

'Funny and painfully relevant. I loved every bit of this novel,
and finished it with a giant smile on my face'

JODI PICOULT



Older

PAMELA REDMOND

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF YOUNGER**

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prólogo

The night before I left the island in Maine, I made a list.

50, I wrote at the top of the first page in a fresh notebook.

I would celebrate my fiftieth birthday in exactly 245 days, and if I was going to do everything I needed and wanted to do before I hit that milestone, I needed to get organized. And busy. And serious.

I underscored the number 50 twice, hard.

Under 50, I wrote *Home*.

I'd been craving a home, a real home of my own, with a new intensity. I'd enjoyed a creative and healing few years in this rustic cabin loaned to me by my publisher, Mrs. Whitney. I'd been comfortable enough before that living first with my friend Maggie, and then with my boyfriend, now ex-boyfriend, Josh.

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But I was heading back to New York and I wanted a place of my own. The first place all my own I'd ever had.

Healthy baby, I wrote down.

My daughter Caitlin's baby, I meant. Some things were so self-evident it seemed silly to put them on the list. But scarily presumptuous not to.

Money.

A job.

Friends. I already had friends. But I hoped they'd be a bigger part of my life.

I'd spent the last two years getting over the previous three, and now it was time to put that phase of my life behind me. The phase in which I first pretended to be younger, and then lived as if I were, and then wrote about the whole thing. Time to grow up and own my real age, my real self, in time for the big five-oh.

I tapped my pen on the notebook. I knew what I was supposed to write next. *Relationship. Man. Dates. Love*. Or something like that.

I didn't want any of those things. Was that terrible? Did that mean there was something wrong with me? I'd spent nearly two years alone now, no man, no love, no sex. It took a while getting used to. For a long time I felt lonely, incomplete.

And then lonely turned to peaceful. Incomplete became whole, strong, perfectly balanced on my own two feet.

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So no, I did not aspire to be in love or engaged or married or even dating by the time I turned fifty.

Sex. Some sex would be nice. I wrote that down. Then crossed it out.

I closed the notebook and slipped it into the side pocket of my suitcase, then I got into bed with all my clothes on, including my fleece and down jacket. I turned out the lamp and lay there for a few minutes, taking in the view that had become so familiar but that I wasn't sure I'd ever see again. The cabin looked so beautiful in the light from the embers of the wood that had been burning all day in the big stone fireplace. Usually I'd throw some fresh logs on before I fell asleep, so the place would still be warm and the fire would still be alive when I woke up in the morning. But I didn't do that tonight. I wanted the coals to be cold when I left, because I wasn't coming back.

I woke up at dawn. All I had to do was tie on my boots before I set out for town and the dock and the boat to the rest of the world. April was still winter in Maine, but the temperature wasn't quite as biting as it had been, even at sunrise. I wasn't wearing gloves and I'd taken the daring step of unstrapping the cleats from my boots, given that half the ice had melted to mud.

The Volvo I'd bought when my daughter, Caitlin, was in sixth grade was waiting for me in the parking lot on the mainland. I felt like I was rewinding my life, going back

to New York, back to my friend Maggie's, back to where I'd been before.

But nothing was as it had been before. Josh and I were no longer together, Maggie and Caitlin were both married, and my publishing friend Kelsey was making TV shows in LA.

TV shows, Kelsey told me via Instagram message, were the new books.

At least I had a book, the old-fashioned kind, to show for the time I'd spent on the island. Called *Younger*, it was a thinly veiled novel about the year I pretended to be a millennial. Mrs. Whitney had wanted me to write and publish it as a memoir, but as the real millennials say, I couldn't even.

That younger woman I'd been was as unreal as the character in the book. Tonight, Maggie was throwing me a party to celebrate my book and welcome me back to the city. I'd been preparing practically the entire time I'd been on the island to leave my younger life behind. I was ready. But that didn't mean, I suddenly realized, that I was ready to be older.

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I could not bring myself to blow a week's grocery money on parking, so I stubbornly drove around lower Manhattan until I found a spot on the street. The weather had changed from winter to summer in the seven hours it had taken me to drive from Maine to New York. I was wearing hiking boots and corduroys; I'd left my parka in the car and tied my fleece around my waist. By the time I dragged my suitcase the seventeen blocks to Maggie's loft, I was so drenched in sweat I looked like a contestant in a wet turtleneck contest.

"Were you in an accident?" Maggie blurted.

"I need a shower," I said.

"Oh, honey," Maggie said. "You need a lot more than a shower."

That's when I focused on the people standing behind Maggie. Apparently it was going to take a team of five—

six if you counted me—to pull me into shape for tonight’s party.

I’d been spending a lot of time outdoors, chopping my own wood, walking three miles each way to the only store on the island. The cabin did not contain a full-length mirror or a scale, but I felt stronger and leaner than I had in years. I had all my own teeth and wore clothes I’d bought new in the past decade, which made me practically the Cate Blanchett of my little island.

“She doesn’t look so bad,” scolded Piper the stylist, as if I were not there.

I was about to respond with appreciation, when Piper continued, “She’s got a kind of Olive Kitteridge thing going on.”

Olive fucking *Kitteridge*?

“Okay, maybe I should do something with my hair,” I said, touching it. I’d kind of forgotten I had hair.

“A deep-conditioning treatment and some color will make a major difference,” said the hairdresser.

“I don’t want to color my hair until I really need to,” I told him.

“You really need to!” the group chorused.

“We’ll do an intensive facial and give you some foundation to correct that redness,” said the makeup artist.

The nail person clucked as she examined my hands. Then she asked me to remove my boots and socks and got down on her knees. Until I saw her reaction, I don’t think

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I'd ever been tempted to use the word *recoil*. She looked up at me, eyes shining with what might have been tears.

"Your poor little feet look like *hooves*," she said.

Maggie shut the double doors that walled off her and Frankie's bedroom from the rest of the loft, where a team of two florists was placing six-foot-tall magnolia branches in vintage French metal vases while the caterers set up the bar and the kids chased one another in circles as the nannies flirted with the art assistants.

In this apartment alone, I'd encountered more people in the last ten minutes than I'd seen since New Year's.

"Let's get to work," Maggie said. "We've only got five hours."

I would love to complain about those five hours, to claim that through my ascetic period living in near-isolation I'd transcended any need for physical indulgence and rejected all outer measures of worth and beauty. But I found myself dozing and possibly purring as I was lathered and scrubbed and rinsed and oiled. I was plucked and waxed and exfoliated and de-hooved.

When the team was done, I felt amazing. And looked . . . maybe not younger than when I'd walked in, but definitely better.

"Now let's find you something to wear," Maggie said.

"I'm wearing my good black dress," I said.

“You mean the one you wore to your last book party?” asked Maggie.

“She can’t be seen in repeats,” Piper said.

“Nobody’s going to remember,” I told her.

Except Josh, I reminded myself. Josh would remember. He’d been with me when I bought that black dress, the most I’d ever spent on anything without a motor. He’d assured me I looked so amazing it was worth it.

“I mean on Instagram,” Piper said.

“I’m not on Instagram,” I said.

“Other people will post,” Piper said.

Ignoring her, I unearthed the black dress that had been lying folded in my suitcase the whole time I’d been in Maine. It seemed to have faded along the crease lines, but I decided to overlook that. All I saw was the dress in which I’d felt as happy and as beautiful as I’d ever been.

“I’m wearing this,” I said.

Not because I wanted to look good for Josh. We were over. So over. I’d invited him tonight to prove how completely over we were.

I stepped into the dress and zipped it up as far as I could by myself. That dress had always had the magic ability to expand and contract as I gained and lost weight, developed muscles from yoga or a paunch from too much ice cream. But now it hung on me like a black plastic garbage sack, size extra-jumbo.

“You did get skinny,” said Maggie.

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“They say as you get older you have to choose between your face and your ass,” said Piper.

So now I was “older”? So now I’d made a choice, and my face had lost?

“You could totally rock this,” Maggie said, pulling a gold minidress from Piper’s overstuffed rack.

“That’s perfect,” Piper said. “Very Mrs. Robinson.”

I guessed Mrs. Robinson was better than Olive Kitteridge, but by then I’d transferred all my fear and loathing onto Piper and, like a rebellious thirteen-year-old, refused to even look at any of the clothes on her rack. No, not like a rebellious thirteen-year-old, like a forty-nine-year-old who could dress herself. And if anyone else didn’t like it, they could bite me.

Ignoring the gold dress, I riffled through Maggie’s closet until I found a pair of stretch, black leather pants and an oversized cream satin blouse.

“The shirt is Frankie’s,” Maggie said.

“Will they mind if I wear it?”

Maggie shrugged. “I’m sure they won’t even notice.”

I found my black lace bra at the bottom of my suitcase—another item that had gotten zero use on the island—and put it on underneath the shirt. Maggie and I wrestled back and forth, buttoning (me) and unbuttoning (her) the top button, until Maggie growled, “Leave the fucking button open or I’m going to rip it off.”

I allowed Piper to hook on enormous gold earrings that

dangled beneath my now voluminous hair. She insisted I wear her black suede heels, at least until the party got underway and nobody could see my feet anymore. There was a quick knock at the door.

“Fourteen and a half minutes till seven!” Frankie called.

A high school chemistry teacher, Frankie could be relied upon for precision.

“Right out, sweetie!” Maggie said.

But first she steered me over to the mirror, the same mirror where, five years earlier, she’d introduced me to my reconstructed twenty-six-year-old self.

My hair was thick and very brown. My face seemed to glow, but that was definitely the makeup. My outfit made me look like a restaurant hostess with a side gig as a dominatrix.

I didn’t look twenty-six anymore. But I looked as close as I would ever get again.

Frankie had concocted a special *Younger* cocktail for the festivities: It involved vodka (the youngest liquor), pink champagne (girly and celebratory), and a sprig of thyme.

“Time, get it?” Frankie winked.

Frankie was tall and round, with cropped strawberry blond hair and ruddy cheeks and round pale eyes magnified by thick-lensed, wide-framed glasses. Frankie was pretty much the opposite of the curvy, sultry Anna Magnani-type

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Maggie had always been attracted to. They were also the temperamental opposite of Maggie's usual fiery, high-drama partners: calm, patient, soft-spoken, supportive. Maggie had never been happier.

Maggie had invited everyone she knew to the party, and many people she didn't, thanks to the prodigious connections she now enjoyed as a famous artist. (She tried to make me put quotes around that term, but she had genuinely become a famous artist.)

The elevator doors opened, spilling a new carload of people into the apartment, including one person who stood a head above everyone else. That was my son-in-law, Ravi, a medical resident who had once played semi-pro basketball in Germany. My eyes traveled down to his shoulder where stood my daughter, Caitlin, as petite as her husband was tall, as fair as he was dark. She and Ravi had announced their pregnancy when I was visiting in December, for Maggie's and my joint birthday and the winter holidays. Caitlin had been barely pregnant then and had looked more drawn than full, but I caught my breath now when she whispered something in Ravi's ear and I saw her distinctly rounded belly. My little baby, expecting a baby.

I pushed through the crowd, intent only on getting to her.

"Wow, Mom, you're wearing as much makeup as a Kardashian," Caitlin said.

If there had been a sink right there, I would have washed my face, but I had to settle for sucking it up and giving my daughter a hug.

“Maggie thought I needed a makeover. You look amazing, honey.”

She ran a caressing hand over her belly.

“I felt her move today,” she said, excitement dancing in her eyes.

“Her?” I said. This was news.

“They don’t know for sure,” said Ravi.

“Officially we don’t want to know,” corrected Caitlin. “And seriously, all I can worry about is whether the baby has two heads or if its little heart will keep beating.”

“You’re past the danger point,” Ravi said.

“I don’t know if you’re ever past the danger point,” I said.

“You were what, six months pregnant when you had your second miscarriage?” said Caitlin.

“Seven,” I said.

Caitlin was five when that happened, old enough to know that Mommy had a baby in her tummy but now the baby was gone. Old enough to try to comfort me when I was crying.

Ravi shot me a dark look. “The doctor said everything looked fine,” Ravi said.

“I’m sure he’s right,” I hurried to reassure my daughter.

“She,” said Caitlin. “Jeez, Mom, don’t be such a sexist!”

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“I’ll make you a plate of fruit and vegetables,” I said. “Let’s find a place for you to sit.”

Ravi took Caitlin’s arm. “We’re going to say hello to Maggie,” he said, firmly steering my daughter away.

I stood there feeling abandoned for only a second before I felt two arms slip around me from behind. I swung around to see the beaming face of my old friend and colleague Kelsey Peters. Kelsey and I had worked together at Empirical Press before she’d moved first to France and then to Hollywood to become a television producer.

“I can’t believe you made it!” I said, pulling her into a hug.

Kelsey was such a strong person, I always forgot how tiny she was; her head barely reached my chin. Now in her midthirties, she looked older, but in the best possible way. When we worked together in New York, she’d favored a tightly laced, ambitious-career-woman look: pencil skirts, pointy high heels, bright red lips, and twice-weekly blow-outs. Living in her native California had made her look at once softer and more sophisticated, with her tousled blond hair, flowing embroidered blouse, vintage jeans, lace-up boots, and Gucci bag.

“I had to be here,” she said. “I love the book.”

“Really?” I said, genuinely pleased.

Kelsey was still the best editor I’d ever worked with. She’d edited my first two novels, one a coming-of-age love story and the other a highly fictionalized account of

three moms in crisis. The whole time I'd been writing *Younger*, I could hear her voice in my head urging me to find a fresher metaphor, a more vivid description, a truer feeling.

"Absolutely," Kelsey said. "I told Mrs. Whitney I wished I'd been the editor."

Kelsey and I both looked over to where our former boss, Mrs. Whitney, was holding court on the long, low sofa. Beside her sat the white Hermès bag that held her little white dog, Toto, which matched her thick white hair, brushed straight back from her forehead. She was wearing a black-and-white Chanel jacket she'd had since I first worked at Empirical Press in the '90s.

"As long as you felt okay about your character," I said.

"Are you kidding? I've been going around telling everybody Lindsay is me. What did Josh think?"

"Josh and I haven't been in touch," I said stiffly.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I always thought he was a great guy."

Kelsey had known Josh for almost as long as I had, and had encouraged me from the beginning to get more serious with him, to get married and have babies, not knowing I was fifteen years older than Josh and had already spent a lifetime as a suburban wife and mother.

"I invited him tonight. I thought it was time for us to be friends again."

"That's very grown-up of you," Kelsey said.

“Thank you, but apparently he didn’t agree, because he’s not here.”

“Well, if he shows up, say hi for me. I’m sorry to do this but I’ve got to run. I got last-minute house seats for Sutton Foster’s one-woman show.”

“Oh, that’s amazing. Caitlin took me to see it in December as a combo holiday-birthday present.”

“Do you have time to get together tomorrow to talk about the book? Bemelmans at five?”

Bemelmans Bar at The Carlyle, with the murals painted by the artist who’d created the Madeline books, had always been Kelsey’s and my special place, reserved for celebrating major book deals or mourning long-term breakups or announcing life-changing news. Or, I guess, publishing new books and seeing each other for the first time in more than three years.

“Perfect.”

There was the sound of a spoon clinking on glass, Kelsey’s cue to duck out of sight. A hush fell over the crowd. Maggie motioned me to her side and began saying nice things about me and my book. I scanned the crowd. Still no sign of Josh. Just as well, I supposed. Maybe he was smarter than me, maintaining the distance that had grown between us.

Judging from the silence and the fact that everyone was staring at me, it was my turn to talk. So I stood there

and explained how writing the book had helped me understand a challenging and amazing passage of my life. I thanked people and joked that the afternoon's beautifying routine had made me look forty-six instead of forty-nine.

And then Josh walked in and all the words flew out of my head. He looked different, his cheeks more angular, his shoulders wider, a new crease between his eyes. And something else I couldn't pinpoint that transformed him from an overgrown boy to a fully grown man. My stomach dropped into my vagina.

Oh no. Oh no no no no. Getting over him was why I'd spent two years alone on an island in Maine turning into a pillar of salt. Getting over him was why I'd written this highly personal and potentially hugely embarrassing book. Getting over him was why I'd oh so coolly sent him a Paperless Post invitation to this party.

But this did not feel like I was over him.

"So, yeah, I wrote this book," I said, trying not to look at him, but unable to look anywhere else. "I think maybe you can buy it here."

Could you? If so, where? It was a big loft. "Or maybe not."

People were still looking at me, somewhat uncertainly.

"Goodbye," I said. I knew that wasn't right. But it did the job: To my enormous relief, everyone went back to talking to one another.

I managed to forget about Josh for a few minutes as

people nicely asked me to sign books. But when the last person handed me a book to sign and I looked up to ask their name, it was Josh.

“Hey, thanks for coming,” I said.

Sounding like a somewhat normal human being. A sane, calm person with only a slight quaver in her voice.

“Of course,” he said. “I was really happy you invited me.”

Then we stood there smiling at each other for way too long.

“The book’s awesome,” he said finally.

“Oh, good.” I was sincerely relieved. The lawyers had sent him advance proofs, so I knew he’d read it and officially signed off, but he hadn’t said anything to me. “Is that what you really thought?”

“Are you in the city for a while? I’d love to talk to you about it.”

“I just moved back,” I said.

“Wow,” he said. “Amazing. Are you staying here with Maggie?”

“Until I find a place,” I said.

Which hopefully would be soon. Maggie had expanded to take over two entire floors of the building, but she filled every inch with her art studio and her enormous egg sculptures and her growing family and her army of assistants and domestic helpers. She’d given me my own tiny room, but that meant the day nanny and the night nanny had to share.

“My new office is nearby,” he said. “I’d love to show it to you.”

“I’d love to see it,” I said.

The word *love* was getting thrown around a bit more than made me comfortable. I lifted my hair off my neck, licking my lips and sneaking a look at Josh from under my eyelashes. Feeling awfully glad Maggie had made me leave that top button open.

What the fuck was I doing? I dropped my hair and shook my head. I knew for sure that I did not want Josh back. But I somehow felt compelled to act as if I did.

“Babe.” A beautiful woman, tall, thin, with skin the same tawny shade of brown as her hair and her eyes, glided up—she seemed not to need normal legs—and slung her arm around Josh’s shoulders.

“Oh, hey!” He seemed happy to see her. “This is the famous Liza,” he told her. And then to me, he said, “Liza, this is Zen.”

She stuck out her long, thin, bronze hand. “Josh’s fiancée,” she clarified.

I noticed her ring then. It was a simple platinum band set with an oval emerald, roughly the size of a grape. She pressed herself close to Josh and kissed him on the neck. Was that really necessary?

“I need to go, babe,” she said. “Were you coming or . . . ?”

“Great to see you, Josh,” I said quickly.

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Please leave. Please don't make me stand here feeling both turned on and rejected by you for one more excruciating second.

"I'll text you about visiting the office," he said.

"Alrighty," I said.

Alrighty? What was I, a 1950s bobby-soxer?

I tried again. "Alrighty, then."

That was worse. I could feel my cheeks blazing.

And then burning even hotter as Josh leaned over and kissed me goodbye. With the touch of his lips, he undid two years of denial and sublimation. Now you have to make me unwanted you, Josh. Make me unwanted you all over again.