

***I DON'T  
WANT  
YOU TO  
REGRET  
ANYTHING***

A M E M O I R

M A D I S O N L E T T S

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Jacket design and author photograph by Juliana Ramirez

Published April 23, 2023

ISBN e-book: 979-8-218-17751-5

ISBN Hardcover: 979-8-218-17750-8

*for Knox.  
and for Dalton.*

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“Right now you may not want to feel anything... We rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we should that we go bankrupt by the age of 30 and have less to offer each time we start with someone new.

But to feel nothing so as not to feel anything—what a waste...

How you live your life is your business, just remember, our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once and, before you know it, your heart's worn out and, as for your body, there comes a point when no one looks at it much less wants to come near it. Right now there's sorrow, there's pain. Don't kill it and with it the joy you felt.”

Guadagnino, L. (2017). *Call Me by Your Name*. Sony Pictures Classics.





P A R T O N E

# ***THE BEFORE***

## December 1st, 2020, 12 pm-ish

I woke up early on the day you died.

I was sitting at the kitchen table when my mom walked through the front door. It was a Tuesday around 12 pm. Maybe a little later than that, I don't remember exactly.

My mom is an elementary school teacher. It was the middle of a school week. I looked up at her as she walked through the front door. She wore a white and yellow long-sleeve shirt. She shouldn't be here. She should be at school.

I had a feeling about why she was home. I refused to let my mind go there. I sat at our kitchen table, continuing to work, typing out an email as I tried my best to ignore my hands starting to tremble.

The front door hissed as it closed behind her. She took a few steps toward where I was working. As she came closer, I noticed she'd been crying—her face red and puffy—and a silence filled the room. She had an odd calmness surrounding her. Her demeanor had only been this way a few other times in my life.

*Something bad is happening.*

I realized this and then I let my mind slip into a place that mimicked her eerie calmness. I looked back down at my computer and began typing an email.

*You're wrong. Everything is fine.*

I'd felt a sort of numbness—an optimism I can no longer explain—from the moment I'd woken up. I answered texts all day. How is he doing? Are there any updates? He's doing really well! I spoke to his parents last night and the doctors said things are looking good! He's starting to show improvements!

My boyfriend Knox was admitted as an inpatient at Duke

University Hospital five days ago. I'd been staying at my mom's house in Charlotte, North Carolina—a two-hour drive from Duke—for the last three. I told people I'd spoken to his parents on the phone at length last night. That he was doing so well his mom Becky decided to spend the night at the hotel instead of in a chair at the hospital. That the doctors and nurses assured her his condition was improving. That she should rest. That she should sleep in a real bed.

My mom made her way over to where I sat. I watched her from the corner of my eyes as I tried to type. She got closer. I realized I hadn't heard from Becky all day. She'd been FaceTiming me every morning with Knox to say hello. I'd answer the phone and she'd hold it up in front of his face. I'd speak to him and he'd smile and nod and try to laugh. She'd call again mid-afternoon and then usually a third time to say goodnight.

I wasn't allowed to be in the hospital. Only one visitor was permitted per patient— COVID protocol. Becky was the obvious choice. Knox's father Eddie and I stayed in connecting hotel rooms nearby. The whole time I felt this awkwardness. This guilt. *I shouldn't be here. I don't belong here. I shouldn't be letting them pay for my room. I should just go home and stay with mom. I can't be in the hospital anyways. I am a burden. I have to get out of this hotel. I can't sit here and do nothing. I can't sit here and wait for news. I can't sit here with Eddie asking me what I want to do for lunch every day.*

After the initial two days of Facetimes and awkwardness and guilt, I decided to leave. I could spend time at home in the comfort of family and friends. It's only two hours from Duke. My dad picked me up and drove me home to Charlotte. That was on Sunday.

What are you doing home from work so early? I asked my mom cautiously.

I think Becky is about to call with some news about Knox, she spoke in an odd voice.

I looked at her for a second, blinking and saying nothing, then

shifted back to my computer screen. I remember this like it had been a scene I was watching. Detached. Unwilling to acknowledge that she had come home early from school. That she had been crying. That Becky was about to call us. I typed an email. I clicked some buttons on my computer screen.

I'm so sorry, Madison, she said. She put her hand on my shoulder.

I pretended not to hear and shrugged the hand off. She put her phone on the table near me. She waited. My younger brother Alfred was sitting in the room next to us with his girlfriend. A set of glass french doors separated us. I saw their posture stiffen from the corner of my eyes. I ignored the way everything in our house had become very still. The way Alfred had paused the video game he'd been playing. Silence. I could feel everyone trying not to look at me. I clicked around my computer screen some more. It's the middle of the work day. Stop letting yourself get distracted.

The phone rang.

## I'm Knox Martin

**T**he day I met you started as normal as any other Saturday I spent in college.

I woke up anxious for the day ahead. I was twenty-one years old. Was I going to have to drink all day to keep up with my friends? Were they going to make plans to do something without telling me? I texted my best friend Charlotte, Char, to check in. We were both juniors at the University of Georgia.

We ended up spending our Saturday morning at some charity event I can't recall the name of. It was at a popular brewery with a huge backyard. Gabe, the guy Char was newly seeing, asked her to come—a bunch of his friends would be there, and she didn't want to show up alone. Weekends in Athens, Georgia—the college town surrounding UGA—are crowded. Chaotic. Full of drunk or hungover students and parents and visitors looking for something to do. Somewhere to party. Downtown is walkable, but there's almost never parking. The best restaurants, coffee shops, bars, and breweries often have lines out the door or waitlists an hour long.

We sat in the back of the brewery and drank beers and chatted at picnic tables. Gabe's friends had always intimidated me a little. I'm not completely sure why—I think I just wanted them to like me. So I sat, chatting and drinking beers. We took some photos. I wanted to act naturally around these unfamiliar faces, but my body wouldn't let me. I had to hold it just so. Smile at the right moments. Laugh a few times when it seemed to make sense. I tried to look like I was having fun.

Char knows everyone in the world—and when I say everyone, I really mean it. She called me over, trying to re-introduce me to a group of guys I'd already met. Either they didn't remember me or

they were pretending not to, the way stunted frat boys do when they've only met you at bars or parties on drunken nights out. I smiled, took a few awkward sips of my beer, and looked around at the crowd of men until I came across one I'd never seen before. We held eye contact—his green eyes piercing mine. I felt exposed. I felt he was looking past the version of myself I carefully acted out in front of all these unfamiliar faces, past my self-judgments, cracking my shell, and seeing right through me.

After a second or two, the boy with piercing eyes stepped closer and stretched his arm out. My hand lifted from my side. It took effort to peel my eyes from his, but I allowed them to drift across the rest of his body, his chest, his face, the patchy hair peeking out from under his hat. His eyes remained confidently on mine. I felt a new energy. A sense of relief. Our hands connected, and I knew him instantly. His wrapped around mine tightly. It was warm and a little sweaty. I left my body. All I could think about was his eyes in front of mine. His smell. The small beads of sweat falling from the sides of his head. His hand holding mine up in the air. I waited for him to speak. His mouth opened, lips curled slightly as if he was about to smile but never made it to the full expression.

Nice to meet you, I'm Knox Martin, he said. He shook my hand up and down in a way that made me tingle.

I'm Madison, I said my part. It's nice to meet you too.

I felt blood creeping up my chest and my neck, making its way to my cheeks. I smiled. I tried to focus and bring my mind back into my body. I could hear my own heartbeat. He kindly pretended not to notice my face was red as a tomato.

His hand dropped mine. We held eye contact for a second longer as I remembered there were other people around us. I took a step back. Char came into focus out of the corner of my eyes. I took another sip of my beer because it felt like the natural thing to do.

For the next hour, I did everything to avoid staring at Knox Martin's piercing green eyes and strong chest. I turned my head

to face the other people in the group. I let out a smile and more laughter to show I was paying attention to the conversation. I shifted from my right foot to my left. I wondered if he was thinking about me. I hoped he was watching me. *Why haven't I ever seen him before?*

Later on the car ride home, I asked my friends about him.

Oh yeah, they said. That's Knox. He just got back from LA. He had to take time off from school last semester. He has brain cancer.

December 1st, 2020, 12 pm-ish

**M**om answered the phone on speaker. Becky was on the other end. She spoke immediately.

How far are you? She said.

Or maybe it was more like: do you want us to wait for you?

Blood began to pump through my body quickly. The sound of it filled my ears. *What the fuck is going on?*

What? I asked. I don't understand what you're saying.

Sweetie, Becky whispered through the phone. You need to prepare yourself. Knox is passing away.

Everything sounded muffled. Like I was underwater. I tried to understand. My mom grabbed my hand and sobbed loudly next to me.

I know, sweetie, Becky said calmly—she thought the sobs were coming from me. We're waiting for you. You should come here to say goodbye.

My mom kept sobbing next to me, and I wished she would stop. The back door slammed next to the room where Alfred had been sitting. I heard him yell loudly outside. I heard something crash against the ground.

I know. I know, Becky repeated. She still thought the sobs were mine.

I sat silently, staring at the phone. I had allowed and refused to allow myself to imagine this moment many times. My mom's sobs slowed and quieted.

Do you want us to wait for you? Becky asked.

Don't be selfish, a voice inside me screamed.

How long... How long will... Is he okay? Will he be okay? What's um... What if...



I tried and failed to get words out.

She's trying to ask if he's in pain. Will he be in pain if you wait for her? My mom stepped in to say what I couldn't.

No, sweetie. He's not in any pain at all, Becky said.

I wanted to say yes. Please wait until I get there. Please don't let him die before I get to say goodbye. I felt ridiculous and embarrassed. How could you even consider the thought? How could you ask them to do such a thing? *They'll hate you. You're so selfish.*

I told them not to wait.

Eddie chimed in. He explained some things about how, when the doctors pull the plugs, there's no telling how long it could take. They would make sure he's not in any pain. Was I sure I didn't want them to wait for me?

I was hardly listening. I stared at my email inbox for a little longer, and then I stood up mechanically.

I'm going to pack a bag, I said. Then we can drive to Duke.

My feet shuffled towards the stairs. They climbed step by step up to my room. My body moved around while my mind floated above, watching. I gathered items and put them in a bag. Underwear, bras, socks, shoes. I gathered my toiletries from the bathroom. I started to feel very cold. It occurred to me that I needed to tell someone what was happening. I started to shiver. I called Char. The phone rang for a second. I'd texted her less than an hour ago that Knox was doing really well. That the doctors said he was getting better.

She picked up the phone.

Knox is passing away, I said. I'm going to Duke to say goodbye.

Oh, I heard on the other end. Oh, Madison.

Will you come over? I asked her. Tears began to fill my eyes.

Of course. I'm getting in my car right now, she cried. I hung up and wiped the tears. I walked halfway down the stairs outside of my room. I sat down on a stair and looked out the window of our front door—a habit I started in high school. I wondered how many times I'd been on these stairs staring out the windows with

a pit in my stomach. How many times I'd watched the grass on the front lawn blow in the wind. I pondered the idea that if my brain never told my legs to stand up and finish ascending the last couple of steps, I could sit there forever, remaining in stillness, staring at the tiny blades of grass outside, watching the light fade and grow bright again as clouds passed in front of the sun. I pondered how long I could stay there unmoving. I allowed my eyes to glaze over. They remained open, but I couldn't really see anything. I sat staring for what felt like a long time. Then Alfred rounded the corner. He was 20 years old at the time. I was 24. He looked at me. Tears filled his eyes. His face was red and puffy like my mom's. I said nothing. He walked up a few steps and stood in front of me, forcing my eyes to meet his.

Madison, he said. I don't want you to regret anything.

He looked at me with a sympathetic intensity. His eyes searched for understanding.

I won't, I assured him.

I wondered silently if I would.