyes at me or call me stupid, and I have to swallow hard to get the lump in my throat to go away.

The third reason isn't so bad, and I guess you could say it's even good, but it definitely makes me different

from the Regular Kids: I like to read. I *really* like it.

When I was little, I read all kinds of things that Regular Kids didn't, mostly poems. At first, I only read poems for *young people* but then my bubby gave me a giant book of poetry for adults and I just kept going. I really like one poem by a man named Tennyson (another FDG, or Fossilized Dead Guy, in case you forgot). It's about the Lady of Shalott, and my bubby explained the whole sad story to me. She even took me to see a painting of the Lady of Shalott in the Art Gallery of Ontario. So here's the short and skinny of her, or whatever that expression is: The Lady of Shalott is cursed and imprisoned in a castle. She can only look at the world through a mirror, and if she ever looks out the window, she dies. But one day she sees a smoking-hot knight, Lancelot, and she's done with prison. She leaves the castle, finds a little boat, writes her name on it, and drifts down the river. Brace yourself for the unhappy ending: she dies in the boat. But she has a note pinned to her dress:

The web was woven curiously,
The charm is broken utterly
Draw near and fear not, – this is I,
The Lady of Shalott.

I guess the point is, everyone saw her for the first time, and everyone learned her name. She *existed*.

Another poet I like is Leonard Cohen, because he sings, too, though my bubby says he misses the low notes and the high notes and the notes in between. His poetry is also a little easier to understand. Don't get me wrong though: my *staunch feminist* brain means I love women poets, too. I like Edna St. Vincent Millay and Maya Angelou and Margaret Atwood and even this French poet from the 1500s named Louise Labé, who had no luck with boys. She was one awesome feminist and she even jousted, but she fell in love with a nitwit and started writing poems about him. Anyway, the love didn't work out but some of the poems are good. Labé tells women to stop sewing all the time and *write*. That's pretty brave for the 1500s. So I figure that right now, I need to be brave like her and write.

Truth be told, there's a *lot* I don't understand in poems. If I can't figure it out, I call my bubby in Toronto to discuss. My bubby is hilarious because when she talks poetry, she makes Earl Grey tea and tells me to do the same. *Fancy a cuppa?* She says to add milk and *one lump of sugar*. Then she puts on this really upper-class British accent to make her explanations sound like she's a pro-

fessor at Oxford. Sometimes we talk for an hour. And when she's done explaining she says things like *Toodeloo, my duck, don't forget to give me a tinkle on the blower*, which sounds like it means *don't forget to pee on my hairdryer*, but it really means *Goodbye, sweetheart, don't forget to call me on the phone*. I think it's safe to say that everyone in my family is slightly bonkers, but not in a bad way.

Sometimes I ask my librarian to explain poems, too, but Ms. Novak usually says that whatever my interpretation is, it's good. Except if there happens to be hanky-panky in the poem that I didn't quite catch (hanky-panky is what my bubby calls *sex*). Then Ms. Novak just blushes and says, "Uh, maybe ask your mother about that one, Aviva." She also wants me to start writing my own poetry, and I have tried, but for now this book is plenty enough. I guess my brain can't stretch that far. It's busy thinking about Maddy and organizing my mental list of *VIT* or *Very Important Things*, which keeps getting longer.

My little brother is definitely a VIT, and maybe my mum's chocolate chip cookies when I'm hungry, but these days, safety is pretty high up there, too. I'm prone to panic, which probably comes from saying the *wrong thing* all the time. It's not the serious kind of panic where

you feel like you're dying, but the sweaty palm kind that makes you feel like you need to sit on the toilet. Those episodes come and go. More so now, since I lost Maddy.

I don't really want to remember the last year we were friends, but unfortunately my excellent memory doesn't let me forget much. Here in Muskoka, I like to go down to the dock and listen to the water and the loons, which look a bit like ducks but don't quack. They wail, mostly to find out where their family is, and the family answers back. It always makes me think of Maddy, and I guess I look pretty miserable. So last week, when my mum was watching me stare across the lake for the thousandth time, she suggested I write down everything I was feeling. She said I should write a book about Maddy and me, and even about my brother, Ethan. At first I wasn't sure I wanted to face it all, but then I thought of Louise Labé.

I spent some of Last Year with Maddy, but mostly without her.

This is harder than I thought.

I think I have to take a cry break.

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