



Here's  
the  
Thing

Emily O'Beirne



## DEDICATION

This story is dedicated to a book called *Emma Who Saved my Life* and to its author Wilton Barnhardt. His story, discovered in my teen years, launched many a subway journey for me for me and is the inspiration for Zel and Prim's adventures in this book.



She still sends me pictures. They pop up on my phone every now and then, these silent reminders of her.

Or sometimes they arrive by the snail trail of the post. I'll find the thin envelope sandwiched between bills and real estate letters addressed to the last tenants. And when I break the seal, my heart beating a predictable storm, there'll be a single photograph, slid between the sheets of flimsy envelope paper, the image unmarked by its long journey. But instead of feeling that little thrill I used to when she sent me pictures—because it meant she was thinking of me—it just hurts.

I file them away in a desk drawer, where I don't have to look at them but can feel safe in the knowledge that they exist.

We used to do it all the time, send pictures. Not of each other or ourselves. Neither she nor I are the type for that kind of navel-gazing crap. We took photos of randomness, sent only to amuse: a close-up of a cafeteria French fry looking unlike any known food; a spectacularly stupid scribble on a toilet wall; an old man in girls' sweatpants at the bodega. It was how we narrated the story of our day to each other, back and forth with images of our minutiae. We didn't post them for everyone else to see. We weren't trying to stage our existence like so many kids at school, glossing their lives with the right hashtag and filter. It was our own private conversation.

These days I send her words. I send her words because I desperately need them back from her. But she only sends those same pictures. She refuses to change the terms. And even though I'd love to grab her and shake her, I also know she's just doing what she always does, studiously ignoring whatever she doesn't want to pay attention to.

But it's not fair. Because on that day at Coney Island, the terms did change. And now I need her to *talk*. I need her to explain her sudden lack of ways to

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say things. I need her to explain why she's never online when I am. Why she didn't come to meet me that day we were going to Far Rockaway. Why she's disappeared, all but for a few pictures in the mailbox. Pictures that make her silence more profound, not less.

And I keep writing, hoping something will rub that silence raw, open a wound. And then maybe she'll be forced to release words from that human fortress she builds.

## CHAPTER 1

As soon as she hears the words “New York”, the blonde princess perks up.

“You actually *lived* there?” Her voice is still measured, but I can hear the hint of intrigue. Suddenly I’m worth something. She straightens her blazer, looking curious and a touch self-conscious. Like the mention of that city has chafed at the all-comforting sense of superiority she held a second ago when she sized up my loose-haired, loose-jeaned, couldn’t-give-a-crap eyeliner look. Now her perfectly braided hair, subtle eye make-up, and her prefect’s badge don’t stand a chance against me (well, New York). It’s like she suddenly feels like the boring provincial cliché she is.

Please don’t think I’m a bitch, describing this girl like that. I’m not a bitch. Really, I’m not. It’s just that you weren’t here ten minutes ago. I swear it was surreal. She was nice as pie when Mum was here, making small talk, telling us about the school excursions and clubs and extra university prep courses they offer. Then, the minute Mum went in to chat with the senior school coordinator, she went on this total backspin from perky polite to general disinterest. All before the office door even closed.

Of course, that was before I uttered the four, golden ‘lived in New York’ words. Now she’s all ears.

So excuse me for judging, but you have to admit it’s kind of deeply shallow on her part. Like something out of a bad teen movie. She’s one of those popular girls, all shiny and judge-y and awaiting her comeuppance, the one who underestimates the new girl at the start. This, of course, casts me as the nerdy but likeable girl. The one who’ll either seek revenge on all the high-definition girls like this evenly tanned overachiever next to me or else become wildly popular by getting a makeover from a gay man, making some excellent quips, and then dating from the girl-clique’s private male gene pool property.

Believe me, people, when I say that NONE of this is going to happen. What *will* happen, if Mum and Dad magically convince me go to this school, is that I will put my head down and stay as invisible as humanly possible. Because if she is a taster of the school social menu, I plan to officially bow out of all interpersonal efforts.

We've already taken the full tour of the school and grounds, led by the blonde, in chirruping prefect mode, and the principal's assistant. Apparently this school's so exclusive that potential Golden Ones don't even get to meet the principal until they're properly signed on, fees paid. Together they schooled Mum in everything this place has to offer. Because she'll be the one paying the fees for the Olympic swimming pool and the sky-lit art rooms, right? And while I dragged my feet behind them, I didn't get a chance to find out if all the other students are carbon, depressing copies of this one either. All the girls (yes, only girls, which you would think would make me happy but it actually doesn't) were tucked away in the classrooms. But my guess is, given the North Shore location and the amount of zeroes I saw on the fees list, that this sample of blonde *wyyyy*-upper-middle-class Sydney sitting right here is probably representative enough for me to turn and run for the hills. Or at least back to the inner west.

"Like, New York, New York? Not the state," the girl asks, wrinkling her nose slightly as if she can't imagine that hallowed city allowing rabble like me in. Which, of course, shows how little she knows about the place. If she thinks I'm rabble, she's got another thing coming when she and her fake designer suitcase finally make it there. If New York knows how to do anything, it's how to produce prime rabble. It prides itself on it.

"Yes, the city," I say patiently instead of sighing the sigh of the withering, which is what I really want to do. If I were Prim, I probably would have. I'm the kind of person who can manage to stay on the right side of polite, but Prim's got zero tolerance for girls like this. But then, Prim's got zero tolerance for most people. "We lived in Midtown."

The girl looks blank.

"It's the middle of Manhattan, near Times Square," I explain as two girls in uniform, looking just like this one but brunette and *sans* prefect badge, peer into

the office. One says something, and the other cackles as they pass. I shudder. Get me out of here. Now.

Blondie perks up some more. "That's where they have the New Year's parade?"

I nod.

"Did you go?"

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. I wouldn't be caught dead there, fighting for a square inch of space with a gazillion tourists and out-of-towners. The parade is what television is made for. It's for parents and old people and the rest of America to watch while New York goes out. Prim and I had planned to spend New Year's Eve planning our New World Order. I don't have time to fill you in on the details right now, but let me tell you this much—this girl here would have trouble surviving once we run the show.

Before I can respond, Mum is finally ejected from the coordinator's office. I'm so relieved to see her I have to stop myself from jumping up and hugging her. She gives me a thin smile like she, too, has been to private school hell and back.

The coordinator is right behind her. She's a shaggy middle-aged woman wearing a pastel sweater dress straight out of the eighties. Now I really feel sorry for Mum. Ten minutes in the presence of that outfit is probably pushing at the edges of human endurance.

"I hope to see you next week, Zelda," the coordinator says to me. "Meaghan will show you back to the gate, won't you?"

Blondie McPerfect nods enthusiastically and leads us back to the car park full of shiny Land Cruisers and zippy hatchbacks. She chatters all the way, practically igniting with excitement when she hears Mum's line of work. I smirk to myself. It must be killing her that two such unimpressive-looking people's life CVs are impressing her so much.

I tune out and watch the school go by. The playing fields are movie-set green, the sprinklers keeping the summer sun from doing its worst. That'd be right. Last night's news said parts of the Blue Mountains are ablaze with bushfires, but North Sydney is lush.

As soon as Meaghan leaves us with a wave and a faux-friendly *see you next week*, I turn to Mum. "I'm not going here. No way."

Mum kind of clicks her tongue, but it's half-hearted too, like she feels just as out of her element. She knows that just because we can afford schools like this monstrosity now doesn't mean we belong to them.

But just in case she wants to argue, I go on. "For starters, I cannot be wearing that dress. You and I both know pink and green does absolutely nothing for me," I say in my best snooty voice.

Mum unlocks the doors and chuckles. That's what I love about Mum. Even if we have enough money, and even if in her secret wannabe heart she'd love for her daughter to attend a school like this, she also knows it's not really me or her. Or Dad either. Or anyone we know, really. We'll never be like those people. Never *want* to be.

"Okay," she says wearily, yanking open the car door. "We'll talk to Rosa about Antony's school."

I nod, trying not to grin too hard. My cousin Antony's school is one of those inner-city places with cool teachers and a strong arts game. It's also got a great academic reputation too (otherwise Aunt Rosa wouldn't have even let Antony darken its doors). I don't know why we didn't just go there first. I guess we were a bit curious about the posh school. Now I am most definitely not.

Minutes later we're driving back to the safety of the inner west, where the world makes sense and I can breathe without inhaling all that gross pretension. I scrutinise Mum's face, checking she's not still hanging onto that 'one of best schools in Sydney' dream.

"You know I can't do a place like that," I say. "Don't you?"

She lets down the window a little and nods. "It's probably a bit...stiff for you, I know. But I wanted to see if maybe you'd like it. We can afford it now. And it would get you into any university course you wanted."

I nod, breathing in the blend of traffic fumes and fresh sea air that has come to mean Sydney for me. "I know. But I just want to go to a normal school with normal people. Not a place packed to the rafters with bland catalogue models and pristine everything. It's boring."

Mum grins at the catalogue comment. I definitely know how to metaphor my way into my mum's frame of reference. She nods. "Okay, we'll go see Rosa tonight. We've got a little time."



I sigh and tip my head back against the seat. A week. A week until I have to start school. And for the thousandth time since we got here, I wish we were back in New York. I even wish for the stuff that I hated at the time, like struggling through the crowded sidewalks and freezing air to my ratty school three blocks away. Like the obnoxious smell of the laneway under our fire escape. Like the creeper who owned the bodega across the street from us. It's better than getting used to everything all over again.

After eight months, New York had just started to feel like home. And even though it was smack bang in the middle of the most famous city in the world, it became my normal. And now it's gone. And if I have to leave our flat and my photography classes and the subway project—and Prim—I at least want to be at a school I don't hate.

## CHAPTER 2

“Go on.” Aunt Rosa points at the front door of their miniature terrace house. “Go show your cousin around Sydney.”

I trail Antony down the narrow footpath. My cousin’s gotten even taller. He’s wide too. Not fat, just thick. And he kind of lurches as he walks, his hands tucked in his front pockets, his thick black helmet of hair falling forward. It’s like his head, or maybe his brain, is leading, steering his body where it wants to go. It’s a weird and endearing combination of clumsy and businesslike.

He doesn’t stop walking, or even say anything, until we get to the water fifteen minutes later. Then he flaps a hand at the harbour. “Opera house,” he mumbles.

I grin and fight the urge to let out a big fat “duh”. And it’s even harder to restrain myself when he points out the Harbour Bridge. I don’t, though. He’s my cousin, even if I haven’t seen him in years; and he’s had it kind of rough lately. Besides, I kind of like the perfunctory nature of his tour guiding. Bare minimum sightseeing.

I mean, I’m not that excited by a bridge, or a building that looks like plates stacked on a dish rack anyway. Once you’ve seen pictures of famous places, you’ve seen them, right? Like, how exciting could the Eiffel Tower be in reality when you’ve seen it a thousand times on posters and in movies?

Sights pointed at, Antony clearly decides his job is done. We march back to Surry Hills and stop at a tiny café sandwiched between a skate shop and yet another café. This one is teeny and wood-trimmed and cute as hell, with its hanging plants and colourful Tupperware. Nearly every table is full. I hunt down an empty one outside and look around at the outfits and haircuts. I’m sniffing some definite hipsterville.

Once he’s got a flat white in hand, Antony brightens up. By which I mean he actually speaks to me. “How long are you here?”

“A year at least. How’ve you been?” This wouldn’t usually be such a loaded question, but this time it is. His dad, my Uncle Ant, died of a heart attack eight months ago. He was only thirty-eight. And since then, it’s just been Antony and Rosa and Madi, his little sister.

When Ant died, Rosa had to go back to teaching, and it was hard for them for a while. It was hard for Dad too. He really missed his brother, and he was frustrated that we were so far away and he couldn’t help Rosa. His other brothers were around to help. (I’ve got a *ton* of uncles on Dad’s side. Um, okay, so you should also probably know I can be prone to exaggeration—it’s more like four.) But as the oldest, Dad felt bad for being away.

I haven’t seen Antony since it happened. I don’t know if I’d survive if either of my parents died.

“I’m fine. Mum and Madi are okay. It’s all fine. We’re coping.” He sounds like he’s reciting something off the back of his hand. I stir sugar into my tea and watch him watch the group of kids at the next table as they pass around a phone, laughing at something onscreen. Then he looks back and shrugs at me. It seems to say, *I don’t know what else to tell you.*

I nod and dutifully change the subject, getting straight to the second most pressing topic. “So, what’s your school like?”

Mum and Rosa are talking about the school right now. I have a feeling that by the time we get back, I’ll be going there, so I want the lowdown, *stat*.

“It’s good. Lots of arts, less sports. Which means less rugby wankers.” He sips his coffee. “And that’s fine with me.”

I smile. Fine with me too. Organised sport is *not* my thing. And beefsteak rugby players? Definitely not my thing.

“And there’s no school uniform either,” he says.

I perk right up at that. After this week’s whirlwind web tour of posh inner-Sydney schools, I’ve seen enough colour variations of pinstripes and plaid to last me for years. I’m perfectly happy to jeans it for the rest of my education.

I listen to him talk about the school in his slow, proper way and remember how much I like my cousin. Antony used to be our family’s “problem child”. According to Aunt Rosa, anyway. When we were kids, he was really super quiet

and he wouldn't talk to anyone. Except me. I didn't see him that much, but when I did, I *made* him talk to me.

I remember hearing the grown-ups talking about him. There were whispers of things like autism and Asperger's tests. But Mum told me later that the doctors told Rosa he was just your everyday, non-specific socially awkward and to let him catch up at his own pace. That was tough for Rosa and Ant to stomach, I think. They were so loud and social, and they loved to have dinner parties and barbecues all the time. Then here was this kid who'd barely say 'boo' to anyone for his first twelve years.

When he first started high school, he went to a Catholic boys' school, but they let him change in Year 9 after a shitty year of bullying and macho boy crap. I could have told them it was the worst place to send him.

Don't get me wrong. Antony is definitely a geek of the all-out variety. But he's also perfectly happy existing in his geekdom. Like, if someone called out his insane levels of nerd to his face, he'd probably just shrug and say nothing. He doesn't aspire to be any different, and I'd bet money he has zero secret aspirations to climb any kind of social ladder. That's one of the things I love about him. He quietly does not give a crap. And I think he's at the kind of school now where it's easier to be that way.

"So, what subjects are you going to do?" he asks.

"Not sure. I have to match what I was doing at my last school. English, History, Bio, Psych. Art, maybe? Do they have French?"

"Don't think so."

"I guess I'll pick something else."

"You should do Drama with us."

"Drama?" Rosa told Mum that Antony is into theatre stuff now. I wouldn't have picked him for a drama kid. He's so...still. "And who's 'us'?"

"My friends. Drama's great at this school." He drains his coffee. "So's our teacher."

I think of the stupid little musicals my old school back in Canberra used to put on, all dancing and singing and embarrassing costumes. Not my thing at all. I tell Antony as much.

He shakes his head. "No, it's not like that. Peter puts on a big school play every year to make the parents and the principal happy, but the class stuff we do is way cooler."

"I'll think about it."

He nods and folds his arms over his chest. "So, how gutted were you to move here?"

"Pretty gutted. It's such an awesome thing for Dad, though."

Did I tell you that part? That Dad is the reason we moved here? He got offered this amazing contract in Sydney for a year, and Mum was about to finish in New York, so they decided it was perfect timing. I, on the other hand, did not.

When we get back to Antony's house, Mum and Rosa are sitting around the kitchen table with Anthony's yearbook and catalogues around them. Mum looks up at me, and I know it's decided. And I can see relief in her eyes, like she knows I'm not going to argue this time.

She points at the catalogue. "Come look at this."

## CHAPTER 3

I spend the Monday before school starts hanging around our new house in Glebe. There's nothing else to do. I don't know anyone, and I don't know the area. Dad says I should go out and explore, but I can't be bothered. Besides, I still miss New York and Prim, and it's hard to get enthusiastic about *another* new place.

Mum's home too, supposedly settling me in. But what she's really doing is mainlining coffee and working frantically from home on the back deck, laptop on her thighs, preparing to start her new job at the Sydney agency.

Yesterday, Mum and Dad dragged me to Glebe Markets. It was kind of cool. It's a little flea market set up in a primary school, full of all kinds of food and crafts and second hand stuff. I found a cute green shirt and put it straight over my tank, unbuttoned, to protect me from the Aussie sun. I'd forgotten how brutal it is. Mum bought a plant to hang in the sunroom window, and we ate sugary crepes as we wandered the leafy streets back to our house. The sky's so blue and the air so sweet smelling it's nearly enough to make me happy to be here. Nearly.

I drag myself out for a walk. Mostly because I'm sick of my bare new room but still too lazy to decorate it yet. Exploring a city is no fun without Prim's dire imaginings to make everything seem like an adventure even when it's not. She loved to point out people or places and think of the worst, grossest scenarios possible for them. I don't know how well she'd do here. Sydney doesn't really lend itself to that kind of creepy imagining. It's too sunny and big-skied and normal.

I plod down the hill and turn down a random side street, nearly bumping into a woman walking four tiny dogs, all mismatched breeds with matching polka dot scarves around their necks. Then I notice she's wearing the same scarf. Total Glebe eccentric. I wish I had my camera with me as I skirt the pooch parade and keep walking, the breeze blowing warm over my bare arms.

In New York, it's freezing right now. I think of Prim kicking trails through the icy slush in Bryant Park and frowning into the steely winter sunshine. *It's only a year*, I tell myself. Then maybe we'll get to go back. Unless one of my parents' careers gets in the way *again*. Why did I have to be born to such overachieving parents? Especially when I'm such a normal, regular achiever? Not under, but definitely not over.

I always thought when we came back, it would be to Canberra. That's where I used to call home. Not that this is something to boast about. Canberra's kind of like Sydney's boring great aunt, the one you have to invite to Christmas because she never married or had kids of her own to torture on holidays. The one who gives you terrible Christmas presents, like an illustrated children's Bible atlas or a sewing kit.

Suburban Canberra is particularly dire. But I didn't really notice until I was older. When you're a kid, anywhere can be exciting. You make your own fun. So, even though we lived in the beige-brick suburbs, with their rows of matching houses and identical streets, I was never bored. There were parks everywhere, and the footpaths were wide and flawless, perfect for biking and skating and hanging around with all the other kids that roamed the hood. We only went inside for dinner and homework. It wasn't until I was fourteen, when I started realising that maybe I wanted a life beyond my own nature strip, that I actually noticed I was living in a cultural void. Not that I ever thought I'd get to live in New York. That definitely came out of nowhere.

Suddenly the world was huge. Almost *too* huge. When we first arrived, I stuck close to the few city blocks around our apartment, only exploring further with my parents on weekends when we did the tourist stuff like the Empire State Building and the Bronx Zoo.

A lot of kids at my school stuck to their neighbourhoods too, needing nothing outside the few blocks where their apartments and schools and friends existed. And I probably would have done the same if it weren't for Prim and the subway project. But that wasn't until later.

I turn down another street. Glebe is what you'd call eclectic, a random mix of terrace cottages and sprawling weatherboard houses. It's that time of day in Sydney when the sun's thinking about setting and everything goes a bit golden.

It's kind of beautiful. That's the thing. No matter how homesick for New York I feel, I can't help liking this city. Sure, it can be crowded and cranky like any big city, but it's also gilded and sun-drenched and stunning. Here the sky's so big you feel insect-small, and when it's not peak hour, the air smells good, like sea salt and gum trees. And there's always room to move. In New York, everything's up way too close yet totally impersonal at the same time. And the smells? That's a cocktail I could've handled never getting to know. Still, I'd go back there in a second. I would. Even if I had to put up with the worst of the summer's-day-garbage-in-an-alley smell for the rest of my life. Even if it was just for a minute, I'd still go back there and put myself right in front of Prim. Then she'd have to talk to me.

I know what you're thinking. I know you're sitting there thinking this is one of those stories that starts with the main character yanked out of her regular, happy life in a cool place, forced to live somewhere remote and weird where she knows no one. She totally hates it at first, but by the end of the story, she's all transformed and learns to love it and wants to stay forever. Well, let me tell you right now: this is not going to be one of those stories.

What I will do here is what all the heroines in the novels do. I will *endure*. I will live through this year because I love my dad and I'm proud of him and because I'm not a brat child. Meanwhile, I'll enjoy some sunshine and the mild winter and maybe even this new school that sounds a lot less uptight than my old one. But the whole time, I'll be hoping that we're going back at the end of it. Because home is where Prim is.

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I get the feeling that a few folk, just like my blonde prefect friend back there, might get some misguided idea that my life is exotic or something. Just because I used to live in New York. Or maybe thinking that I'm some rich brat who gets to travel all the time.

Nope, it's not like that at all. Like I said, until I was fifteen, the only place I'd ever lived was Canberra. Hardly a high-flying cosmopolitan existence, right? We're not rich, and we're not exactly glamorous. In fact, we're pretty typical middle-of-the-road Aussies. I eat toast with Vegemite for breakfast (I'm a more butter, scraping of veg girl) religiously, Mum's guilty pleasure is *Neighbours* (now,



can you please instantly forget I told you that?), and my Dad's favourite food is ribs from the barbecue. My parents just happen to have glamorous (sounding) jobs, which means I just happened to live in New York for a year.

We moved there for Mum. She started a model agency years ago with a friend in Canberra. She used to be a casting agent, but then she started model booking. I know, I *know*. But it's *so* not as glam as it sounds. Mum spends most of her days on the phone, wrangling clients and drinking enough coffee to razz an elephant. Anyway, she ended up selling out of the company because she said it was too hard for it to grow in a small city like Canberra. Mum *loves* her job as a booker, though. She's really good at it too, which is why a friend helped her land a job with this really big company in New York for a year. They loved her so much there that when Dad got his job here, they offered her an even better spot at their Sydney office. And she took it, she said, because Dad moved to New York for her and the least she could do was move to Sydney for a year. Notice no one's doing anything for me in this equation? Yup, trying not to be bitter.

Anyway, I'm happy she landed this job, but I'm still praying they take her back in the New York office at the end of Dad's contract.

People always ask me the same three questions about living in New York.

Question one: Was it amazing? Well, yes and no. It was definitely kind of mind-blowing at first. I couldn't get over the size and the crowds. And I also remember how weirdly *familiar* everything seemed. I would walk down some streets and think I'd been there before, which is impossible. That's how much American TV and film we see in Australia. Like, sometimes I'd be walking down the sidewalks and there'd be crowds of people and cars and that steam that rises up from the grates on the street (which I always thought was fake). I'd feel like I was on a movie set. It was *so* surreal. Then it just got kind of normal. There were definitely things that weren't amazing too. There was the constant peak hour. There were the bad smells and the constant noise. There was the cold in winter and the heat in summer.

There was the lack of space too, on the street and inside. Our apartment was tiny. We did a house swap. So while we lived in the middle of Manhattan, this guy and his son lived in our three-bedroom house back in Canberra. We won out on location, but they definitely got the sweet end of the space deal. My bedroom

barely fit a bed and a set of drawers. I had to do my homework at the kitchen counter.

Question two: Was it dangerous? I think that's all the movies and TV shows we watch. It didn't *feel* that dangerous. I wouldn't walk around in the middle of the night (even if my parents let me), but I wouldn't do that in Sydney either. There were definitely places on the subway project where Prim and I went that made me feel uneasy. Prim probably did too, though she'd never show it.

Question three: Did you see/meet any celebrities? No. God, I hate this question. And what would it matter if I did? It's not like I was going to march up and chat to them about their latest movie, anyway. I saw some girl I recognised from a TV show once, but I did what any sane person or New Yorker would do and stared surreptitiously from a distance.

Basically, living in New York City was pretty normal. At least it was until Prim came along. When I met her, it became a different place. It became even bigger. It became a place to be discovered. It was exciting.

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