

Excerpt from *Far From the Tree*, by Robin Benway. HarperCollins, Kindle Edition. 2017. For in-class use only.

Janie wasn't the only person who hadn't realized Grace was coming back to school, judging by the look on Max's face. He was laughing with Adam, one of his friends, and when Grace walked into the room, his eyes got so big that he looked like a cartoon. If Grace hadn't hated him so much, it would have been funny, but the only thing she felt was a sick thrill for surprising him. She liked the idea of keeping him on his toes, popping up where he least expected her, a flesh-and-blood ghost to haunt him for the rest of his life.

Grace knew it wasn't possible, but it felt like everyone in the room stopped talking when she walked in, their heads swiveling between her and Max. As if this period was suddenly the new episode of a soap opera, and the long-thought-dead evil twin had just sauntered back into town.

She sat down in her normal assigned seat, which, unfortunately, was right across from Max. She had chosen that seat back at the beginning of the year because it was easier to talk to him that way. Now she cursed Past Grace for making such a terrible decision. Past Grace, it turned out, was a real idiot.

Adam was giggling and saying, "Dude, dude," quietly, the way you do when you have a secret.

"Shut up," Max hissed at him. Adam had been (and, Grace assumed, still was) as dumb as concrete, one of those guys who thought he was a football star when he really just watched from the sidelines and high-fived other people when they made the winning touchdowns. Grace had never liked him, and Max knew that.

Unlike her first two teachers, Mr. Hill ignored Grace and got down to business, which she appreciated. Sympathy was sometimes worse than being ignored. "Okay, bodies," he said loudly. (Mr. Hill always referred to his students as "bodies." It was a little distressing at times. Grace couldn't help but picture a roomful of corpses.) "Let's focus!"

Grace dug her pen out of her bag, willing herself to not even look at Max. She could see his feet, though, and he was wearing new shoes. That blew her mind. Somewhere in the time between when she'd had his daughter, met her half siblings, and returned to school, Max had gone shopping and bought new shoes, like his life was still normal; like it hadn't changed at all.

And the truth was that it hadn't. Somewhere in the world, another couple was raising Max's biological child. And *he* had new shoes.

By the time Grace found her pen, her cheeks were bright red. The urge to use it to scribble all over Max's shoes was strong, painfully so, but she just set it down on her desk and looked forward.

"Hey," Adam whispered across the aisle as Mr. Hill turned toward the whiteboard at the front of the classroom. "Hey, psst! Grace!"

She didn't turn around. She knew Adam wasn't going to ask about how she was feeling, or wish her a good first day back, or see if she needed anything.

"Grace! Hey, are your boobs all saggy now?"

Someone—Grace didn't know who—giggled behind her, and over the rushing sound in her ears, she heard Max say, "C'mon, dude." Grace would have preferred if Max had, oh, gone all Game of Thrones on him and mounted his head on a stick, but Max just said, "C'mon, man," again.

Grace gripped her pen and wondered when Max had become such a weakling, with a spine made out of cotton candy. Maybe it had happened while they'd waited in line at Target that day, buying pregnancy tests, or maybe it was that day when his dad talked about the "good girl" Max was dating instead of Grace. Or maybe it had happened at homecoming while Grace was squeezing a baby out of her body and he danced, wearing a cheap plastic crown.

This version of Max wasn't the boy Grace had dated, or slept with, or loved. And it seemed crazy to her that, somewhere out there, there was a child who was half him and half her, when she suddenly couldn't stand to be in the same room with him anymore.

"Grace!" Adam hissed again.

Mr. Hill was still up at the whiteboard, apparently writing out an entire soliloquy, so Grace turned to look at Max. Even his face looked weak. How could she have ever dated someone with that jawline? Thank God Peach hadn't inherited it.

"Would you tell your friend to shut the fuck up?" Grace hissed at Max. She could tell that he was sorry, it was written all over his (pathetic) face, and she spun back in her seat, cheeks flaming like she had a fever.

That's when Adam's phone made the noise. It was a baby's cry—a newborn baby's cry. It sounded like Peach, like the first sound Grace had ever heard her make, that crazily desperate wail that announced her arrival into the world.

Grace didn't know what moved first, her body or her hand, but then she was flying over her desk like she was running the hurdles in gym class, her fist out so it could make clean contact with Adam's face. He made a sound like someone had let the air out of him, and when he fell backward, his desk trapping him against the floor, Grace pinned him and punched him again. She hadn't had this much adrenaline since Peach had been born. It felt good. She even smiled when she punched Adam for the third time.

It eventually took Max, Mr. Hill, and this guy named José (who really was on the football team) to pull her off Adam. José sort of spun Grace away, setting her down on her feet so hard that her teeth rattled together, and then Grace was gone, leaving her backpack, Adam, Max, and U.S. history class behind.

She stumbled toward the bathroom at the end of the quad, the one that no one ever used because it was near the biology classroom and the smell of formaldehyde sometimes leaked into the vents. It was disgusting, but she didn't care. She just needed somewhere to contain the hurricane inside her chest when it eventually burst out of her.

The sound of Peach roared through her ears as she cried out.

She sank down on the floor under the sink farthest away from the door, hugging her knees to her chest. The floor was cold, which was good, because Grace was fairly sure that her skin was on fire, and also, her hand was throbbing. Punching someone in the face, it turned out, hurt like hell, and she pressed her knuckles against the tiled wall, hissing a little.

It was hard to catch her breath. Like it had been when Peach was being born, like her body was working separately from her brain, and she closed her eyes and tried to breathe. The room was cool and quiet and there were probably twenty people now looking for her, but Grace didn't care.

She just wanted it to stay quiet.

After a few minutes, the door swung open and a boy walked in. Grace had never seen him before, but it wasn't like she had been super present during her last few months at school. Either way, it was pretty obvious that the guy wasn't expecting to see her on the floor.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't know that anyone was . . ." he said, then glanced back at the door. "Wait, is this the girls' bathroom or . . . ?"

Grace shook her head, still crying. She hadn't even realized she was crying, but her cheeks were wet and her hair stuck to them when she moved her head.

"Are you . . . ?" The boy backed up, then took a step forward, a slow-motion cha-cha. "Shit, I'm sorry, I'm so bad when people cry. Are you . . . okay?"

"I'm fine," Grace said, and apparently it was Opposite Day in her head, because fine was definitely not the word to describe her at that moment.

He continued standing by the door. "I'm not calling you a liar or anything, but you don't look fine."

Grace started crying again.

"What'd you do to your hand?"

"I punched Adam Dupane in the head three times," she told him. There was no way to make it sound nicer than that, so Grace didn't bother trying. It wasn't like he wouldn't find out, anyway. There was probably already video online. Grace was going to get expelled, she realized, and was surprised by how nice that sounded to her.

"Wow." The guy's eyes widened. "Well, I don't know who Adam Dupane is, but you seem like a nice person, so he probably had it coming."

"He's a dick," Grace said.

“A total dick,” the guy agreed. She couldn’t tell if he was humoring her or teasing her, but Grace didn’t care.

“Um, you probably need to put something on that,” he said, motioning to her swollen hand, then set his backpack down and pulled some paper towels off the machine and ran them under the cold water. “Here.” He passed them to Grace. “It’s not exactly an ice pack but it’ll help.”

Grace just stared at him. “Who are you?” she finally asked. Her nose was starting to run and she felt disgusting and snotty—and embarrassed for feeling disgusting and snotty.

“Oh, sorry. I’m Raphael. Raphael Martinez. But you can call me Rafe, you don’t have to be, like, formal or anything. I’m very nonthreatening, don’t worry. Well, I mean, since you’re the one who just punched someone, maybe you’re not worried. Maybe I should be worried. Trust me. I’m a total wimp.” He wetted another paper towel as he talked, then passed it to her. “I mean, I faint at the sight of blood, I really do. Not exaggerating. Hey, can I ask you a question?”

This Rafe person was making her head start to spin. “Yeah?”

“What is that terrible smell in here?”

“Formaldehyde.” Grace wasn’t sure when she had stopped forming complete sentences. “Dead cats. Next door.”

“Anatomy class?” he guessed.

She nodded.

“Got it.”

Grace winced as her hand throbbed under the cold towels. Everything hurt now—her head, her arm, the base of her spine—and she tried to keep from tearing up, with no luck.

And Rafe, Hero of the Day, flipped the lock on the bathroom door and came to sit down next to her. Grace could tell that he was being very careful not to touch any part of her, and for some reason, that just made her sad. “So,” he said conversationally, like they were talking about the weather, “Adam’s a dick.”

“Max just sat next to him the whole time and didn’t even say anything,” Grace said, and she wasn’t crying again, not exactly. Her face was just wet and there was a lump of something terrible stuck in her throat.

“I know,” Rafe said with a sigh. “What an asshole.”

“You don’t even know who I’m talking about!” Grace cried. “Why are you agreeing with me?”

“Well, you’re sad,” Rafe said, sounding a bit confused. “Do you want me to argue with you? Because I will if it’ll make you stop crying. Here, okay.” He cleared his throat. “You are so wrong. Adam’s the best.”

“No,” Grace sniffled. “I just . . . I just want to be quiet, okay?”

“Got it,” he said. “Whatever you want.” But Grace couldn’t stop hearing that baby noise, the very first sound that Peach had ever made, a battle cry that had somehow triumphed over everything else, including her heart, and when Grace started crying again, Rafe carefully leaned his body toward hers so that their shoulders were touching.

He was very, very quiet.

Grace lost track of how long she sat on the floor and cried, but after a while, there was a knock at the door and someone saying, “Gracie?”

“That’s my mom,” Grace explained, wiping at her eyes.

“Are you in trouble?” Rafe asked. “I’ll hide you in a stall if you want.”

Grace suddenly wanted her mom so bad that it hurt. “No, you can let her in,” she said. “It’s okay.”

“Oh, honey,” her mom said when she saw her. “Let’s go home.”

And that was the last day of Grace’s junior year.