

FICTION

All the boys she ever loved

Jonathan O'Brien

MICHAEL ZANETTI

I remember the first one like I remember them all. This gangly little five-year-old making himself small in the backseat of the car, the middle seat a gap between him and Lacey as they talked on and off the whole drive about whatever it was five-year-olds talked about back then. He'd brought a small cloth bag with him, and he was showing her his action figures, these strong, poorly proportioned men with large heads and reluctant smiles. When we got to the house, I asked him to take off his shoes on the porch and he looked at me worried.

No shoes inside our house, I said. It keeps the carpet clean.

We don't have carpet, Michael Zanetti said. And then he said: You're older than my dad.

And I looked at him and said something like okay, and then he scrunched up his little face as he picked apart his laces and tossed his shoes by the door and that was that.

They spent the day playing, Michael and Lacey. Mel and I took turns keeping an eye on them, popping in every now and again to make sure neither one had hurt the other – but we left them mostly to their own devices, because what were they going to do, they were five, and Mel had been reading a book on Montessori, about the importance of independent play. But then after an hour or so, of course – and this was my objection to

the whole Montessori thing in the first place – we heard Michael crying out all of a sudden, sensitive kid that he was, and I rushed in to see what was what, and there was Lacey, her hand over his hand on a *Thunderbirds* action figure, her other hand on a Barbie Princess with a little cloth over its face, Michael going: Lacey stop it it's not a wedding stop I told you it's a bag cause she's been captured and that's what they put over your head when you're captured come on please no stop.

I asked Lacey what she was doing and she turned to me – her hands not moving from the dolls – and said: They're getting married.

And I said: Does everyone agree that's what's happening?

And Michael Zanetti said: No!

And Lacey said: Shut up, Michael!

And I said: Language, Lacey.

And then Mel's hand was on my back and she leaned down and said to the kids: How about some toasted cheese sandwiches? and everyone agreed that sounded pretty good, even Barbie and the Thunderbird, at least according to Lacey.

After lunch it was time for me to take Michael home and I asked Lacey if she wanted to come and she said she did, and Michael and her were getting along pretty good then, as if they'd never argued at all over whether or not their dolls had been married, and then we were out on the porch and Michael was looking at his shoes with his eyes wide and worried. He put the shoes on his feet and then just sort of held the strings and looked at me. He looked like he was going to cry, and so I asked him if he needed help, and just as I did that Lacey wandered over, already strapped up and ready to go, pointing at her shoes and grinning as she grabbed at my hand and turned to Michael Zanetti to say: Come on, Michael, hasn't your dad heard of velcro?

PETER PETERSON JNR

To start with, he had a stupid name, which made me immediately suspicious, because what kind of parents would do that to a kid, and that was on top of the fact that this was the first boy she'd asked to have over in years, signalling the end of that safe phase we'd all had the pleasure of sharing, where she'd only really hung out with girls. Now here was this twelve-year-old kid on my doorstep, barely getting out a Hello, Mr Rogers before Lacey pulled him inside and through the house so he could get changed to go swim in the new

pool Mel and I had installed just before summer. Lacey was already in her one-piece, and she offered Peter Peterson Jnr her room for him to get naked in, at which point I intervened and said: We have a perfectly good bathroom for getting changed in, and I showed him where it was.

No boys in your room, I said, while the boy was not in her room, and when she complained, I said again: I mean it. He's not going in there today.

Lacey complained that she wanted to show him the new books we'd gone and bought together the day before, to which I said he could wait by the door while she went in and got those books, and then she could show them to him no problem in the living room, or the hallway even, if that was what she wanted to do, and so she said – in a tone I knew would only become more prevalent three months down the line when she turned thirteen – *Fine*.

After they had changed and headed down to the pool, and I'd double-checked I was ready for my early-morning flight, I went and joined Mel on the back deck to drink some fresh juice we'd picked up from the market and also to keep an eye on the pre-teens in the pool.

How's the tongue-twister boy going? I asked and Mel looked at me confused. I said: Peter Peterson is Peter's son. Try saying it five times quickly and tell me this kid doesn't deserve to get bullied.

David. Don't.

Look, he can't even swim.

She's been teaching him.

What, I said, and I frowned, but when I looked down, sure enough, she was right. There was Lacey showing Peter Peterson Jnr how to make it so his arm didn't slap the water on every stroke and would instead sort of glide in, slide into the water all smooth-like, and that made me say to Mel: I don't like that, the way she's touching him.

And Mel said: It's fine. Let them be.

And I said: She should at least be able to find a boy who can swim.

HARRY STYLES

At least Harry Styles could swim, as far as I understood. Sure, he lived on a different continent, and whenever he came over it cost me almost four figures in concert tickets to let Lacey go and see him, but in a way these were good things – in my eyes, the ideal boy was the one who came to the city for just one night at a time, was never left alone with her and just before leaving yelled

out to an entire crowd of teenagers that while he and his friends would like to come back around as soon as they could, in maybe a year or so, he could make no promises. He could swim, but not the whole Atlantic.

Of course, even all this distance could not keep Lacey's life drama free, and one day I got in from my late-Friday flight home and she was in her room crying and I could tell from her eyes that she'd been at it for a while. I knocked on her door and went in and asked her what was going on. And after some comforting and convincing she finally told me in a flood of tears that she'd been talking to Harry Styles online, that she'd got his private MSN off one of her friends whose parents had paid for a VIP pass for the last tour, and that she and Harry had been talking a while and that she'd decided to finally send him a photo of her – which of course made me start yelling. She was crying even harder then, grabbing at my arm and saying: No, Dad, no, just my face, Dad, promise, nothing bad, they taught us about that at school, I swear, just my face – which calmed me down a little, enough at least to ask her what specifically had happened, and she said that when he'd seen the photo of her face he'd told her she was ugly, her nose especially, too big and crooked for her face, is what he'd said.

Harry Styles thinks my nose is ugly, Dad, and it's your fault. You should have never made me learn to ride a bike; I wouldn't have a crooked nose if you hadn't made me ride without training wheels so fast, if you hadn't rushed me all the time – and then she collapsed back into tears.

I rubbed her back and said I was sorry.

And she said: I bet I'd be pretty like Mum if it wasn't for you.

Lacey, you're the most beautiful girl in the world, I said.

You have to say that because it's your fault I'm not beautiful. It's your fault I'm ugly, and now Harry Styles thinks so too.

I rubbed her back some more, pulled her head onto my leg to use as a pillow and I stroked her hair until she grew calm, which she finally did after a while. When her breathing felt normal against me, I asked her if she really thought she'd been talking to Harry Styles, the real Harry Styles, and she said maybe but that she didn't really know, probably not, and admitting that out loud made her calm down a little more, and it was then that I asked her if she thought it might be one of her friends playing a trick on her.

That's a pretty shitty trick, she said.

Hey, language, I said. But yes, it's a pretty shitty trick.

And that made her laugh. Language yourself, she said, and then she nestled into my leg even more.

JOHNNY WILSON

It was Mel who first raised with me the subject of Johnny Wilson. She said: Our daughter's got a boyfriend.

To which I said: Our daughter's fifteen.

To which she said: And now she has a boyfriend.

I said I wanted to meet him, and she said she wanted to meet him too, obviously, and I said: You haven't even met him and you're letting her call him her boyfriend, and Mel said it wasn't a matter of letting her say anything – she'd just come home a couple days ago and said it. She doesn't feel she needs permission, Mel said.

And why am I only hearing about this now?

Because it didn't matter before, but now it does matter because he's coming for dinner tomorrow night and you have to be there and you have to be nice, and that's the end of this discussion.

And so, sure enough, I was there when he arrived, standing with Mel a couple metres or so down the hall while Lacey, or Lace as Johnny Wilson called her, opened the door for him, saying: Johnny, I'd like you to meet my mum and dad. Mum and Dad, I'd like you to meet Johnny.

I nodded and stood in place, while Mel walked to meet Johnny halfway down the hall and shook his hand and said: My, my, aren't you tall.

My dad reckons I'm still growing, he said, making his way towards me. And speaking of dads, he said, hello, Mr Rogers.

I looked up at him and said hello and shook his hand, and Mel called out that it was just fine for Johnny Wilson to call me David, and to call her Mel while he was at it.

Over dinner I asked him what he was picking to study for his last couple years of high school, and he said maybe economics and IT, and maybe also music, to balance it all out. He said he was working on making music with computers, to which I said I preferred stuff with guitars, like Pink Floyd, and he said that Pink Floyd used computers to make some of their music too, and I said: Probably just their later stuff, I bet. And then I asked him if he'd written any songs for our daughter yet and he blushed and she blushed too and Mel said that was very sweet and that she couldn't wait to hear them one

day and then she asked if Johnny wanted any more pasta and he said he did, just a little, because he was – he reminded us, looking at me in particular, maybe – he was still growing after all, and then he had another serve after that too because Mel offered and he was either too polite or too greedy to say no.

After dinner Mel drove our daughter and Johnny Wilson to the movies where she gave them some money for tickets, popcorn and maybe an ice-cream after, and she told them she'd pick them up. Then she came back and asked me what my problem was, exactly, with the young man Johnny Wilson.

What do you mean?

I mean you were rude. All night you were rude, and for what? He's just a kid, for God's sake. A harmless kid.

I just – I have to be sure –

Be sure of what?

You know – that he's right. That he can dot his i's and cross his t's, you know, the important details and stuff. That he can hold his own.

She's not gonna be happy with you, Mel said.

But I said she'd be fine and, sure enough, she was, she said she'd had a good night, and that Johnny had too; at least that's what she told Mel, because she didn't say a thing about it to me, never mentioned Johnny to me so it was only through Mel that I learnt she'd broken it off with him just a few weeks later because he wasn't quite the right fit, and I had to keep myself from saying to Mel that I'd told her so.

DAVID SIMPSON

It was a couple years, then, before the next one, and when he did come round, I didn't like him from the start. There was, of course, the obvious reason not to like him: he had my name, and I don't think I have to tell you why I didn't like the idea of that. And what's more is I was in a bad mood generally around then, because I was about to take a generous severance package as part of a settlement for a work accident onsite out west that meant I'd retire early, but with a half-shattered left arm. And so it didn't help at all that at the same time as all that was happening, Lacey decided to introduce to me and Mel this boy who bore my name like a shiny new replacement model.

Mel did most of the talking the night he came round, and I mostly just drank wine, offering him some as part of a test he managed to pass by saying no, though only after glancing at Lacey, who wasn't drinking either, which should have been clue enough, really; he shouldn't have needed to check.

I was pouring maybe my third glass when I asked him where he planned on studying next year, and he said he thought he'd take a gap year first and then come back and maybe go into finance or law, depending on whether he liked his dad or his mum better at the time he finally came to choose. Which one are you leaning towards at the moment? I asked between sips. If you had to – had to pick.

Well, Dad did get me a surfboard for Christmas, he said. So I guess I'd have to pick finance.

Mel and Lacey laughed at that, and I joined in maybe a little too late.

When he left that night with Lacey on his arm, off to go bowling or something, he shook my hand and said Goodnight, David, like it was some big joke or something, and I said Goodnight, David back, and then he was gone and immediately after the door shut, Mel was on my back and saying: You can't keep doing this, and when I just raised my bad hand up and looked at her, she said: Going so hard on them like that. It's not doing our daughter any favours.

I don't know why you're talking about this like it's some sort of pattern. I've only ever got to meet two of them.

And she said: Exactly.

And I said: I just want whoever she picks to be right for her.

Well, that's up to her, Mel said. And you're not making it any easier for her to figure it out.

Later that night, though, when Lacey got dropped home, maybe too late for my liking, I met her in the living room and when I said hello she jumped. Dad, she said. Christ.

Language, I said, smiling. How was your night?

She answered my questions briefly. They'd gone to an escape room and had ice-cream in the city, but she didn't really give me much more than the facts. I said to her: This isn't an interrogation. I'm really – I'm really asking.

I know you didn't like him, Dad, she said, and when I tried to object, she simply announced she was taking herself to bed, telling me I should sleep it off, too.

BARRY LIEFLING, STEVEN WU, HENRY VAN DER NIET

During Lacey's first semester at university, there was a quick succession of young men who arrived at our front door to pick her up and take her God

knows where for the rest of the night. Even though she was at uni, she still hadn't got her driver's licence, mostly because she refused to let me teach her, even though I had the time, since I was just contracting part-time from home.

I only met these men – Barry, Steven and Henry – once or twice each and I didn't like any of them. Though at least Steven and Henry were easier to deal with than Barry. For starters, they seemed more regular, closer to her age, and less stubbornly sure of themselves. Plus, they never smelled like tobacco. Barry, on the other hand, smoked like a chimney, just like how my dad used to. Mind you, I never saw Barry smoking, but I always smelled it on him when he came around, and I smelled it on her too when he dropped her back home. He had these God-awful tattoos, also, up his whole sleeve, mirroring my bung arm, like he really wanted to show off how able-bodied he was compared to me, draw attention to it, to how he could probably still pick Lacey up, hold her tight, all those responsibilities that were meant to be mine. The few times he came by I made a show of saying goodbye to Lacey, telling her to be safe, to call me if anything happened. I watched him over her shoulder when I hugged her.

Even Mel didn't have much time for that one. I'm gonna make her get her licence, she said. I'm gonna make her let you teach her.

I don't get why you have to make her.

She turned to me, focused for a moment on the mess on my side of the bed we still shared back then – the bottles and plates and papers and cables – and then she looked at me and said: Work it out yourself.

And I didn't like Mel speaking to me like that, which was a thing that had got all too common back then, and I let Mel know that, that I was sick of her treating me like that, and yeah, I got pretty loud about it, but that was no reason for her to start crying all of a sudden, saying: We're not doing this right now; I don't want to – we can't do this right now, which made me get up out of bed and on my feet and insist that we could in fact do this – whatever the hell this was – right now, and then she started crying again and didn't stop until I left the room with a loud grunt and a punch of the wall, an empty wineglass in my bad hand.

FRANCIS BRODEUR

Francis was the first guy she ever brought around to my apartment, which I assumed meant it was serious between them. She told me over the phone

they'd been seeing each other for almost two years, and that she'd decided she'd like me to meet him. I said that sounded really nice, and that I'd like that a lot. We made a date but when I asked her on the phone how she was doing, she ignored me and told me she'd see me on Friday with Francis in tow.

It was good timing, the call, cause it gave me good reason to clean up the place a bit, picking up pizza boxes and shirts strewn about the living room, getting the kitchen up to snuff enough that I could put together a semi-impressive salad alongside a deli-bought lasagne.

I had it in the oven to time well with their arrival, and when they did come in, just a few minutes or so late, I shook Francis' hand and then hugged Lacey for a long time. She was wearing thick make-up, and her eyes were dark, but she was smiling, and that was good, and I told her as much. It's been a while, I said. Are you well? You look well.

She's well, said Francis, and this food smells good.

It's just in the oven, I said. Take a seat. I'll get some wine.

I only drink white, said Francis.

I have white, I said, and he said that was good and I went and poured three glasses, and we all sat on the couch in an L shape and I asked Francis about what he did for work, which was accountancy, and I said he didn't look like an accountant, and he said that was something that tended to work in his favour, but looking at him and his missing professionalism, I doubted that it did. I asked Lacey how her work at the legal clinic was going, and she said it was going well, that she was hopefully going to be admitted by the end of the year, and I told her that was great, and Francis said she just had to work a bit harder on staying focused on her study and then she'd be fine. There was a lull in the conversation and Francis asked me when dinner would be and I checked my watch and told him not quite yet and he said: Okay, but soon, right?

At the table I served Lacey and then myself and then Francis, and we talked in bursts about our lives, about how the city was changing as more money flowed into it, about how it was a shame our suburbs weren't linked by public transport, but that they'd have to have me round one night once Lacey was admitted and they had more time. We want to make time for so much stuff, said Francis. And we all know how much you mean to Lacey.

I looked at her, and she noticed me but did not look back. She shrugged, gazing into her lasagne like it had answers. She didn't speak much the whole

time, really, which I guess maybe I could have chalked up to nervousness about me and Francis meeting, only there was something I didn't like about the whole thing, and by the time it was just Lacey and me cleaning up and him sitting swilling wine, I'd already started debating whether or not to call Mel. And it wasn't long after our goodbyes, during which Francis said over and over that Lacey and him would have me over soon, since I wasn't really all that scary after all, and then they left and I poured myself another glass of wine. And then I called Mel.

When she picked up, she just said: David.

And I said: Hey, Mel. Hey. Sorry – I –

We can't do this again.

No, Mel, it's not that. It's – I just had dinner with Lacey, and Francis.

Oh, said Mel. Okay. Yeah. How are they?

I – is she – is Lacey okay?

There was a pause on the other end of the line. And then Mel said: I guess so? I don't know.

I put the phone on speaker, placed it on my pillow. What does that mean?

I mean, David, that I don't know –

How do you not know?

Because I'm just one person, David, on my own. I can't figure everything out.

Then it was my turn to pause. I'm worried – about her.

This again, too?

She hasn't said anything to you about him being – I – I don't know –

What? Being what exactly, David?

I stayed silent.

On the other side of the line, Mel started crying. Christ, David. Christ.

I'm sorry, I said. I'm sorry. And then: Do you want to come round? We could – talk.

Talk to someone, she said, by all means.

That's what I'm –

No. To someone other than me.

I was quiet.

Lacey handles herself just fine, Mel said. If she needs help, she'll find it.

I let my head sink into my pillow, and then she was gone for good.

WILLIAM

It was a few years after meeting Francis Brodeur that I met William. Maybe it was years and years. She brought him by my bed in the ward, this shy little thing who clung to her legs mostly, this gangly kid who'd hardly look my way without her cooing him over and over again. William, she said. That's your grandpa. Have a look. He won't bite. He probably doesn't even have any teeth.

I've got teeth, I said, showing them off. For now.

She laughed a little. They look good, she said. You look good.

I shook my head. You don't have to, Lacey. You don't have to.

She gave me a flat smile and a sigh, and then she placed a box on the tray beside my bed, and the smell of something baked wafted through the sterile room, something like the chocolate cake her mother'd always make, back in the day, but I didn't look to check, because I was focused on something else, focused on this little five-year-old dawdling round the back of the room, staring at all the humming machines with their tubes shoved into my body, this kid, confused and a little scared maybe, and all I could think when I looked at him was what last name he had, whether it was mine, whether it was ours, and about whose he was, and whether he'd grow up to have some part of me as part of him, and how strong he'd be, and how good he'd be to her. I was still thinking through all these things when Lacey finally convinced him to come toward me to say a proper hello, and I saw his untied shoelace drag across the floor, and I watched as he tripped over the fraying string and there was nothing, as he tripped to the floor in all slow-motion, there was nothing, oh Lord, nothing I could do to help him or her at all.