



LET IT BE

A NOVEL

CHAD GAYLE

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ONE AFTER 909

WHEN my brother was ten years old, he almost killed a man. No one in my family has ever talked about what Joseph almost did, because we're Texans, and Texans rarely talk about what might have been, but it's something that I've thought about quite often, something I've had to think about since my mother passed away.

It happened the year my parents got divorced, which was also the year that my mother fell in love with the music of the Beatles for a second and final time. Her favorite album that year was *Let It Be*.

There's a track on *Let It Be* called "One After 909," a groovy tune about a guy who's trying to get with a girl that's on a train he can't seem to catch. To a thirteen-year-old girl like me, it seemed like a cool number, even though it was old news, and I had fun with it whenever it was on; I thought it was a great song. Joseph hated it, however; for my little brother, "One After 909" was a meaningless, worthless lyric that wasn't about anything, that was nothing but a ruse, and he was willing to argue

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this point for hours if he had to, which should tell you something about my brother. He was a smart kid, but he was a smart kid who could be ruthlessly stubborn when he was convinced that he was right and that someone else was wrong.

Not talking about what Joseph almost did has preserved that long gone year perfectly in my mind. What we might have said never had a chance to chip away at its sharp edges or to reshape it into something new, and that's why it's hard for me to make excuses for what my brother did to us back then. Now, when I listen to *Let It Be*, I remember it all, the whole sordid mess, and I know that he was much more aware of what he was doing than we thought at the time.

Joseph never understood how wise love can be. He was so busy chasing after a version of himself that would be better than the person he was, a person who would be able to reduce the world and all of the people in it to a series of simple questions, that he never learned how to latch onto the answers that mattered most.

He was like the singer in that song, "One After 909." He was trying to catch a train that would take him to a better place, a place where every heartache would be explained away, but he couldn't swing it, and he never realized that he was trying to make the wrong train, one that would always pass him by.

ACROSS THE UNIVERSE

INSTEAD of stars, Joseph saw black holes, gaping mouths that swallowed small circles of an imaginary sky.

When he opened his eyes, he was still lying on the bed that was supposed to be his but wasn't. A pillow was folded behind his head, a library book was tucked under his right arm, and pencil drawings of pockmarked moons and spaceships with needle fine noses were strewn at his feet, not far from a pile of clothes that had been dumped on his blue blanket.

Rolling off the bed, he shoved his feet into a pair of tightly laced shoes. He could hear his father speaking in the other room, the room that his mother shared with his sister, and the bluntness of his father's voice made Joseph cross the carpet quickly. He paused for a moment to kick several die-cast cars to one side before he opened the door.

The other door was still closed. Glancing in the bathroom that stood between the two rooms, Joseph noticed, once again, the plastic frog that squatted between

the sink's taps. The frog's thick green lips curved around a winsome hint of square, ultra-white teeth, and there were three new toothbrushes planted in its hollow head.

Turning to the right, he went into the living room, where his sister Pam was sitting on an orange sofa with her long legs crossed in front of her. When Joseph walked by, she looked up from the *People* magazine that she was reading to frown at him, and she pointed a finger that was tipped with pink nail polish at his chest.

"Where are you going, twerp?"

"Nowhere," he said.

Opening the front door, he sat down on the porch's shallow concrete steps, stretched out his arms, and yawned. He was thinking about the brick house where he'd grown up, and as he tossed a few dirt clods at the white Volkswagen that was parked in the driveway, he tried to conjure up the pine-covered hills that surrounded that house, the dense thickets where the sun's rays were soft and mild, where a canopy of green leaves could make the warmest summer day seem like the tail end of spring. He remembered the wormy odor of the forest, how it mixed with the smell of the pine sap and the bright tang of the underbrush, and he wished that he was walking down an east Texas road that was stained with rust-colored dirt, getting ready to cut across a trail that would take him to a place where he would never be found.

Standing up, Joseph tramped through the weed-infested yard until he reached the curb. Clambering up onto the rear bumper of his father's pea-green Ford, he climbed into the empty bed of the truck, looked down the street

at the houses that were crowded together on the opposite block, and lay down on the warm corrugated steel. As he folded his hands over his stomach and fastened his eyes on the clear blue sky, he tried to understand how someone like his uncle Chuck could live here, in Amarillo, for fifteen years, in a city that seemed, to Joseph, like a sprawling colony that had been built on foreign soil. He gave up on this problem as the sounds of the city's traffic, of dogs barking, and of kids playing on another street began to occupy his mind.

A door slammed somewhere, and Joseph heard his father call his name.

Bill had dark hair and thick brows that shaded his brown eyes. He walked with his shoulders pinned back and his arms well away from his hips, and his belly bulged against a plaid buttoned-down shirt that was tucked into a stiff pair of blue jeans. His worn and weathered boots kicked small plumes of dust into the air as he walked over to his truck; Joseph was surprised to see him smile when he reached the curb.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Waiting for you,” Joseph replied.

Bill patted the cigarettes stowed in his shirt pocket, as if he needed to know that they were still there. “Your mother was worried.”

Joseph didn't say anything.

“You should've told Pam where you were going.”

“Yes sir.”

Bill glanced over his shoulder at the white cinder block house and the small Volkswagen that was parked

beside it. When he faced Joseph again, the smile was gone, and Joseph realized that his father had something else to say, something that was neither pleasant nor reassuring. Joseph waited, barely breathing, but Bill seemed reluctant to take the next step. He scratched his narrow jaw and walked around to the back of the truck, where he lowered the tailgate and took a seat. Joseph joined him, dangling his shoes two feet from the ground.

“Did I ever tell you about the mockingbird I had when I was a boy?” Bill asked.

“A mockingbird? I don’t think so.”

“I didn’t?”

“No sir.”

“Well,” Bill started, patting the cigarettes again, “when I was younger, about your age, I found a little baby mockingbird flopping around in my back yard. It had its feathers, but it wasn’t quite ready to fly, so I rescued it, put it in an old birdcage I found in the garage. I started feeding the thing—fed it grasshoppers, bits of fruit, whatever I could come up with—and it started growing, getting bigger week by week.

“One day, when I was out doing my chores, that little mockingbird figured out how to unlatch the door on its cage. They’re pretty smart, you know, and it managed to get the thing open with its beak, and then it flew right out the window. I was upset when I realized what had happened, but my dad—your grandpa—was sure that there was a chance that it might come back home, so we left the window in my room open for a few days, just in case.”

Joseph looked up at his father. "Didn't you have window screens back then?" he asked.

"Window screens? Yes, we had window screens, but mine had a big hole in it."

"Oh," Joseph said.

"Anyhow, to get back to what I was saying, the first two days went by and there was nothing, no sign of that bird. I was pretty much convinced that it was gone for good, but then, on the third day, lo and behold, it sailed right through the window, into my room, and went straight back to its little cage."

"It did?"

"Yeah, it did. It started chirping and singing as if it had something to say, as if it wanted to tell me everything that had happened."

"Why do you think it came back?"

Bill swatted at a fly that was buzzing near his ear. "Why? Because it was hungry, that's why," he said. "It figured out how much harder it would be to live outside the cage. Doesn't that make sense?"

Joseph nodded.

Bill paused for a moment. "You see, Joseph, there are certain times when a woman might act the same way that that mockingbird did, because it's easy for a woman to get mixed up about her feelings in a way that a man never does. She gets it in her head that she wants something that's better than what she's got, and she goes after that shiny new thing and keeps chasing it until she's got it, and then she realizes, as soon as she settles down again, that what she had to begin with was just fine, and she

goes on back to where she belongs. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Joseph nodded; Bill patted the cigarettes in his shirt pocket once more.

"Now, you probably know this already, but your mother doesn't feel comfortable with the idea of me staying here tonight, and it's going to take more than eight hours for me to get back to Crockett from here, so I'm going to have to go on and hit the road."

"When are you coming back?" Joseph asked.

Bill kneaded his son's shoulder. "Soon, I hope." He eased himself off the tailgate. "For now, you just remember what I said, and you mind your mother. Go on inside and tell your sister that I'm leaving."

Joseph did what he'd been told to do, and Pam followed him outside. After they'd said their goodbyes, they watched their father get in his truck, and Joseph had the odd feeling, as the Ford's engine rumbled and coughed, that his mother was watching them from the living room window.

"Be good," Bill shouted, waving at them from the cab. "I'll see you soon."

The muffler sputtered as Bill turned the truck around in the driveway, and then the Ford picked up speed on the wide, straight street and disappeared; Joseph's father was gone.

As he went inside, Joseph remembered sitting with his mother, Michelle, at the kitchen table a few days before, when she'd told him that she was leaving his father. She'd talked for a long time without saying much, and

he'd noticed how often she rubbed her chin while she made vague references to the problems that men and women faced once they were married. At the end of that conversation, she'd explained, in a voice that was about to crack, that they would always be a family, regardless of where they were or what might happen next, but Joseph didn't see how this could possibly be true, and he felt as if he was alone and apart from his mother when the front door was closed.

On Monday, Joseph kept close to the house while he waited for his mother to come home. When he heard her Volkswagen pull into the driveway, Joseph went out to help her bring in several sacks of groceries and two loads of laundry, and then he followed his mom into the back yard, where he watched her hang wet sheets, pillowcases, and towels on a sagging line that was strung between two rusted metal poles. When they went inside, she told Joseph that she would take him to the library, as she'd promised, as soon as her face was fixed. He wondered out loud how long that would be.

“Just a minute, Joseph. Maybe two.”

He went into his room to retrieve the library book that he'd checked out the week before, and then he joined Pam on the orange sofa, but he ignored the soap opera that she was watching on TV. When Michelle emerged from the bathroom with her blond hair brushed, Joseph could smell the hair spray that seemed to hover around her like an invisible cloud.