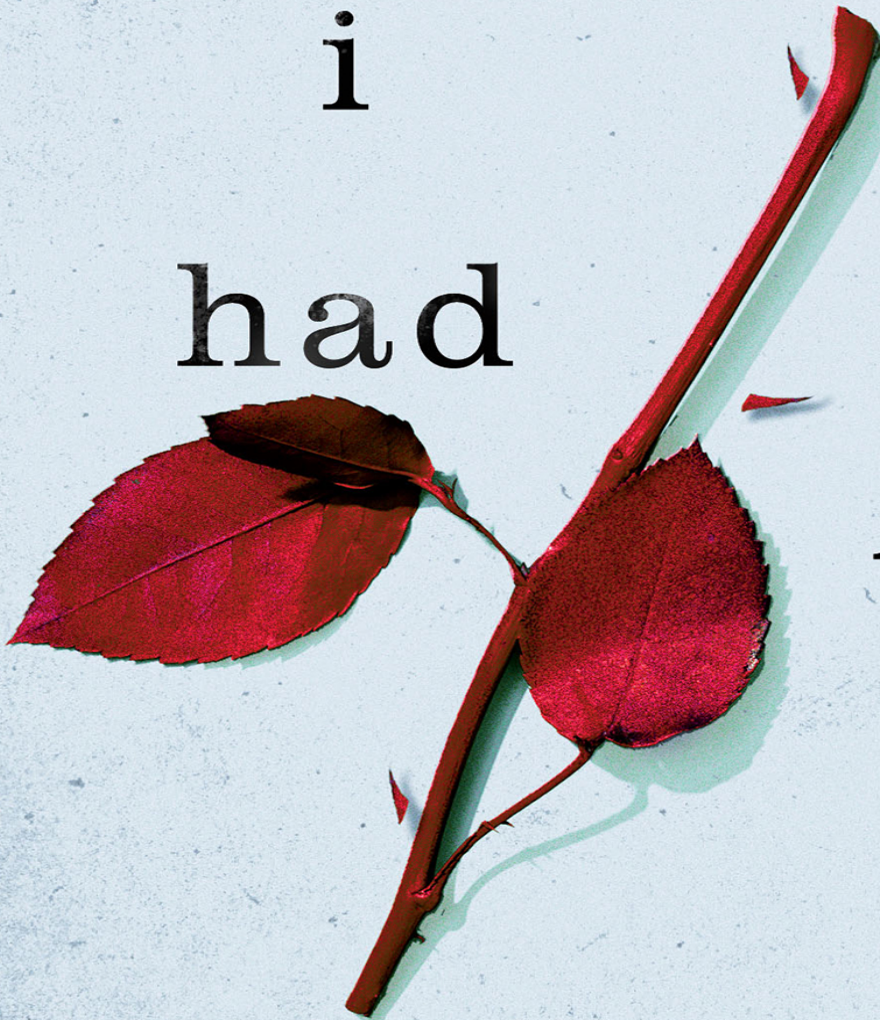


if
only



i
had



told
her

#1 *new york times* bestselling author of
if he had been with me

laura nowlin

also by laura nowlin

If He Had Been with Me
This Song Is (Not) for You

if
only
i
had
told
her

laura nowlin



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This book is dedicated to the memory of

Aliksir Drago Jaan

And in honor of all parents whose children live on in their hearts.

author's note

In the winter of 2009, my husband found me crying over my secondhand IBM ThinkPad. He kneeled in front of me in my “office” (a deep window ledge in our tiny studio apartment that I’d claimed as a desk), and I sobbed to him,

“I have to let Finny die inside my brain now!”

As I first drafted Autumn’s narrative in *If He Had Been with Me*, I crafted Finn’s side of the story within me, and I could feel all his thoughts and passion. I had even written a page and a half of Finn’s story. When my husband found me crying, it was because I had realized that I needed to delete those pages. I had no agent, no literary prospects; I couldn’t write a whole new novel from his perspective when my energy would be better spent revising the novel that I’d already written from Autumn’s point of view. So I dried my tears and focused on making sure Autumn’s story was the best it could be. I let Finny’s voice fade. I let him die again within me.

Over the years, so many readers have asked for a Finny POV, and I’ve always said, “I’m sorry, he’s dead; I can’t bring him back.” And it was true. I didn’t have that power. But Gina Rogers had that power.

I hadn’t planned to listen to the audiobook. The idea of my words in someone else’s mouth terrified me. But then Gina sent me a message asking that if I ever listened, I provide feedback—even if it was

negative—because she too was an artist striving for an ideal. I was so touched by her sentiment and dedication to her craft that I decided to give it a listen.

The moment I heard Gina as Finny say “Hey” to Autumn at the bus stop, I felt him stir within me. Before I was done listening, he was alive and, dear reader, Finny was mad at me. Not for killing him—he understood I had to make *If He Had Been with Me* the best story that I could—but he had a few things that he wanted to say, some things he needed to clarify. Given his miraculous resurrection, his request seemed reasonable, and I was compelled to let him finally have his say.

So forgive me if I ever swore to you that this book would never exist. At the time, I believed it with my whole artist’s heart.

But life is like that sometimes, and that’s a good thing.

content warning

This novel includes depictions of death, depression, suicide, and pregnancy.

If you or someone you know is experiencing mental-health distress or crisis, please reach out for help.

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline:

Call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org.

finn

one

Autumn is a terror to sleep beside. She talks, kicks, steals the covers, uses you as a pillow. The stories I could tell if I had anyone to tell them to. Autumn is uncharacteristically embarrassed about her nocturnal chaos though, and it's one of her eccentricities for which she will not tolerate a bit of teasing. Our mothers—"The Mothers" as Autumn started calling them when we were young—have their own tales of Autumn's nighttime calamities, and the look that she gives them has been enough to stop me from sharing my childhood memories of her violent, restless sleepovers.

This summer, I discovered just how much she hasn't changed. The other day, she fell asleep watching me play video games. I had finally, finally, made a specific timed jump when she flung her arm onto my lap, causing my guy to fall to his death. I gently lifted her hand off me and scooted over a few inches, but not too far. I didn't tell her about it when she woke up; she would say something about going back home when she starts to feel tired, and I'd rather give away all my games than lose a minute of whatever has been happening between us since Jamie broke up with her.

I made sure to insert myself between Autumn and Jack last night for this very reason. It was clear that we were crashing at my house, and I felt it was my duty to be the one to take the blows.

I have to admit: I'd hoped for something like this.

It was her fingers twitching against my ribs that first woke me.

Aunt Claire is right. Autumn snores now. She didn't when we were children. I'd believed Autumn when, again and again, she insisted that her mother was only joking.

But here we are, in this blanket tent I made for her, her head under the crook of my arm. She's on her side, curled in a tight ball, snoring, though not loudly. Her breath comes in hot, short puffs.

After Jack fell asleep last night, she and I stayed up talking for a while. Autumn was drifting, but I hadn't wanted to give her up yet, so I kept her talking until she said, "Hush, Finny. I need to focus on sweeping."

I turned my face and, in the darkness, saw her closed eyes, her gentle breathing.

"You're sleeping?"

She frowned.

"No. Can't you see me with the broom? It's so messy in here."

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Oh, you know...in the room...in between..."

"Between what?"

"Huh?"

"The room in between what, Autumn?"

"Pretend and reality. Help me. It's so messy."

"Why is it messy?" I asked, but she didn't answer me.

I went to sleep much like I am now, on my back, staring at the quilt above us. I remember stretching my arm above my head, vaguely aware of the way she was twitching and mumbling a few inches away from me, presumably cleaning the space between this world and the next. We weren't touching, but it felt like the atoms between us were warm with my love for her.

Later on in the night, I woke up when she smacked my face. I pushed her hand away and turned my head toward her. She was close

but not touching me, the covers bunched in her other fist, the hand that clocked me resting between us. I made myself look away and close my eyes, go back to sleep.

But now...

This is heaven: her forehead pressed into me, her head under my arm, and my hand on her shoulder. We found each other by instinct. Even if I was half-asleep, I would never have done this knowingly. I wouldn't know if she was okay with it. I don't know it now either, but I am unable to move.

My penis, based on very minimal evidence, has decided that today is going to be the greatest day of both our lives. I understand its enthusiasm, but it's (sadly) vastly overestimating the situation.

If I move, Autumn will wake up.

If Autumn wakes up, she'll see my body's assumption.

This is what I get for putting myself in this position. Again.

Not that I've been in this *exact* position with Autumn. But like I said, the tales I could tell.

The toilet flushes. I hadn't wondered where my other best friend had gone off to.

I am not going to be able to keep up the brave face with Jack. I don't think he'll let me this time. He's always known that I was still in love with Autumn after all these years, in spite of my being mostly happy with Sylvie. He let it slide all through high school, but he's not going to let me pretend anymore.

A couple of weeks ago, after we went to see that silly horror movie that made Autumn scream three times, both of them—Jack and Autumn—said they had fun. They said they could understand why I liked my other friend so much, and sure, maybe we could do it again.

Autumn had meant it. I could tell.

It wasn't that Jack didn't mean it. There was just a lot he wasn't saying.

I don't know if last night helped. I want Jack to see that Autumn isn't a poseur who thinks she's a princess like Alexis or Taylor make her sound.

It's more like Autumn is a real princess but from an alien planet. She is the most confident and insecure person I've ever known.

Except for Sylvie, of course.

Remembering Sylvie robs my penis of the delusion that a miracle is about to occur and adds to my already bloated guilt.

Jack retches and spits. The toilet flushes again, then the sink runs. I hear Jack get a glass of water in the kitchen.

I try to remember what Sylvie said about her flight itinerary. She must be in the air now. Over the English Channel? I can't say. I picture her in her seat, on the aisle, like she told me she prefers. Her Discman rests on her tray table, and her golden hair falls back as she tilts her head to listen.

I hope this trip was everything she needed, helped the way her therapist thought it would.

At first, I was doubtful. Sylvie in Europe on her own with no one to rein her in? Sure, she'd been to Europe before, is fluent in French, and has a cell phone. But I still couldn't believe that her therapist insisted she get away by herself without a single friend or parent on the postgraduation trip he'd prescribed.

I see now that Dr. Giles had been onto something. Sylvie knows how to take care of herself when she's not trying to impress other people. Sylvie gets drunk to impress people. If no one had dared her first, Sylvie would have never pulled her legendary inebriated stunts.

On her own, with her backpack and her maps, hostel listings and train schedules, Sylvie trekked across that continent. She got herself in a situation in Amsterdam when she didn't realize some guys were trying

to get with her, but she got herself safe, and it was all over by the time she called me.

I hope Sylvie sees how capable she is, how smart and resilient. I hope she can feel good about herself for her own reasons, not for how other people think of her. Sylvie could be anything she wants if she just stops caring what the wrong people think about her.

I'm one of those people, and I hope I'm not going to ruin whatever progress this summer gave her.

Jack enters the room. I close my eyes. Though my penis remains somewhat optimistic, the blankets provide cover. I should move, wake Autumn, pretend my arm was never around her, but I can't bear to yet.

I hear the flap of the blanket tent flutter. Jack sighs. He says the same thing he told me the night I trusted Sylvie to sober drive for us and I had to drunkenly call him for a ride.

"We both should have expected this, you know," Jack mumbles.

He drops the blanket and it sounds like he goes to the couch, but I'm paying less attention to him now.

Autumn won't be asleep for much longer. She twitches occasionally, moving her face in reaction to things I cannot see. She makes a soft noise, the sort of noise I wish I could be responsible for while she is awake and consenting. And with that thought, I lift my arm and shift away from her. She frowns at the loss of heat, and I pause, waiting for her to stir. She whimpers and curls into a tighter ball.

I allow myself the brief luxury of gazing at her face.

It is cosmically unfair how beautiful Autumn is. It puts me at such a disadvantage. Her brilliant, goofy brain was already enough. Why must she have a perfect face too?

I never stood a chance.

Even before she grew breasts.

I need to stop this train of thought.
Might as well get this over with then.

Jack is typing on his phone at the end of the couch. He doesn't speak until I sit down.

"Finn, man—"

"I know," I say.

He flips his phone closed.

"No. You're in way over your head. You have no idea."

"I have an idea."

He stares at me.

"I know what I'm doing," I try.

"What *are* you doing? And what about *her*?" Jack nods toward the tent. Even though we're talking low, he starts to whisper. "She would have to be the stupidest person on earth to not know you're bonkers in love with her."

"She's not stupid. She just doesn't know how much I"—I can't bear to say the word—"care about her. She thinks it's an old crush."

I get that stare from him again, but I don't know what he wants me to say. Autumn doesn't flirt with me. She doesn't make suggestive jokes or give me any false reason to hope. Not when she's awake.

I'm the problem. My heart gets confused when she looks at me with affection that's only natural given our history.

"Finn," Jack says, "look at it this way. I'm not like you. I wasn't raised in a house where people talked about feelings and stuff. This is hard for me, and I'm doing it anyway. Again."

Again.

It's true.

"You're a good friend," I say. "And thanks. But she needs me. She's in a weird place with her other friends."

"She was laughing with you all night," Jack says, like he's trying to nail each word into my head.

"She was drunk, and besides, she's—" I realize what I'm about to say, but it's out of my mouth before I can hold it back. "—like Sylvie. She's disturbingly good at hiding how much pain she's in."

Jack groans and rubs his face. He says something I don't quite hear, but it ends with the word "type." Autumn makes a noise in the tent, and we both hold our breaths and listen.

Silence.

"Since you brought up Sylvie," he whispers. "Yeah, I complain about her, but she's my friend too, and I—"

"I know. I'm going to—"

Autumn makes a noise.

"She's about to wake up," I tell him.

Jack sighs. He's right about me when it comes to Autumn, and he knows that I know that he's right.

Jack and I can both see what happens next. Autumn and I will go off to Springfield. We'll make friends, probably mutual this time, but eventually, Autumn is going to meet someone she likes, someone who has whatever made her want to be with Jamie. And I am going to be more than devastated. I will be obliterated. Jack and I are close enough that it kinda makes this his problem too. But I can't give up what I have with Autumn, and when she does meet that guy, I'm going to make sure he's supporting her, not treating her like a troublesome but valuable acquisition. Or a sidekick. Or a punch line.

"Fin-nah," Jack sings. He snaps his fingers in front of my face. "Hello!"

"Sorry, I—"

"Zoned out the way she does? You have been so, so... Like last week!" Jack asks, "How could you have missed that game?"

"Autumn and I were at the mall."

"You never miss it when the Strikers are on TV," Jack says.

And it's true; I was annoyed with myself when I remembered that the game was on. St. Louis barely has a league, and I'm on a mission to support it. But Autumn was talking about how the mall was like a neglected garden with some patches dying more quickly than others. According to Autumn, the area around the movie theater is a sunny spot with good rainfall. We walked around and decided that kiosks were weeds, and the department stores were neglected topiaries.

My shrug has not satisfied Jack. He waits for me to explain myself.

"I'm going to break up with Sylvie when she gets home tomorrow."

"I figured," Jack says. Simple words, but his tone has the recrimination I deserve. "Then what?"

"Oh God!" Autumn moans as she dashes out of her cave.

"Autumn," I say involuntarily as she heads to the half bath near the kitchen, the one recently vacated by Jack. I warned her she would be miserable if she had that fourth drink. It was her choice, but I still feel responsible. Plus, Jack made it, so unlike the previous three that I'd made her, it probably contained more alcohol. I am about to comment on Jack's bartending skills when I see the look on his face and remember that I do not have the high ground. "I'm going to check on her," I say.

"I figured," Jack says again. "Then what?"

"Then we'll hang out?" I try to make it sound flippant, as if I think he's only asking about today, but I don't fool either of us. We both know I'm avoiding the real question: How am I going to live the rest of my life in love with Autumn Davis with no hope of reciprocation?