THE BOY IN THE BLACK SUIT

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90 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE
FABER & FABER

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First published in the US by Atheneum Books, an imprint of
Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division, in 2015
First published in the UK in 2019
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House,
74–77 Great Russell Street,
London WC1B 3DA

Published by arrangement with Pippin Properties, Inc.
through Rights People, London

Printed in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–356126



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CHAPTER 1
EVERYTHING IS BACKWARD

It was the first day of school. Actually, it was the nineteenth day of school, but it was *my* first day, and all I could think about was how happy I was that I had already missed three weeks, and that this would be the last first day in this place I would ever have. Thank God. Don't get me wrong, I didn't hate school. I just wasn't really in the mood to be lugging books around, or learning stuff that didn't really matter to me, or even worse, being around people that I didn't really matter to. I know, I know—I sound like a prime candidate for black fingernails and emo poetry, but I guess what I'm really trying to say is that I just wasn't feeling too social. Scratch that—I wasn't feeling social at all. Lockers slamming, sneakers screeching and squeaking on the floor as every kind of teenager ran through the hallways laughing and shouting on their way to class—it was all like one big nail on an even bigger

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chalkboard. Everyone was zipping by, bumping me, as I sort of floated through the halls like some kind of zombie.

It was like I was living in a different world where everything was backward. Ms. Harris, the principal who normally spent most of her time hiding from students in her office, offered to actually *walk* me to my locker. Meanwhile, kids I was cool with—at least I thought I was cool with—like James Skinner, totally ignored me. See what I mean? Backward.

The last time I saw James was during the summer when our whole class had to meet up at the school to have our senior pictures taken. Me and James joked about how much we hated taking photos, and how our crazy moms were obsessed about the whole thing. I told him how my mother begged me to smile, but I knew I wouldn't. I couldn't. Not because I didn't want to, it's just that every time a camera was pointed at me, I never knew what to do with my face. Some people can smile on cue. You say "smile," and they go ear to ear, flashing every tooth in their mouth. And some people . . . can't. I was one of those. So, I knew in my senior pictures I would look just like I did in my junior, sophomore, and freshman pictures—like a robot. Except this time, it would be a robot face in a cap and gown, which is even worse.

The point is, I had just seen my so-called friend James—had just joked about this corny senior picture crap with him—and now he was acting like he didn't even know me. I guess that's what happens when people find out your mom just died. You become invisible. At least I did. To everybody. Well, almost everybody.

"Yo, Matt, I'm so sorry about your moms, man." Chris Hayes,

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my best friend, slid up behind me while I tried to stuff myself into my locker. He was one of those guys who was supercool, crazy fly, and girls had a thing for his shaved head. He'd probably be voted "Best Dressed" or something dumb like that, and if he wanted to, he'd have a fair shot at prom king. And to top it all off, he was trying hard to be sympathetic to me, his pretty normal, now really sad homeboy. I appreciated it even though it did no good. But at least he had enough heart to come up to me and say something, instead of just avoiding me, like death was some kind of disease that anyone could catch just by speaking to me. Everybody else was either staring at me or trying way too hard to not look at me at all.

"Y'know . . . Mrs. Miller was like a second mom to me, and I'm so, so sorry I couldn't make the funeral," Chris went on.

Well, I'm sorry you couldn't make it either. I'm sorry I had to sit there in that church—which, by the way, had a broken air conditioner—sweating, watching all those people march down the aisle to look in my mother's casket and whisper to themselves all this mess about how much she looked like herself, even though she didn't. I'm sorry you weren't there to hear the lame choir drag out, song after song. I'm sorry you weren't there to see my dad try his best to be upbeat, cracking bad jokes in his speech, choking on his words. I'm sorry you weren't there to watch me totally lose it and explode into tears. I'm sorry you weren't there for me, but it doesn't matter, because even if you were, you wouldn't be able to feel what I feel. Nobody can. Even the preacher said so.

That's what I *wanted* to say, but I didn't because Chris didn't deserve all that. I knew he would've been there if he could've. But

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he just couldn't do it. I get that. So I turned around to look at him and said, "It's all good, man." I swallowed hard and reached out for a five, holding back my tears. *Do. not. cry. Not in school.*

Chris grabbed my hand and pulled me close for a man-hug. And right at that moment, with perfect high-school timing, Shawn Bowman ran up behind Chris, slapped him on the ass, and rambled off some dumb joke, calling us gay or whatever. And of course, after Shawn said that, the girl he was with—Michelle something—smacked him on the arm and sucked her teeth. She yanked Shawn close and whispered in his ear, and I could tell she told him my mom had just died because his face went from blue-black to—well, it stayed blue-black, but if he could've turned red he would've been a walking stop sign. Chris had turned around and glared at Shawn. He had his fists balled up and I could tell he was pissed.

"Asshole," Chris growled. Shawn just slinked away, embarrassed, which, judging by Chris's tone, was a good idea.

It was like all of sudden high school became . . . high school. A bunch of immature, irresponsible teens who felt invincible only because they'd never really been through nothing. The ones who had didn't act like everybody else. Like Shante Jansen. When she got pregnant our sophomore year, she changed big-time. That baby grew her up, and certain things about high school suddenly seemed a lot less important. She just wanted to do her work and go home. No time for the extra silliness. That's how I felt. Like all of a sudden I was way too old for high school, even though I really wasn't. Such a strange feeling.

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Luckily, I didn't have to be in school too long. Because I had done pretty good my freshman, sophomore, and junior years, I had a short schedule and could leave at noon everyday. Of course, I was a little behind, but Ms. Harris had all the teachers create make-up assignments for me so that I could catch up on the work I missed. I wasn't really worried too much though. School was always pretty easy for me. A lot easier than smiling, that's for sure.

The original plan was to go to school from eight forty-five to noon, then work at the bank from one to five thirty, as a part of the work-study program. I wasn't too gassed about working at a bank, just because it seemed like it would be boring as hell, sitting behind that thick glass counting other people's money all day. The paycheck, however, I was definitely excited about. But because I missed the first few weeks of school, I also missed the first few weeks of work, and the bank filled my spot with another student. So I was left without a job and nothing to do after class.

My father and I talked when I got word that my spot was being given away, and he told me not to worry about it, but that I should definitely try to find some work, especially since I was going to have so much time on my hands. When he said that, my mother hadn't passed yet. Now that she had, I *really* wanted to find a job, not just to keep busy, but also to try to help him out with the bills. And even though I considered myself to be pretty smart, I didn't have any work experience, at least not any that was on the books. Sweeping Ms. Jones's steps didn't really count.

So I did what anybody in my position would do. I tried to get a job at a fast-food joint. Cluck Bucket. The grimiest spot in

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the hood. But they were known for paying pretty good. At least more than most of the other fast-food spots. Everybody said it was because it was owned by some rich dude who felt like the least he could do was pay folks enough to survive, since he was practically killing the whole hood with the food. How could something that tastes so good be so bad for you?

I had eaten there tons of times. My mother would send me out to get chicken baskets on Friday nights. We cooked Monday through Thursday and then took the weekend off. Yes, *we* cooked. I was pretty much my mom's sous chef growing up, which is just a fancy way of saying I was her kitchen assistant. A little slicing, a little dicing. Some stirring, some sprinkling. What I'm getting at is, I'm kind of mean with the pot and pan. That's another reason why Cluck Bucket seemed like an easy choice for me. I can burn, and I like the food. Especially the biscuits. My mom always said they reminded her of real country biscuits. I never had a country biscuit, but Cluck Bucket's were incredible. As a matter of fact, Cluck Bucket's everything was pretty good, all the way down to the sweet tea.

"Can I help whoever's next in line?" the girl behind the register said with about as much enthusiasm as I had for anything right now—none. She wore a net on her head that made her hair look more like some kind of helmet, and a gold necklace was around her neck with a nameplate hanging from it. RENEE, it said in cursive.

I stepped forward, my sneakers making that weird sound you hear when something comes unstuck.

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"Welcome to Cluck Bucket, would you like to try a combo, a special, the Cluck Deluxe, a shake, or a delicious treat from our list of desserts?" she rattled off while rolling her eyes and looking away.

"Are y'all hiring?" I asked, sort of quietly. I didn't care if anybody knew I was trying to get a job, but at the same time, I didn't want everybody in my business.

Renee looked at me for a second, sizing me up.

"Hold on," she said, annoyed. She turned around and yelled to the back, but it looked like she was yelling at the chicken stacked up in that big metal bed thing it sits in. "Clara. We hiring?"

Another woman appeared from behind the metal trays. Her shirt was white instead of purple like Renee's. She also had that hair thing around her head, but her hair was in braids and looked like snakes caught in a net.

"You looking for a job?" Clara said roughly.

"Yes."

She reached under the register and pulled out a piece of paper. An application.

"Fill this out over there." She pointed toward the tables closer to the door. "And bring it back up here when you done."

Clara then slapped a pen down on the counter and glared at me. "And don't steal my pen."

I sat down and started filling out the application, trying to block out the stale smell of old grease and the sounds of all the people coming in and out, yelling and cracking jokes, kids skipping school, construction workers on their lunch breaks, junkies begging for biscuits, and just about anybody else you could possibly imagine.

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The bell on the door kept jingling every time someone opened it, letting in the car horns and police sirens from outside. Noise from every damn where.

"What's good, Ma?" a young guy probably my age said to Renee. "You looking good with that thing on your head," he joked. His boys laughed.

I tried to see her reaction, but I couldn't because he was standing in front of her. But I could hear her.

"Yeah, whatever. What you want, man?"

The guy rocked left to right and adjusted the hat on his head, and his crotch.

"What's good with your number?" he said, slick.

"Nope. But how about some food," Renee said pretty flat. I'm sure she got this kind of crap all the time. Some fool crackin' slick in front of his friends. I always wondered if this kind of game worked. Like, does "What's good with your number" really bag the ladies? Doubt it.

"A'ight, a'ight, a'ight, whatever. Just let me get a Deluxe."

"No Deluxes. All out."

"Damn, a'ight. Well, let me get Five Cluck Strips."

"No strips."

"Come on, really?"

"Really."

"A'ight well, just give me a three-piece meal. I *know* you got chicken." The guy laughed and shook his head, disappointed.

At this point he moved to the side, just enough for me to see Renee. She turned around and looked at all the chicken in the hot

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bed. There must've been like sixty pieces in there. Then she turned back around to the dude.

"All out."

"What?"

"All out. No more chicken."

"It's chicken right there! What you talkin' about?"

"All out."

The boy stood there stunned.

Renee smirked and lifted her hands to her face, her fingers forming a pretend camera. She acted like she was taking a picture. "Snapshot!" she shouted. Then Renee looked at the make-believe camera as if she was checking the photo—guess it was an invisible digital—and teased, "Yikes, not your best face."

The dude's boys started laughing at him, and before he could say anything back, Renee said, "Next in line, please!"

Then he got all sensitive and cussed Renee up and down, throwing the typical "You ain't even that pretty anyway!" at her, bumping tables and chairs as he walked out. His boys trailed behind him like a litter of puppies. I looked down at my application as they were leaving. Guys like that always try to mess with somebody else to make them feel better, and I just wasn't in the mood.

Everyone else in line laughed, though. Especially when the next guy ordered fifty pieces of chicken and got every piece. Apparently, that's why she really couldn't sell that jerk the chicken. It was already spoken for.

"Thank you so much, love. I already have it squared with Clara," the man who ordered all the chicken said.

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