



HELLO

BEAUTIFUL

A NOVEL

ANN

NAPOLITANO

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
DEAR EDWARD

Hello Beautiful

A N O V E L

Ann
Napolitano



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Dedication

Acknowledgments

By Ann Napolitano

About the Author

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?

I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not
contain'd between my hat and boots,

And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good,

The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.

—WALT WHITMAN, "SONG OF MYSELF," VERSE 7

William

FEBRUARY 1960—DECEMBER 1978

FOR THE FIRST SIX DAYS of William Waters's life, he was not an only child. He had a three-year-old sister, a redhead named Caroline. There were silent home movies of Caroline in which William's father looked like he was laughing, a sight William never saw again. His father's face looked open, and the tiny redhead, who pulled her dress over her face and ran in giggling circles in one of the movies, was apparently the reason. Caroline developed a fever and a cough while William and his mother were in the hospital after his birth. When they came home, the little girl seemed to be on the mend, but the cough was still bad, and when her parents went into her room to get her one morning, they found her dead in her crib.

William's parents never mentioned Caroline while William was growing up. There was one photograph of her on the end table in the living room, which William traveled to occasionally in order to convince himself that he'd actually had a sister. The family moved to a navy-shingled house on the other side of Newton—a suburb of Boston—and in that house, William was an only child. His father was an accountant who worked long hours downtown. With his daughter gone, the man's face never opened again. William's mother smoked cigarettes and drank bourbon in the living room, sometimes alone and sometimes with a female neighbor. She had a collection of ruffled aprons that she wore while preparing meals, and she became agitated whenever one became stained or messy.

"Maybe you shouldn't wear the aprons while you cook," William said once, when his mother was red-faced and on the verge of tears over a dark

blotch of gravy on the fabric. “You could tuck a dish towel in your belt instead, like Mrs. Kornet does.”

His mother looked at him as if he’d spoken in Greek. William said, “Mrs. Kornet, who lives next door? Her dish towel?”

From the age of five, William would walk to the nearby park most afternoons with a basketball, because basketball, unlike baseball or football, was a game he could play alone. There was a neglected outdoor court that usually had a hoop free, and he would shoot for hours, pretending he was a Celtics player. Bill Russell was his favorite, but to be Russell you needed someone else to block or defend against. Sam Jones was the best shooter, so William was usually Jones. He tried to imitate the guard’s perfect shooting form while pretending the trees that surrounded the court were cheering fans.

One afternoon when he was ten years old, he showed up at the court and found it occupied. Boys—maybe six of them, about William’s age—were chasing one another and a ball between the hoops. William started to back away, but one of the boys called, “Hey, wanna play?” And then, without waiting for William to answer: “You’re on the blue team.” Within seconds, William was swept into the game, his heart pounding in his chest. A kid passed him the ball, and he passed it right back, afraid to shoot and miss and be told he was terrible. A few minutes later, the game broke up abruptly because someone needed to get home, and the boys spilled off the court in different directions. William walked home, his heart still rattling in his chest. After that, the boys were occasionally on the court when William showed up with his ball. There was no discernible schedule to their appearances, but they always waved him into the game as if he were one of them. This never stopped being shocking to William. Kids and adults had always looked past him, as if he were invisible. His parents hardly looked at him at all. William had accepted all of this and thought it was understandable; he was, after all, boring and forgettable. His primary characteristic was pallor: He had sand-colored hair, light-blue eyes, and the very white skin shared by people of English and Irish descent. On the inside, William knew, he was as uninteresting and muted as his looks. He

never spoke at school, and no one played with him. But the boys on the basketball court offered William a chance to be part of something for the first time, without having to talk.

In fifth grade, the gym teacher at his elementary school said, “I see you out there shooting baskets in the afternoons. How tall is your father?”

William stared at the man blankly. “I’m not sure. Normal height?”

“Okay, so you’ll probably be a point guard. You need to work on your handle. You know Bill Bradley? That gawky guy on the Knicks? When he was a kid, he taped cardboard to his glasses so he couldn’t look down, couldn’t see his feet. And then he dribbled up and down the sidewalk wearing those glasses. He looked crazy, no doubt, but his handle got real tight. He has a perfect feel for how the ball will bounce and how to find it without looking.”

William sprinted home that afternoon, his entire body buzzing. This was the first time a grown-up had looked directly at him—noticed him, and noticed what he was doing—and the attention threw him into distress. William had a sneezing fit while he was digging for a pair of toy glasses in the back of his desk drawer. He visited the bathroom twice before he carefully taped rectangular pieces of cardboard to the bottom of the glasses.

Whenever William felt sick or odd, he worried he was going to die. At least once a month he would crawl under his covers after school, convinced he was terminally ill. He wouldn’t tell his parents, because illness wasn’t permitted in his house. Coughing, in particular, was treated as a horrific betrayal. When William had a cold, he allowed himself to cough only in his closet with the door closed, his face muffled by the row of hanging button-down shirts he had to wear for school. He was aware of that familiar worry tickling his shoulders and the back of his head while he ran outside with the ball and glasses. But William had no time for illness now, no time for fear. This felt like the final click of his identity falling into place. The boys on the court had recognized him, and the gym teacher had too. William might have had no idea who he was, but the world had told him: He was a basketball player.

The gym teacher gave him additional tips that allowed William to develop more skills. “For defense: Push kids away with your shoulder and your butt. The refs won’t call those as fouls. Do sprints: Get a quick first step and beat your man off the dribble.” William worked on his passing too, so he could feed the ball to the best players in the park. He wanted to keep his place on the court, and he knew that if he made the other boys better, he had value. He learned where to run to provide space for the shooters to cut in to. He set screens so they could take their favorite shots. The boys slapped William on the back after a successful play, and they always wanted him on their side. This acceptance calmed some of the fear William carried inside him; on the basketball court, he knew what to do.

By the time William entered high school, he was a good-enough player to start for the varsity team. He was five foot eight and played point guard. His hours of practice with the glasses had paid off; he was by far the best dribbler on the team, and he had a nice midrange jumper. He’d worked on his rebounding, which helped offset his team’s turnovers. Passing was still William’s best skill, and his teammates appreciated that they had better games when he was in the lineup. He was the only freshman on the varsity team, and so when his older teammates drank beer in the basement of whoever’s parents were willing to look the other way, William was never invited. His teammates were shocked—everyone was shocked—when, in the summer after his sophomore year, William grew five inches. Once he started growing, his body seemed unable to stop, and by the end of high school he was six foot seven. He couldn’t eat enough to keep up with his growth and became shockingly thin. His mother looked frightened when he lurched into the kitchen every morning, and she’d hand him a snack whenever he passed nearby. She seemed to think his skinniness reflected badly on her, because feeding him was her job. His parents sometimes came to his basketball games, but at odd intervals, and they sat politely in the stands, appearing not to know anyone on the court.

His parents weren’t there for the game when William went for a rebound and was shoved in the air. His body twisted while he fell, and he landed awkwardly on his right knee. The joint absorbed all of the impact, and all of

his weight. William heard his knee make a noise, and then a fog descended. His coach, who seemed to have only two registers—shouting and mumbling—was yelling in his ear: “You okay, Waters?” William generally responded to both the shouts and the mumbles by phrasing everything he said as a question; he never felt sure enough to lay claim to a statement. He cleared his throat. The fog around him, and inside him, was dense and laced with pain that was radiating from his knee. He said, “No.”

He’d fractured his kneecap, which meant he would miss the last seven weeks of his junior-year season. William’s leg was immobilized with a cast, and he was on crutches for two months. What this meant was that for the first time since he was five years old, he was unable to play basketball. William sat on the desk chair in his room and threw crumpled-up paper into the bin by the far wall. The clouds that had descended with the injury remained; his skin felt damp and cold. The doctor had told him that he would make a full recovery and be able to play in his senior-year season, but still, William felt slightly panicked every minute of the day. Time became strange too. He felt like he would be locked in this cast, in this chair, in this house, forever. He began to think that he couldn’t do this, couldn’t sit inside this broken body any longer. He thought of his sister, how Caroline was gone. He thought about her gone-ness, which he didn’t understand, but as the clock hand labored from one minute to the next, he wished that he were gone too. Off the basketball court, he had no usefulness. No one would miss him. If he disappeared, it would be like he’d never existed. No one spoke of Caroline, and no one would speak of him. Only when William’s leg was finally freed from the cast, and he could run and shoot again, did the fog and the thoughts of disappearing recede.

Thanks to his decent grades and promise as a basketball player, William was offered a handful of scholarships from colleges with Division I basketball programs. He was grateful for the scholarships, because his parents had never indicated that they would pay for college, and because he took it as a promise of guaranteed basketball. William wanted to leave Boston—he’d never been more than ninety miles from the city center—but the swampy heat of the South made him nervous, so he accepted a

scholarship from Northwestern University, in Chicago. In late August 1978, William kissed his mother goodbye at the train station and shook his father's hand. With his palm pressed against his father's, William had the strange thought that he might never see his parents again—that they'd only ever had one child, and it wasn't him.

IN COLLEGE, WILLIAM GRAVITATED toward history classes when filling his schedule. He had what felt like gaping holes to fill in his knowledge of how the world worked, and it appeared to him that history had the answers. He appreciated that the academic subject looked at disparate events and found a pattern. *If* this happened, *then* this happened. Nothing was completely random, and therefore a line could be drawn from the assassination of an Austrian archduke to a world war. College life was too new to be predictable, and William struggled to find any sense of equilibrium in the face of excited students who offered him high fives while he made his way down the noisy hallway in his dorm. He divided his days between studying in the library, practicing on the basketball court, and attending classes. In each of these locations, he knew what to do. He sank into every classroom chair, opened his notebook, and felt his body sag with relief when the professor began to talk.

William rarely noticed other students during classes, but Julia Padavano stood out in his European history seminar because her face appeared to be lit up with indignation and because she drove the professor—an elderly Englishman who held an oversized handkerchief balled in one fist—crazy with her questions. Her long, curly hair shifted around her bright face like curtains while she said things like: *Professor, I'm interested in the role of Clementine in all of this. Isn't it true that she was Churchill's main adviser? Or: Can you explain the wartime coding system? I mean the specifics of how it worked? I'd like to see an example.*

William never spoke in class or utilized the professor's office hours. He believed that the role of a student was to keep his or her mouth shut and

soak up as much knowledge as possible. He shared the professor's opinion of the curly-haired girl, which was that her frequent interjections and inquiries, though often interesting to William, were impolite. The fabric of a serious classroom was created by students listening and the professor providing wisdom in a carefully unrolled carpet of words; this girl poked holes in that fabric, as if she didn't even know it existed.

William was startled one afternoon after class when she appeared at his elbow and said, "Hello. My name is Julia."

"William. Hi." He had to clear his throat; this might have been the first time he'd spoken that day. The girl was regarding him with wide, serious eyes. He noticed that in the sunlight her brown hair had honey-colored highlights. She looked lit up, from without and within.

"Why are you so tall?"

It wasn't unusual for people to remark on William's height; he understood that his size was a surprise whenever he entered a room and that most people felt compelled to say something. Several times a week he heard, *How's the air up there?*

Julia looked suspicious when she asked the question, though, and her expression made him laugh. He stopped on the path that crisscrossed the quad, and so she stopped too. William rarely laughed, and his hands tingled, as if they'd just woken up from an oxygen-deprived sleep. The overall sensation was one of being pleasantly tickled. Later, William would look back at this moment and know that this was when he fell for her. Or, more accurately, when his body fell for her. In the middle of the quad, attention from a specific girl reeled in laughter from the nooks and crannies within him. William's body—tired and bored by his hesitant mind—had to set off fireworks in his nerves and muscles to alert him that something of import was taking place.

"Why are you laughing?" Julia said.

He managed to mostly tamp it down. "Please, don't be offended," he said.

She gave an impatient nod. "I'm not."

“I don’t know why I’m so tall.” Secretly, though, he believed that he’d willed himself to this height. A serious basketball player needed to be at least six foot three, and William had cared about that so badly that he’d somehow defied his genetics. “I’m on the basketball team here.”

“At least you’re making a virtue of it, then,” she said. “Perhaps I’ll come to see one of your games. I generally don’t take an interest in sports, and I only come to campus for classes.” She paused, and then said quickly, as if embarrassed, “I live at home to save money.”

Julia told him to write her phone number on his history notebook, and before she walked away he’d agreed to call her the next night. It was to some extent irrelevant whether he’d fallen for her or not. In the middle of the quad, this young woman seemed to have decided they would be boyfriend and girlfriend. Later, she would tell him that she’d been watching him in class for weeks and liked how attentive and serious he was. “Not silly, like the other boys,” she said.

Even after he met Julia, basketball still took up most of William’s time and thoughts. He’d been the best player on his high school team; at Northwestern, he was dismayed to discover he was among the weakest. On this team, his height wasn’t enough to set him apart, and the other young men were stronger than he was. Most of them had been weight lifting for a few years, and William was panicked not to have known to do the same. He was easily shoved aside, knocked over, during practices. He started going to the weight room before practice and stayed on the court late to drill shots from different angles. He was hungry all the time and kept extra sandwiches in his jacket pockets. He realized that his role on this team would probably be as a “glue guy.” He was good enough at passing, shooting, and defense to make himself useful, even though he wasn’t a gifted athlete. His most valuable skill was that he rarely made mistakes on the court. “High basketball IQ, but no hops,” William heard one of the coaches say about him, when they didn’t know he was within earshot.

His scholarship required that he work a job on campus, and from the list of possibilities, he chose the one that took place in the gym building, because it would be convenient for basketball. He reported to the laundry

facility in the sub-basement of the enormous building at the assigned time, where he was confronted by a skinny woman with a tall Afro and glasses. She shook her head and said, “You’re in the wrong place. They told you to come here? White boys don’t get assigned to laundry. You need to get yourself to the library or the student rec center. Go on.”

William looked down the stretch of the long narrow room. There was a row of thirty washing machines on one wall and thirty dryers on the other. It was true that as far as he could see, no one else was white.

“Why does it matter?” he said. “I want to do this job. Please.”

She shook her head again, and her glasses waggled on her nose, but before she could speak, a hand clapped William on the back and a deep voice said his name. He turned to see one of the other freshmen on the basketball team, a strong power forward named Kent. Kent had nearly the opposite set of basketball skills from William: He was a supreme athlete who dunked theatrically, crashed the boards, and sprinted every minute he was in the game, but he made bad reads on plays, caused multiple turnovers, and never knew where to be on defense. The coach gripped his head while he watched Kent run the court, presumably reeling at the disparity between the young man’s physical potential and his high-speed, erratic play.

“Hey, man,” Kent said. “You working down here too? I can show him the ropes, if you like, ma’am.” Kent gave the stern woman a wide, charming smile.

She softened and said, “Okay, fine, then. Take him off my hands and I’ll pretend he’s not here.”

From that point on, William and Kent timed their shifts in the laundry so they could work side by side. They washed hundreds of towels and the uniforms for every team. Football uniforms were the worst, because of the smell and deep grass stains that required a special bleach to be scrubbed into the fabric. William and Kent developed a rhythm to each step of the laundry process; with their focus on timing and efficiency, the work felt like an extension of basketball practice. They used the time to break down plays and figure out how their team could improve.

One afternoon, while they were folding an enormous pile of towels, William explained, “It goes: Guard-to-guard pass to initiate, forward comes off the baseline screen, and a guard screens down for the big.” William paused to make sure Kent was following. “If the pass goes to the big, the small steps out to the corner and the other forward comes off that screen, and the other guard screens down on the weak side.”

“Picking the picker.”

“That’s right, and if the big passes to the forward, then the flex continuity repeats.”

“Too predictable! Coach wants us running the same thing over and over....”

“But if we do it right, there’s not a lot a defense can do to stop it, even if they know it’s coming, especially if we—”

“Boys,” the man at the next dryer said, “do you know that you’re making no sense? I mean, I watch basketball, and I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Kent and William grinned at him. At the end of their shift, they went upstairs to the gym, where it was twenty degrees cooler, and shot baskets.

Kent was from Detroit, had loud opinions on all the NBA players and teams, and often broke his sentences in half to laugh at one of the dumb jokes that flew like paper airplanes around the locker room. During practices, he was repeatedly yelled at by the coach for showboating, which Kent apologized for but was unable to stop himself from doing again five minutes later. “Fundamentals!” the coach thundered, over and over.

Kent claimed to be related to Magic Johnson, who was a senior at Michigan State and was widely considered a lock as the first pick in the upcoming NBA draft. It was so easy for Kent to make friends—everyone liked him—that William wondered why Kent chose to spend his time with him. All he could see was that Kent seemed to delight in William’s quietness as an opportunity to manage their friendship. Kent did most of the talking, and only slowly did William realize that Kent told personal stories in order to get William to share his own. After hearing about Kent’s grandmother’s leukemia, which had stunned everyone in the family—

apparently, she'd claimed she would live forever and was such a powerful force that they'd all believed her—William told Kent that he'd exchanged only one letter with his parents so far and that he was going to stay at school for Christmas break.

After a long night practice, while they were walking slowly across the quiet quad, their muscles cramping with exhaustion, Kent said, "Sometimes I have to remind myself that it doesn't matter if the coach benches me or bawls me out because he doesn't appreciate my beautiful game. I'm going to med school. He can't stop my future from happening."

William was surprised. "You're going to be a doctor?"

"Hundred percent. I don't have the tuition worked out yet, but I will. What're you going do after college?"

William was aware of his cold fingers. It was early November, and when he breathed in, the air felt icy in his lungs. William never considered life after college; he was aware that he kept his eyes averted from the future on purpose. He wanted to say *basketball*, but he wasn't good enough for that to be his career. Kent asking the question confirmed that he didn't think William was good enough either.

"I don't know," William said.

"We'll start thinking about it, then," Kent said. "You got talents. We got time."

Do I have talents? William thought. He wasn't aware of any, off the basketball court.

Julia attended a Friday-night basketball game in early December, and when William noticed her in the stands, his eyesight blurred and he passed the ball to the other team. "Hey," Kent yelled as he powered by William on the court. "What kind of bullshit was that?" On the defensive end, William made two steals that turned the momentum of the game in favor of the Wildcats. On offense, at the top of the key, he made a bounce pass to an open shooter in the corner. Kent crowed just before halftime: "I get it! You got a girl here! Where is she?"

After the game—the Wildcats won, and William had played his best minutes of the early season—he climbed into the bleachers to see Julia.

Only when he got closer did he see that she was seated with three girls who resembled her. They all had the same boisterous shoulder-length curls. “These are my sisters,” Julia said. “I brought them to scout you. That’s basketball language, right?”

William nodded, and—under the scrutiny of the four girls—he was suddenly very aware of how short his basketball shorts were and of the flimsiness of his sleeveless jersey.

“We enjoyed it,” one of the younger-looking girls said. “It looked exhausting, though. I don’t think I’ve ever sweated in my entire life as much as you did. I’m Cecelia, and this is my twin, Emeline. We’re fourteen.”

Emeline and Cecelia pointed friendly smiles at him, and he smiled back. Julia and the sister on her other side were studying him like jewelry appraisers sizing up a stone. If one of them had pulled a watchmaker’s loupe out of her purse and held it to her eye, he wouldn’t have been surprised. Julia said, “You looked so powerful...out there on the court.”

William blushed, and the tops of Julia’s cheeks pinkened too. He could see this beautiful girl’s desire for him, and he couldn’t believe his luck. No one had ever wanted him before. He wished he could take her in his arms, in front of her sisters, in front of the entire arena, but that kind of bold action wasn’t in William’s nature. He was drenched with sweat, and Julia was speaking again.

“This is my sister Sylvie,” she said. “I’m the oldest, but only by ten months.”

“Nice to meet you,” Sylvie said. Her hair was a shade darker than Julia’s, and she was more petite, less curvy. She continued to study William, while Julia beamed like a peacock with all her feathers on display. While he stood there, he watched one of the buttons on Julia’s shirt come undone, pulled too tight across her generous chest. He had a glimpse of her pink bra before she realized and pulled everything back into place.

“How many siblings do you have?” Either Emeline or Cecelia asked this. They weren’t identical, but they looked very alike to William. Same olive complexion, same light brown hair.

“Siblings? None,” he said, though of course he thought of the framed photo of the redheaded toddler in his parents’ living room.

Julia already knew he was an only child—it had been one of her first questions during their first phone call—but the other three girls looked comically shocked.

“That’s terrible,” Emeline or Cecelia said.

“We should invite him to our house for dinner,” Sylvie said, and the other girls nodded. “He looks lonely.”

And so, four months into college, William found himself with his first girlfriend, and a new family.