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# BIRD BOX

## DON'T OPEN YOUR EYES

NETFLIX
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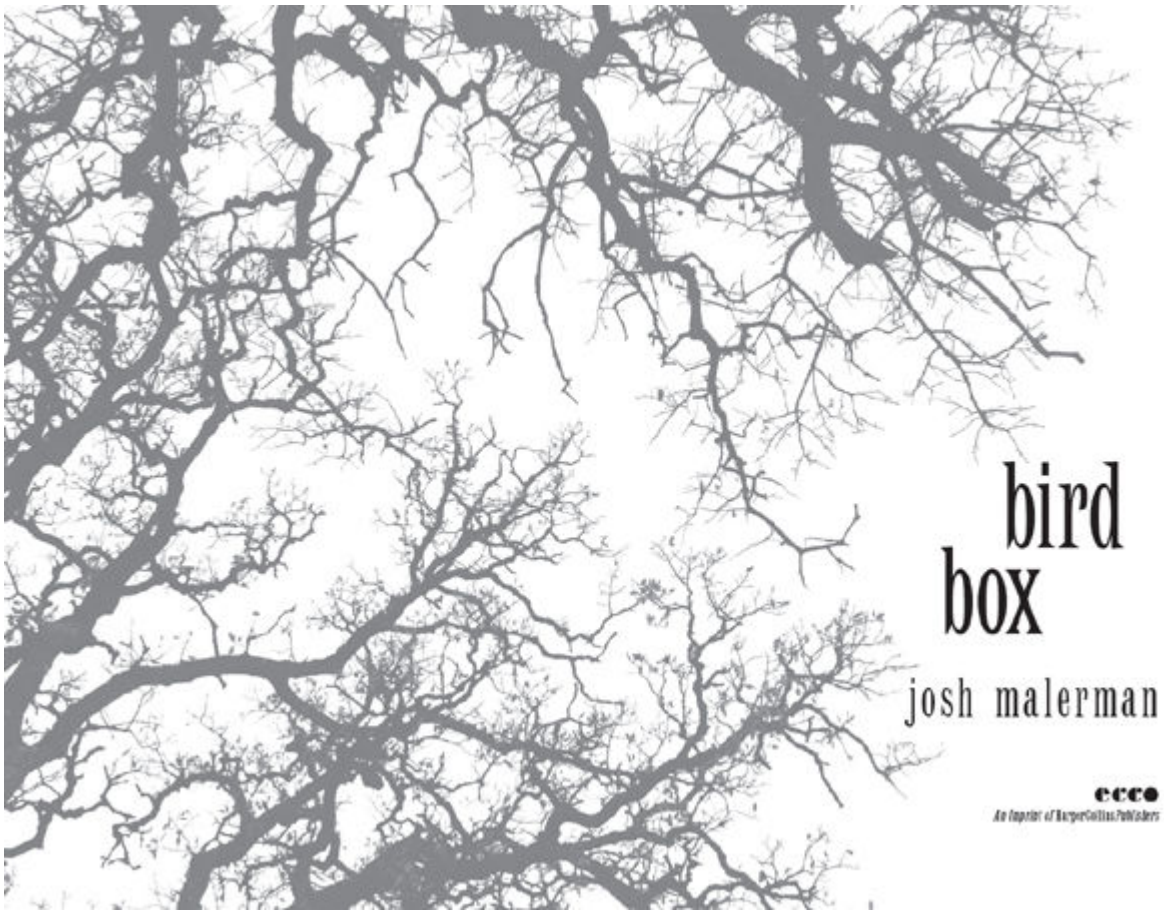
A NOVEL

JOSH MALERMAN



# bird box

josh malerman

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# dedication

*Sometimes I wish I were an architect, so that I could dedicate a building to a person; a superstructure that broke the clouds and continued up into the abyss. And if* Bird Box *were made of bricks instead of letters, I'd host a ceremony, invite every shadowy memory I have, and cut the ribbon with an axe, letting everyone see for the first time that building's name. It'd be called the Debbie*.

*Mom*, Bird Box *is for you*.

# contents

# one

Malorie stands in the kitchen, thinking.

Her hands are damp. She is trembling. She taps her toe nervously on the cracked tile floor. It is early; the sun is probably only peeking above the horizon. She watches its meager light turn the heavy window drapes a softer shade of black and thinks,

*That was a fog*.

The children sleep under chicken wire draped in black cloth down the hall. Maybe they heard her moments ago on her knees in the yard. Whatever noise she made must have traveled through the microphones, then the amplifiers that sat beside their beds.

She looks to her hands and detects the subtlest sheen in the candlelight. Yes, they are damp. The morning's dew is still fresh upon them.

Now, in the kitchen, Malorie breathes deep before blowing the candle out. She looks around the small room, noting the rusted utensils and cracked dishes. The cardboard box used as a garbage can. The chairs, some held together by twine. The walls are dirty. Dirt from the feet and hands of the children. But older stains, too. The bottom of the walls in the hall is discolored, profound purples that have dulled to brown over time. These are blood. The carpet in the living room is discolored, too, no matter how hard Malorie scrubs. There are no chemicals in the house to help clean it. Long ago, Malorie filled the buckets with water from the well and, using a suit coat, worked on removing the stains from all over the house. But they refused to go away. Even those that proved less persistent remained, a shadow perhaps of their original size, but still horribly visible. A box of candles hides a blotch in the foyer. The couch in the living room sits at an awkward angle, moved there to shield two blemishes that look like wolf heads to Malorie. On the second floor,

by the attic stairs, a pile of musty coats conceals purple scratches, embedded deep into the foot of the wall. Ten feet away is the blackest stain in the house. She does not use the far end of the home's second floor because she cannot bring herself to cross it.

This was once a nice house in a nice suburb of Detroit. Once, it was family-ready and safe. Only half a decade ago, a real-estate agent would have proudly showed it off. But this morning, the windows are covered with cardboard and wood. There is no running water. A big wooden bucket sits upon the kitchen counter. It smells stale. There are no conventional toys for the children. Pieces of a wooden chair have been whittled to play the part of little people. Small faces have been painted upon them. The cupboards are bare. There are no paintings on the walls. Wires run from under the back door into the first-floor bedrooms, where amplifiers alert Malorie and the children to any sounds coming from outside the house. The three of them live this way. They do not go outside for long periods of time. When they do, they are blindfolded.

The children have never seen the world outside their home. Not even through the windows. And Malorie hasn't looked in more than four years.

*Four years*.

She does not have to make this decision today. It's October in Michigan. It's cold. A twenty-mile trip on the river will be hard on the children. They may still be too young. What if one of them were to fall into the water? What would Malorie, blindfolded, do then?

*An accident*, Malorie thinks. *How horrible. After all this struggling, all this survival. To die because of an accident*.

Malorie looks at the drapes. She begins to cry. She wants to yell at someone. She wants to plead with anyone who might listen. *This is unfair*, she would say. *This is cruel*.

She looks over her shoulder, to the kitchen entrance and the hall that leads to the children's bedroom. Beyond the doorless frame, the children sleep soundly, covered by black cloth, hidden from light and sight. They do not stir. They show no sign of being awake. Yet, they could be listening to her. Sometimes, for all the pressure upon them to listen, for all the importance she's placed upon their ears, Malorie believes they can hear her think.

She could wait for sunnier skies, warmth, more attention paid to the boat. She could inform the children, listen to what they have to say. Their suggestions could be good ones. Only four years old, but trained to *listen*. Able to help navigate a boat that will be piloted blindly. Malorie would not be able to make the trip without them. She needs their ears. Could she also use their advice? At four years old, would they have something to say about *when* was the best time to leave the house forever?

Slumping into a kitchen chair, Malorie fights back the tears. Her shoeless toe still taps on the faded linoleum. Slowly, she looks up to the top of the cellar stairs. There she once talked with a man named Tom about a man named Don. She looks to the sink, where Don once carried buckets of well water, trembling for having been outdoors. Leaning forward, she can see the foyer, where Cheryl used to prepare the food for the birds. And between herself and the front door is the living room, silent and dark, where there are too many memories of too many people to digest.

*Four years*, she thinks, and wants to smash her fist through the wall.

Malorie knows that four years can easily become eight. Eight will quickly become twelve. And then the children will be adults. Adults who have never seen the sky. Never looked out a window. What would twelve years of living like veal do to their minds? Is there a point, Malorie wonders, where the clouds in the sky become unreal, and the only place they'll ever feel at home is behind the black cloth of their blindfolds?

Malorie swallows hard and imagines raising them by herself until they are teens.

Could she even do it? Could she protect them another ten years? Could she guard them long enough for them to guard her? And for what? What kind of life is she protecting them for?

*You're a bad mother*, she thinks.

For not finding a way to let them know the vastness of the sky. For not finding a way to let them run free in the yard, the street, the neighborhood of empty homes and weathered parked cars. Or granting them a single peek, just once, into space, when the sky turns black and is suddenly, beautifully, spotted with stars.

*You are saving their lives for a life not worth living*.

Malorie sees the drapes soften another degree through blurred, teary vision. If there is a fog out there, it won't be for long. And if it can help her, if it hides her and the children as they go to the river, to the rowboat, then she has to wake them now.

She slams a hand against the kitchen table, then wipes her eyes dry.

Rising and leaving the kitchen, Malorie takes the hall and enters the children's bedroom.

"Boy!" she yells. "Girl! Get up."

The bedroom is dark. The one window is covered with enough blankets so that even at its zenith, sunlight does not get through. There are two mattresses, one on each side of the room. Above them are black domes. Once, the chicken wire that supports the cloth was used to fence in a small garden by the well in the home's backyard. But for the past four years, it has served as armor, protecting the children not from what could see them, but from what *they* could see. Beneath it, Malorie hears movement and she kneels to loosen the wire that's fastened to nails in the room's wood floor. She is already pulling from her pocket the blindfolds as the two children look at her with sleepy, surprised expressions.

"Mommy?"

"Get up. Now. Mommy needs you to move fast."

The children respond quickly. They do not whine or complain.

"Where are we going?" the Girl asks.

Malorie hands her a blindfold and says, "Put this on. We're going on the river."

The pair take their blindfolds and tie the black cloth tightly over their eyes. They are well versed in the motion. Experts, if at four years old they can be experts in anything. It breaks Malorie's heart. They are only children and should be curious. They should be asking her why, today, they are going on the river—a river they have never been on before.

But, instead, they just do as they are told.

Malorie does not put on her own blindfold yet. She will get the kids ready first.

“Bring your puzzle,” she tells the Girl. “And, both of you, bring your blankets.”

The excitement she feels is unnameable. It’s much more like hysteria. Stepping from one room to another, Malorie checks for things, small items they might need. Suddenly, she feels horribly unprepared. She feels unsafe, as though the house and the earth beneath it just vanished, exposing her to the outside world entirely. Yet, in the mania of the moment, she holds tight to the concept of the blindfold. No matter what tools she might pack, no matter what household object might be used as a weapon, she knows that the blindfolds are their strongest protection.

“Bring your blankets!” she reminds them, hearing the two small bodies ready themselves. Then she steps into their room to assist them. The Boy, small for his age, but with a wiry strength Malorie takes pride in, is deciding between two shirts that are both too large for him. They once belonged to an adult, long since gone. Malorie chooses for him and watches as his dark hair vanishes within the cloth, then sprouts again through the head hole. In her anxious state, Malorie recognizes that the Boy has grown some recently.

The Girl, average sized for her age, is attempting to pull a dress over her head, a dress she and Malorie sewed from an old bedsheet.

“There’s a chill in the air, Girl. A dress won’t do.”

The Girl frowns; her blond hair is messy from her having just woken up.

“I’ll wear pants, too, Mommy. And we’ve got our blankets.”

Anger flares in Malorie. She doesn’t want any resistance. Not today. Not even if the Girl is right.

“*No dresses today*.”

The world outside, the empty malls and restaurants, the thousands of unused vehicles, the forgotten products on idle store shelves, all of it presses in on the house. It all whispers of what awaits them.

She takes a coat from the closet in the small bedroom down the hall from the children. Then she leaves the room, for what she knows will be the last time.

“Mommy,” the Girl says, meeting her in the hall. “Do we need our bicycle horns?”

Malorie breathes deep.

“No,” she answers. “We’ll all be together. The whole trip.”

As the Girl steps back into the bedroom, Malorie thinks of how pathetic it is, that bicycle horns are her children’s greatest entertainment. They’ve played with them for years. All of their lives, honking from across the living room. The loud sound used to put Malorie on edge. But she never took them away. Never hid them. Even in the throes of early, anxious motherhood, Malorie understood that in this world, anything that brought the children to giggle was a good thing.

Even when they used to frighten Victor with them.

Oh, how Malorie longs for that dog! In the early days of raising the children alone, her fantasies of taking the river included Victor, the border collie, seated beside her in the rowboat. Victor would’ve warned her if an animal were near. He might’ve been capable of frightening something away.

“Okay,” she says, her lithe body in the door frame of the children’s bedroom. “That’s it. Now we go.”

There were times, placid afternoons, tempestuous evenings, when Malorie told them this day might come. Yes, she had spoken of the river before. Of a trip. She was careful never to call it their “escape” because she couldn’t bear their believing their daily lives were something to flee from. Instead, she cautioned them of a future morning, when she would wake them, hastily, demanding they prepare to leave their home forever. She knew they could detect her uncertainty, just as they could hear a spider crawling up the glass pane of a draped window. For years, there sat a small pouch of food in the cupboard, set aside until it went stale, always replaced, always replenished, Malorie’s proof, her evidence that she *might* wake them as she told them she would. *You see*, she would think, nervously checking the drapes, *the food in the cupboard is part of a plan*.

And now, the day has come. This morning. This hour. The *fog*.

The Boy and the Girl step forward and Malorie kneels before them. She checks their blindfolds. They are secure. In that moment, looking from one small face to the other, Malorie comprehends fully that, at last, the journey out has begun.

“Listen to me,” she tells them, grasping their chins. “We’re going to take a rowboat along the river today. It could be a long trip. But it’s

crucial that you both do every single thing I say. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“It’s cold out there. You have your blankets. You have your folds. There’s nothing more you need right now. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Under no circumstances will either one of you remove your blindfold. If you do, I will hurt you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“I need your ears. I need you both to listen as carefully as you can. On the river, you need to listen beyond the water, beyond the woods. If you hear an animal in those woods, tell me. If you hear anything in the water, you tell me. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Do *not* ask questions that have nothing to do with the river. You’ll be sitting up front,” she says, tapping the Boy. Then she taps the Girl. “And you’ll be sitting in the back. When we get to the boat, I’ll guide you to those places. I’ll be in the middle, rowing. I don’t want you two talking across the boat to one another unless it’s about something you hear in the woods. Or the river. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“We are not stopping for any reason. Not until we get to where we’re going. I’ll let you know when that is. If you get hungry, eat from this pouch.”

Malorie brings the pouch to the back of their small hands.

“Don’t fall asleep. Do *not* fall asleep. I need your ears more now today than I’ve ever needed them.”

“Will we bring the microphones?” the Girl asks.

“No.”

As Malorie speaks, she looks from one blindfolded face to the other.

“When we leave this house, we’ll hold hands and walk along the path to the well. We’ll go through the small clearing in the woods behind our house. The path to the river is overgrown. We may have to drop hands for a step, and if we do, I want you both to hold on to my coat or each other’s. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

*Do they sound scared?*

“Listen to me. We’re going somewhere neither of you has ever been. We’re going farther from the house than you’ve gone before. There are things out there that will hurt you, that will hurt Mommy, if you do not listen to me, now, this morning.”

The children are silent.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Malorie has trained them well.

“All right,” she says, her voice revealing a hint of hysteria. “We’re going. We’re going right now. *We’re going*.”

She presses their heads against her forehead.

Then she takes each child by the hand. They cross the house quickly. In the kitchen, Malorie, trembling, wipes her eyes and pulls her own blindfold from her pocket. She ties it tight around her head and dark long hair. She pauses, her hand on the doorknob, the door that opens to the path she has taken for countless buckets of water.

She is about to leave the house behind. The reality of this moment overwhelms her.

When she opens the door, the cool air rushes in and Malorie steps forward, her mind’s eye blurry with terror and scenarios too ghastly to speak of in front of the children. She stammers as she speaks, nearly yelling as she does.

“Hold my hands. Both of you.”

The Boy takes Malorie’s left hand. The Girl slips her tiny fingers into her right.

Blindfolded, they step from the house.

The well is twenty yards away. Small pieces of wood, once part of picture frames, outline the path, placed there for direction. Both

children have touched the wood with the tip of their shoes countless times. Malorie once told them that the water in the well was the only medicine they'd ever need. Because of this, Malorie knows, the children have always respected the well. They never complained about fetching water with her.

At the well now, the ground is bumpy beneath their feet. It feels unnatural, soft.

"Here's the clearing," Malorie calls.

She leads the children carefully. A second path begins ten yards from the well. The entrance to this path is narrow, and it splits the woods. The river is less than a hundred yards from here. At the woods, Malorie momentarily lets go of the children's hands so she can feel for the scant entry.

"Hold on to my coat!"

She feels along the branches until she finds a tank top, tied to a tree at the path's entrance. She tied it here herself more than three years ago.

The Boy grabs hold of her pocket and she senses the Girl take hold of his. Malorie calls to them as she walks, constantly asking them if they are holding on to one another. Tree branches poke her in the face. She does not cry out.

Soon, they arrive at the marker Malorie has stuck in the dirt. The splintered leg of a kitchen chair, stuck in the center of the path, there for her to trip on, to stumble over, to recognize.

She discovered the rowboat four years ago, docked only five houses from their own. It has been more than a month since she last checked on it, but she believes it is still there. Still, it's difficult not to imagine the worst. What if someone else got to it first? Another woman, not unlike herself, living five houses in the other direction, using every day of four years to gather enough courage to flee. A woman who once stumbled down this same slippery bank and felt the same point of salvation, the pointed steel tip of the rowboat.

The air nips at the scratches on Malorie's face. The children do not complain.

*This is not childhood*, Malorie thinks, leading them toward the river.

Then she hears it. Before reaching the dock, she hears the rowboat rocking in the water. She stops and checks the children's

blindfolds, tightening both. She leads them onto the wood planks.

*Yes*, she thinks, *it's still here*. Just like the cars are still parked in the street outside their house. Just like the homes on the street are still empty.

It is colder, out of the woods, away from the house. The sound of the water is as frightening as it is exhilarating. Kneeling where she believes the boat must be, she lets go of the children's hands and feels for the steel tip. Her fingertips find the rope that holds it first.

"Boy," she says, pulling the ice-cold tip of the boat toward the dock. "In the front. Get in the front." She helps him. Once he is steady, she holds his face in both her hands and says once again, "Listen. Beyond the water. *Listen*."

She tells the Girl to stay on the dock as she blindly unties the rope before carefully climbing onto the middle bench. Still half-standing, she helps the Girl aboard. The boat rocks once violently and Malorie grips the Girl's hand too tight. The Girl does not cry out.

There are leaves, sticks, and water in the bottom of the boat. Malorie sifts through them to find the paddles she has stowed on the boat's right side. The paddles are cold. Damp. They smell of mildew. She sets them into the steel grooves. They feel strong, sturdy as she uses one to push off from the dock. And then . . .

They are on the river.

The water is calm. But there are sounds out here. Movement in the woods.

Malorie thinks of the fog. She hopes it has hidden their escape.

But the fog will go away.

"Children," Malorie says, breathing hard, "*listen*."

Finally, after four years of waiting, training, and finding the courage to leave, she paddles away from the dock, from the bank, and from the house that has protected her and the children for what feels like a lifetime.