WATCH OVER ME

Printz Award–winning author of We Are Okay

NINA LACOUR
had we been telling the truth
ON THE MORNING OF MY INTERVIEW I slept until eight, went downstairs to the kitchen, and poured myself the last of the coffee. I stood at the counter, watching out the window as I sipped, and then pushed up my sleeves and turned on the water to wash the breakfast dishes that Amy and Jonathan had left stacked in the sink.

In just a few days, I would leave them.

Amy had bought a crib and tucked it into the garage. A few days after that, she came home with a bag from a toy store. A stuffed bunny peeked over the side. She asked me how my English final went and I told her that I wrote about the collapse of social mores in a couple of short stories and she said it sounded great. And then she took the bag into their bedroom as though it were nothing.

She was only being kind. I knew that. They hadn’t asked me to stay.

The sink was empty. I scrubbed it until it was perfectly
white and then I turned off the water. I tried to breathe. I tried not to want this so badly.

My phone buzzed.

“Are you ready?” Karen asked. She’d been my social worker for four years and even though I could tell she was in traffic, probably dribbling coffee on her skirt and checking her email as she talked to me, she calmed my racing heart.

“I think so,” I said.

“Remember—they read your letter. I’ve told them so much about you. They’ve talked to all your references. This is just a final step. And you get to make sure you really want it.”

“I want it.”

“I know you do, honey. I want it for you too. Call me as soon as it’s over.”

He knocked at ten thirty, exactly when he said he’d arrive.

“Mila?” he asked when I opened the door. He stuck out his hand. “Nick Bancroft. So nice to finally meet you.”

I led him into the kitchen, where a round table sat beneath a window in the sun and the chairs were close enough for friendly conversation but far enough apart for strangers.

“How are you doing?” he asked after we sat.

“Well, finals are over, so that’s good,” I said.

“Yes, congratulations. Your transcripts are solid. Have you considered college?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I’ll go at some point.”
He nodded, but I saw that he felt sorry for me. My eyes darted to the window. I didn’t know how to talk about my life with someone who understood. I clenched a fist in my lap and forced myself not to cry. I was ready to prove my work ethic, talk about the hours I spent volunteering at the library, and assure him that I was not afraid of dirt or messes or children throwing tantrums—but I was not ready for this.

“So, let me tell you about Terry and Julia and the farm,” he said, taking mercy on me. “They adopted me when I was three, so it’s been home basically all my life. I haven’t lived at the farm in a long time, but I help them run the finances and I do all the interviews.” I felt my fist unclench and I settled into the chair and listened to him tell me about the things I had already learned from talking to Karen and reading a *San Francisco Chronicle* article from fifteen years ago with the headline MENDOCINO COUPLE ADOPTS FORTIETH FOSTER CHILD. He talked about the farm and how everyone contributes to running it, from the children to the interns, and how as an intern I would spend my weekdays teaching in the schoolhouse and my Sundays waking up at five a.m. to run the booth at the farmers’ market. He told me about the holidays when all the grown-up children come back to visit. “It becomes home if you let it,” he said. “Even for the interns. I know that might sound hard to believe, but it’s true.”

“When do I find out?”
“Oh!” he said. “I thought you knew. You’ve been chosen already. It’s yours if you want it.”

My hands flew to my face. “Thank you,” I said. And then I couldn’t say anything else. He nodded, that look of sympathy again, and kept talking.

“Most of your hours will be spent in the school. They’ve designed a curriculum and your job will be to learn it and teach the six- to nine-year-olds. There is only one of them right now, I think, but more will come soon. And Terry and Julia will be there to help.”

“Would you like some tea?” I blurted. I had meant to ask him when he got there but had been too nervous. Now that I knew I was chosen, I wanted him to stay and tell me everything. Maybe that way I could hold it inside me—a real, live thing—in the days between that one and the one of my arrival.

“Sure,” he said. I filled the kettle and set some boxes in front of him. He chose peppermint, and as I poured the steaming water over the leaves I breathed in the scent and it was like starting over already.

“I want to make sure you understand what this is,” Nick said. “Quite a few people have turned it down. And some people haven’t known what they were getting into and it hasn’t worked out. You need to want it. It’s a farm. It’s in the middle of nowhere—to one side is the ocean and in every other direction is nothing but rocky hills and
open land. It’s almost always foggy and cold and there’s no cell service and no town to shop in or meet people—Mendocino is forty-five minutes away. Farmers’-market days are the only times you’ll interact with the outside world, and you’ll be weighing squashes and wrapping flowers most of the time.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “I don’t mind.”

He warned me that the cabins where the interns live were tiny, only one room with wood-burning stoves for heat. He said that there was a landline but no cell service, and that everyone ate meals together three times a day and took turns with prep and cleanup.

“The main house is comfortable and you’re always welcome in it. They have tons of books and a bunch of instruments. There’s even a grand piano in the living room.”

“I’ve always wanted to play the piano,” I said. I don’t know why I didn’t tell him about all my years of lessons and the songs I knew by heart. “Someone to Watch Over Me” began to play in my brain, and the kitchen filled with music. My grandmother was sitting next to me, her fingers showing me where my fingers should go. Nick kept talking, and I listened over the sound of piano notes, full and rising. I had been so young. I didn’t tell him about the terrible thing I’d done. He didn’t ask those kinds of questions. Funny, when interviewing for a job to work with children, that a person would ask about college and remoteness and not say, Tell me
the worst thing you ever did. Tell me about your wounds. Can I trust you?

Had they known the truth about me they might not have given me the job, I thought, even though I was determined to be good. Even though I held on fiercely to my own goodness.

By the time he finished his tea, we had it all planned out. He asked if I wanted to wait until after the graduation ceremony and I said no, that I didn’t care about wearing a hat and robe and walking with the other students. Okay, he said, then he would pick me up on Sunday and we would drive up together. He gave me a thin volume called *Teaching School: A Handbook to Education on The Farm* and asked me to read it. He said, “Mila, I have a good feeling about this. I think you’ll be a perfect fit with all of us.” And I told him I had a good feeling about it, too. And I told him that I felt lucky, and he said, “You are lucky. We all are.”

And then he left.

Had we been telling the truth, he would have said, *The place where I’m sending you—it looks beautiful, but it’s haunted.*

Okay, I would have said.

*It will bring everything back. All that you tried to bury.*

I understand.

*It’s going make you want to do bad things.*
I have experience with that.  

*And how did it turn out?*

Terribly. But I promise to do better this time.

We could have had that conversation—it would not have been impossible. I would not have told him everything about me, but I would have told him enough. I still would have taken that four-hour drive up the jagged coastline to be with Terry and Julia and Billy and Liz and Lee and the rest of the children. All I’m saying is it would have been easier had I known.
welcome
FROM MY UPSTAIRS BEDROOM WINDOW, I watched for Nick’s shiny black car. Once it appeared, I stood and set my cell phone on the windowsill. I didn’t expect Amy and Jonathan to keep paying the bill, and there was no service where I was headed anyway. I took one final look at the room from the doorway—drawers empty now, bed stripped—and then I went downstairs.

I said goodbye to Amy and Jonathan and promised to send letters as we loaded the little I owned into the trunk.

“I hope the baby is sweet,” I said to Amy. Her eyes darted away, but there was nothing for her to feel guilty over. They had let me live in their house for three of the four years I had been in the foster system. They’d given me a nice room and cooked me food and talked with me and bought me everything I needed. It was nobody’s fault that we didn’t fall in love. They were young and they wanted a baby.

“I mean it,” I said.

I climbed into Nick’s car and waved goodbye. The finality
of it all rose over me. I was leaving. My vision went dark, the world stopped. But then it passed, and I was all right.

Five hours later, Nick turned off Highway One and onto an unmarked gravel drive. He avoided potholes for a quarter mile, and slowed as we approached a wide wooden gate.

“For the goats,” he said.

He stopped the car, opened the door to climb out, and left the engine running.

It was just before eight o’clock and the sky was pale pink, and I watched through the windshield glass as he unlatched the gate and pulled one side open, then crossed in front of the car to open the other. Behind him was a field and a big wooden barn. Some moss-covered boulders. Two goats munching grass.

Here I was.

I had made it.

And then he was back in the car, and we rolled forward. When he stopped again, I said, “I’ll get it,” and I stepped onto the farm for the first time. It was salty and muddy and cold—even in June—and I breathed in its newness as I swung the gates closed and latched them shut. When I turned back to the car, I could see a row of small cabins, and past them, a sprawling farmhouse with its lights on, all white and three stories, something from a picture book or an old movie, nothing like any house I’d ever set foot in.
“See that over there?” Nick asked, pointing to a curved, white tent. “That’s the flower tunnel. Julia’s famous around here for her flowers.”

“I can’t wait to see everything.”

He parked midway down the gravel drive, at the closest point to the cabins, and we walked across the field, Nick with my suitcase, me with my backpack and duffel. The cabins were identical from the outside—each of them tiny, more sheds than houses—with small front windows and old brass doorknobs. Some muffled words followed by laughter came from inside the first cabin as we passed it. About twenty paces later we reached the second, which was silent and still. And then after another twenty steps, he stopped in front of the last one.

“Welcome home,” Nick said.

He made no move to open the door, so I turned the knob myself. I expected the inside to be dark, but it wasn’t. A skylight cut through the middle of the ceiling, casting the room in the same pink glow as outside.

Nick tucked my suitcase just inside the doorway. My shoes were muddy from the field, so I set my backpack and duffel inside without crossing the threshold. I saw a rug, a twin bed with a wrought-iron frame, a writing desk with a chair, a wood-burning stove, and a stack of cut wood.

“I’ve always liked these little cabins,” he said. “But I never got to live in one. They’re only for the interns.”
“You lived in the house?”

He nodded. “In a room with two other boys. We whined about it all the time—we were total shitheads—but it was great. Now we meet up for vacations every summer and we always share a hotel room. I never sleep as well as I do when I’m in a room with my brothers.”

I smiled. “That’s sweet,” I said.

“I’m going to head over to the house, but take your time. Terry or Julia will show you how everything works a little later.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

I waited for a moment longer, there in the doorway.

Then I took off my shoes, lined them neatly by the threshold, stepped into the cabin, and closed myself in. The rug was soft underfoot and full of color—greens and pinks and blues. And even without a fire in the stove, I was warm.

I could have stayed there for the rest of the night, but they were waiting for me. After I’d sat on the bed to test its softness and hung my clothes on the tiny rack between the woodstove and the table, I slipped my shoes back on and headed across the field.

I approached the main entrance, but the windows on each side of the heavy oak door were dark. So I walked the perimeter of the house, running my hand along the white wood planks until I heard voices and saw light, and found
a small patio with a door to a mudroom that opened onto a kitchen. It swung open before I finished knocking.

There was Julia, for the first time.

She had a soft body and laugh lines, white-blond hair and pink lips. “This is home,” she said. “No knocking on doors here. Just come right in.”

She wound her arm through mine and led me in. I had expected more people but apart from us it was only Nick and Terry, leaning toward each other from opposite sides of a butcher-block island, immersed in conversation.

“Ah,” Terry said when he saw me. He had silver close-cropped hair and brown skin, a wide white smile, and eyes that surprised me with their blueness. “Mila, welcome. I’m sure you’re hungry. We saved some dinner for you and Nick.”

He put a mitt on his hand, opened an old-fashioned oven, and pulled out two plates heaped with mashed potatoes and sausages and beans. He lit the burner to warm some gravy in a small cast-iron pot.

“Special occasion food, I see,” Nick said. Then, to me, “Prepare yourself for a lot of soup.”

Terry laughed, reached an arm toward Nick, and ruffled his hair.

“I’m not twelve,” Nick said, laughing, too.

Terry turned to me and smiled, warm but careful. “Here, sit.”

I sat at the never-ending kitchen table, all oil-spotted...
and cup-stained, and let the dinner fill me up while Terry
and Julia chatted with Nick about his new job in a San Fran-
cisco skyscraper. I half listened, taking in the details of the
kitchen. The blue-and-white-flowered curtains, the butcher-
block counters, the giant mason jars lined up on shelves, full
of flour and cornmeal and sugar and rice. I had never been
anywhere like it.

“Well . . .,” Nick said when he had finished eating.
“You’re sure we can’t persuade you to stay?” Terry asked.
“Gotta work in the morning. But I’ll come up again
soon. Good luck,” he said, giving me a quick hug goodbye.
“Don’t let these two work you too hard.”

They walked him out, and by the time they returned I
was also finished eating.

“Mila,” Terry said, picking up my empty plate and water
glass. “Why don’t you stay and visit with us for a little bit
before I show you around.”

“I’d love to,” I said. “Can I can help clean up?”

“Oh, don’t worry about these. You’ll be cleaning up
plenty soon enough.” He set my dishes in the sink and
smiled as he nodded toward the living room, where I could
see that Julia was already arranging pillows on one of the
sofas. I followed him up the two steps that separated the
rooms. A fire burned under a grand hearth, glowing across
overstuffed chairs and floor pillows, two sofas and a grand
piano. The whole room was covered in floor-to-ceiling
shelves laden with books and framed photographs. Rugs piled upon rugs. Everything was beautiful and nothing was perfect, and I didn’t know how I could have been chosen to be there.

Julia sat on the sofa, one leg tucked under. “Nick said you had an easy drive up. Have you been this far north before?”

I chose one of the chairs and sank into it. “No,” I told her. “Never this far.” I traced the outline of a bird printed on the armrest. I was trying not to look at the grand piano, which filled up the corner behind her. The sight of it made my chest ache.

The fire crackled and light danced across the ceiling and I wanted to give them something of myself. “I have to tell you...” They both leaned forward. “Nick told me about the piano. And for some reason I said I wanted to learn how to play it, but I actually know how to play. It’s just been a very long time.”

Julia laughed. “It’s funny, isn’t it? The things that come out of our mouths.”

“I’m glad you told us,” Terry said. “What a treat to have someone here who plays well. There’s enough terrible playing, believe me.”

“I don’t know if I play well. It’s been years.”

“Do you want to play now?” Julia asked.

I did want to. I wanted to very badly. So I got up and
walked across the room and sat down and set my fingers on the keys.

I remembered what to do next. It came back to me. I played “Someone to Watch Over Me” from beginning to end without faltering. I knew just which keys to press, when to pause, and when to speed up. I played softly because, upstairs, children were sleeping. I finished and crossed back to the chair. I wondered if they could see me blushing, but I didn’t really mind if they did.

“We knew we picked well,” Julia said.

“Yes,” Terry said. “Now tell us who taught you to play like that.”

So I told them that I had lived with my mother and my grandparents for most of my childhood, until I turned thirteen and my mom and I moved in with Blake. “My grandmother loved to play the piano and she was a really good teacher. I don’t even remember trying to play, or messing up, or worrying about whether I was doing it right. I just remember her fingers on the keys and her telling me to follow.”

“And what happened to your grandparents?” Terry asked.

“They died sometime after we moved out. In a car accident.”

“And we heard that your mother . . .” Julia trailed off, waiting for me to finish the sentence.

“She left,” I said. “After the fire.” I traced the bird again,
and then the branch it perched on, and the leaves that sprouted from the branch. By the time I looked up I was able to meet their faces. “I don’t want to talk about the fire if that’s okay.”

“That’s just fine,” Julia said.

“Your past is your own,” Terry said.

I nodded. We sat quietly for a minute or two. Julia said, “Thank you for playing for us. Thank you for your openness.” She stood up and stretched her arms over her head. “It’s past nine already. I’m going to check on the children. They’re so looking forward to meeting you in the morning.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting them, too.”

“Let’s get you some provisions,” Terry said. “It’s always nice to have something in case you want a midnight snack without crossing the field. And then we’ll go to your cabin and I’ll show you how to heat it.”

In the kitchen, he handed me a basket and offered me oranges and a loaf of bread and cookies. “And now,” he said, once the basket was full, “we cross the field to the third cabin.” He gestured to the window, then stopped. I followed his gaze but at first all I saw was our reflection, standing beneath a light in the kitchen: a tall Black man with an expression of wonder, a lonely white girl trying to make sense of the dark.

Then in the moonlight I saw something outside, glowing and crossing the field, moving closer. And the closer it came,
the more it looked like a figure, like how a person would look if a person emanated light.

“I hope you aren’t afraid of ghosts,” Terry said.

I felt gripped around the throat at first. Felt a familiarity. A darkness. My spine went stiff and straight and I made my face blank. I would be impenetrable. I would not give myself away.

The ghost hovered in place on the moonlit field. It lifted its arms to the sky and spun in a slow circle. A girl, I thought, by the way she moved. And, in spite of myself, I was mesmerized.

“No,” I whispered. “No, I’m not afraid.”

I didn’t know if I was telling the truth.

All I knew was I wanted to watch her spin forever. I wanted to be her. The soft, dark grass on my bare feet. Free of the fears I carried with me. We watched her, Terry and I did, until she had spun herself invisible. What a wonder it was, to stand side by side with someone and watch the same thing. And then all that was left was an open field and a moon and some cabins in the distance.

“Julia and I were warned before we bought this place that there were ghosts here. We didn’t believe it, or maybe we didn’t care. But the first time I saw them, I dropped to my knees.”

I turned toward him, waited for more. But he shook his head as though to break the memory. “Shall we?” he asked.
The mudroom was stocked with raincoats and boots and a full shelf of battery-powered lanterns. He handed a lantern to me and took one for himself. “Whenever you head into the dark, bring one of these with you. The paths are uneven and the field can get muddy. Keep one in your cabin and then bring back the others when you return to the house.”

We stepped out and crossed right through the space where the ghost had been. I thought there would be something—a scent, a breeze—but she was gone completely and the night was only the night.

“We’ll start with the bathroom,” he said, striding past the row of three cabins to a smaller structure behind them. “The door sticks sometimes. Push down a little bit. Lean into it.”

I tried and it worked. It was a simple, clean space with a toilet and a counter with a sink and a new bar of soap.

“It gets very cold. Not quite ideal for the middle of the night, but I hung this hook on the back of the door in case you wear a jacket over. The shower is around back.” We held out our lanterns and walked the perimeter of the building to a high gate that enclosed a patio of sorts. First there was a bench and several hooks. A few steps over was a shower-head, and next to that was a round, metal trough, the kind that animals might drink water from. I realized it functioned as a bathtub. “It is not the most comfortable, but it does the trick if you want a soak,” Terry said. “And you’re welcome to bathe in the house anytime.”
Back at my cabin, he stood at the doorway. “I’d like to show you a couple of things. How to light the fire, where to stack the wood. Do you mind if I come in?”

“No at all.”

He checked the supply of wood. “Oh, good,” he said. “Billy made sure you had plenty. You’ll meet him and Liz tomorrow, along with all the children. Breakfast is at seven thirty in the kitchen. Have you used a wood-burning stove before?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“The best way to learn is by doing,” he told me. “So go ahead and take two logs from the pile and a few sheets of that newsprint.”

I did as I was told, placed them in the stove. He took a matchbook from a blue dish, began to hand it to me, and then froze—his arm in mid-reach, the matchbook between his fingers. I didn’t look at his face but I could see him breathing. My heart lunged into my throat—he is afraid of me, afraid of me—but then I remembered that he didn’t know the whole story, so he had no reason to be afraid. He was sorry for me, then. He thought it might be difficult.

“I don’t mind,” I told him. “I’m not afraid of fire.”

“Good, good,” he said. I took the matchbook from his fingers, tore off a match, and struck it. After the newsprint was lit, I closed the doors of the stove and latched them.

“Just one more thing and then I’ll go.”
I waited.

“You’re free to leave anytime. You are not a prisoner here. But if you do want to leave, all I ask is that you let us know so that we can drive you into town. Some people have set out walking. It isn’t safe.”

I nodded.

“Of course, I hope you’ll stay,” he said, and smiled.

“I plan to,” I told him, and we said good night.

I unzipped my duffel, pulled out my toiletry bag, and walked the path to the bathroom to prepare for bed. When I was heading back, the ghost had reappeared on the green. She leapt, she spun. I averted my eyes. Heard Terry saying, I hope you aren’t afraid of ghosts. My pace quickened as I approached my cabin. I shut the door fast and hard behind me.

I undressed and stepped into my pajamas, pulled the covers back and climbed in. My face touched the pillow.