

ABBY COOPER

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# Friend or Fiction

*Abby Cooper*

## *For Michael*

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# 1 The Blank Page

OPPSERVATION: *You can love something but not really like it very much.*

Questions for further research: *Why, lunchtime, why?*

I tucked my oppservation journal into my bag and scanned the cafeteria. This was supposed to be the best part of the day. At least for most people it was. Most people grabbed their lunches as fast as they could and went to their tables with their best friends to laugh and talk and make plans for after school. Most people got to forget about anything bad and just relax and hang out and eat.

Sometimes, during the time it took me to get my brown bag out of my locker and sit at my table, I got sad.



But then, once I sat down, I remembered. I was going to have lunch with my best friend, too, just like everybody else. Only my best friend wasn't like anyone else's. She was better.

I sat in my usual spot, took out my cheese sandwich and my yellow notebook, and waited. Sometimes she showed up right away. Other times she took a little longer. Today must have been one of those other times, because it felt like she was taking forever.

I thought about what we might do when she finally got here. After eating maybe we'd share headphones and listen to music the way Nia and Zara always do. Or maybe we'd purposely give ourselves milk mustaches and take really funny selfies like Molly and Casey do. We could even do some things that other people around here couldn't, too, like make plans for the weekend. And next weekend. And next year. People in Tiveda, Colorado moved away all the time. I've heard adults call this place a *transient* town, which must mean it's not good enough to stay, or something, because you never really knew who would be at school on Monday and who would've moved on to a new town. But Zoe was always a sure thing. Not only did we have today together, we had all our tomorrows too.

Still, there was a pang deep down in the pit of my stomach as I watched everybody else having fun. For a second I thought Nia and Zara were going to invite me to come sit with them, but then they looked away. I frowned at my notebook. What was taking Zoe so long?

Mrs. Yang, my English teacher, always says that the hardest part is starting. No matter how long you've been writing or how much you love it, she says, sometimes the blank page can be the scariest thing there is. She says that you should just put a word on it. Any word. Then put another one.

I opened my notebook.

*Zoe and Jade and the Best Lunch Ever*, I wrote at the top. Eight words! Take that, blank page.

I stopped staring at Nia and Zara and Molly and Casey. I took a deep breath. I wrote more. I took a bite of sandwich. I kept going until the warning bell rang, and when it did, I barely even noticed. In my story Zoe and I had just finished taking milk-mustache selfies and now we were making origami napkin birds for each other. She was drawing funny faces on them and pretending hers were talking, and I was trying to make mine talk back but I couldn't because I was laughing too hard.

When I finally closed my notebook and gathered my stuff, I noticed all the faces looking my way. As bad as blank pages were, blank stares were even worse. My pale skin felt as red as my hair. Yeah, I wrote during lunch. So what? It was pretty obvious by the looks I got that people thought it was weird that my nose was always buried in my notebook. But the one thing they never did was ask.

That was fine, though. I didn't want to tell anybody what I was writing anyway. Out of the corner of my eye, I peeked at Gresham Gorham—or Clue, as everybody called him. It was bad enough that *he* knew my secret.

As if he could feel me looking, Clue turned and stared me right in the face. His dark, serious eyes dropped to my notebook. Then they flashed back to the one in his lap.

My heartbeat quickened, so I took a few long breaths. I pushed my purple glasses up higher on my nose and hugged my notebook to my chest. That calmed me down right away, same as it always did. Forget Clue. Forget other people. Forget everything.

I had Zoe.

And that was all that mattered.





## 2

# The Beginning of Zoe

When I started fourth grade my best friend was Joslin. We'd just moved from Nevada and she'd introduced herself to me right away and everything was awesome. She taught me how to play tetherball without getting hit in the face, and we had nine amazing days of not-getting-hit-in-the-face best-friend fun.

Then she moved away, and I never heard from her again. I kept sending letters, and she kept not writing back.

So then I hung out with Rosie. Rosie liked to write, like me.



But not enough, I guess. After she moved she didn't write letters or e-mails or postcards like she promised she would. Not even one. And no texts either. But I guess I can't blame her, because I was still the only kid in my grade (and the world, it felt like) that didn't have a cell phone.

I hadn't been in Tiveda for that long, but I was already sick of people coming and going so much. People only lived here so they could feel like they were living in Denver, even though they weren't living in Denver. When they could afford something nicer (usually in Denver), they left.

Sometimes, if they couldn't afford something nicer—or if they couldn't even afford it here—they'd move further down the road, to Bertsburg, where everyone lived in trailers. It wasn't far away, but far enough where the people who lived there went to another school, which may as well have been a whole different universe.

Dad always compared Tiveda to those rest stops in random places off the highway. People pulled over when they needed to stretch their legs, to have a bathroom break and a snack, and then they took off. That's what we were supposed to do while Mom painted murals in buildings around town and

Dad consulted with an energy company, whatever that meant.

But instead of a stretch and a snack, we stayed in Tiveda for a full night of sleep and a full day of meals. Over and over and over again. As U-hauls pulled in and pulled out, we stayed right where we were. And now we were officially stuck in a town that had a different mailman every other day, three stores that were considered the mall, and zero flowers because whenever anybody planted some, they left when the seeds needed care the most.

In my opinion you should be able to know the name of the person delivering your mail. Three stores did *not* make a mall. And was it really that hard to stay long enough for a flower to bloom?

Because of all this I was about to give up on ever having a best friend when Vanessa joined my always-changing little class toward the end of fourth grade. Her smile was warm and friendly. Plus she had a giant collection of candles that she really wanted to show off, and I really wanted to see something besides all my own junk. She invited me over right away, and soon we had an after-school tradition every day—to just hang out. Sometimes we'd spend hours lining up the candles from favorite to least favorite. Or

most smelly to least smelly. Or tallest to shortest. We never ran out of ways.

Nessa was planning a gigantic birthday party—well, as gigantic as you could get around here—and I helped her get everything ready. It was going to be at one of those places where the whole room was a big trampoline. I had never been to a place like that before, and it sounded totally amazing. And it was only fifteen minutes away, so maybe we could go back sometime. Every day after school we would cross a day off her cute dog calendar. Everything was about jumping and candles and best-friend fun. Everything was fun at home too. Dad was happy. Mom was happy. My little brother Bo was only three, so he was extra cute and hilarious. We were supposed to move soon, too, to a more forever kind of place in Denver. Maybe we'd even get a dog.

So that's why it was a pretty big surprise when Mom and Bo picked me up from the birthday party five minutes after Nessa's parents brought us there.

"We have to go to the hospital," Mom said in a loud, scared voice, the kind that made all the trampoline-jumping people stop and stare.

I hadn't even finished taking off my shoes.

"Why?" I asked. "What's going on?"



“I’ll explain in the car,” she said. “Go say goodbye to your friends.”

Somehow I made my way over to Nessa, even though my legs felt like noodles and my stomach had leapt to my throat.

“I have to go,” I said. My voice barely eked out. “I don’t know why.”

Nessa made a face like she’d just taken a bite of birthday cake, only to discover it was really a sour lemon. “What do you mean?”

I couldn’t see Mom from where I was standing, but I could definitely hear her foot tapping by the door. *Let’s go*, the taps said. They came faster and louder. *Let’s goooooooooo!*

“My mom says I have to,” I told Nessa. “Something about the hospital.”

Cold air blasted through the room. Nessa frowned. “I don’t get it.”

I swallowed hard. I felt ice-sculpture frozen.

“Me either.”

I waited for her to give me a hug or tell me to call her later or something, because we were best friends, and I obviously didn’t *want* to go, and my leaving was bugging both of us and freaking us both out.

But she didn't do any of that. Instead she crossed her arms and said, "Best friends do not miss each other's parties."

"I know!" My voice switched from shaky to shrieky. "I don't want to! But—"

"Jade," Mom called. "Now, please."

My body tensed. It felt like everyone there was jumping on my heart like it was one of the trampolines.

"I—" I couldn't find the right words. I couldn't find *any* words, period. And it didn't matter anyway. Because Nessa—my very best friend in the whole world—had walked away.

Leaving the party barely felt real. Neither did getting in the car, putting on my seatbelt, or driving to the hospital.

Mom said a lot of words in the car, but they all blurred together. Sick. Dad. Tests. Urgent. *Sickdad-testsurgent*. They sounded like one big, blobby word, and my heart felt like a big, blobby mess.

How was it possible that your whole family could be so happy, and everything could be going so well, and you could even be thinking about getting a dog, and then, just like that, you weren't?

And how could a best friend who's supposed to

care about you not understand that something bad was happening, and leaving her party wasn't your choice?

When we got to the hospital, Dad was taking a test that we couldn't help with, so we went to the gift shop instead of to his room. Bo got a sketch pad and crayons and I got the biggest yellow notebook I'd ever seen in my life. Mom looked pretty happy about that. She knew how fast I could fill a regular-sized notebook. There were tons of them piled up in my room already. When you want to be an author someday, you have to practice a lot.

On the first page of the notebook, I wrote some of the things I'd been thinking about in the car on the way over. I put *Oppservations* at the top. This was the beginning of my list of observations about something opposite, like how your best friend could suddenly become not so friendly when you did something she didn't like, even if it wasn't your fault.

On the next page, I started writing a story. About me and Nessa and trampolines and how things should have gone.

Dad should have been fine. I should have gotten to stay at the party. We should have had the best time ever. Joslin and Rosie should have written to me to apologize for not staying in touch. If I couldn't

stay at the party, and Dad wasn't fine, then all my friends, especially Nessa, should have come to the hospital with me. Or called to check on things, or promised to come by later with leftover cake.

Or waved.

Or *something*.

Maybe Nessa wasn't the perfect best friend, even though we always had fun together. And Rosie and Joslin definitely weren't the perfect best friend, because they left me, and they didn't keep in touch, even when I tried to.

I turned the page and started a new story.

Maybe there wasn't a perfect best friend out there for me. Maybe I'd be better off if I created my own.

So instead of writing the names of anyone I knew, I wrote the name *Zoe*.



We finally got to see Dad an hour later, but it wasn't him, not really. The guy in the bed was frowning instead of smiling. His hair stood straight up like he was an actor at Tiveda's Halloween haunted house. His face was white, almost like a ghost's, and he looked fragile, like you could poke him and he'd break. Plus, his arms were attached to all these long, twisty wires. And instead of his typical flannel shirts



and tennis shoes, he wore a crinkly paper gown and silly-looking socks. I didn't know who this person was, but it definitely wasn't the dad I knew.

"What are you holding, Jadey?"

He sounded like a different person too.

But at least he could talk. When I tried to make words come out of my mouth, they just sounded like pathetic little squeaks. Mom squeezed my hand, but I couldn't bring myself to squeeze back.

"You writing a story?" the-guy-they-said-was-Dad asked.

Somehow I nodded.

"Read it to me."

I let out the humungous breath I'd been holding since we stepped into the room. No matter what was going on with Dad—like if he was busy or tired or hungry or cranky or sick, like he was now—he knew how much I loved writing stories, and he always wanted to hear one. This stranger really was my dad. I didn't know how to feel about that, so I did the only thing I could: I read.

*Sometimes days can trick you. They seem regular, but then, all of a sudden, they're not. My voice shook at first but went back to normal when I saw that Dad*

was smiling. Jade thought it was a normal Sunday, but when she peeked out the window and saw a girl who looked about her age moving into the house across the street, she had a feeling that everything was about to change. Right away Jade knew there was something different about the girl. Maybe it was the way she raced in circles around her driveway, like being outside was the greatest thing to ever happen to her. Maybe it was the way she put big red stickers that spelled her name on the mailbox, even though people usually put their last names on mailboxes, if they bothered to at all. When Jade met the girl at school on Monday, she knew that her life was about to get much more exciting. Mailbox stickers were only the beginning.

I paused and peeked at Dad again. Maybe I was imagining it, but his face looked a lot less ghost-y. It was even starting to look sort of normal.

I kept going.

The girl, Zoe, had olive skin, long dark hair, bright green eyes, and a heart-shaped birthmark above her left eyebrow. The second she came into Jade's classroom, Jade could tell that Zoe would be super popular. She walked and smiled like someone who would do

anything for the people she cared about, like she was awesome, and she knew it. It was like she'd strolled right out of one of those pop songs where the singers encourage people to be strong and powerful. Wherever she went, invisible glitter and confetti followed.

But even in a whole classroom full of people staring at her with please-be-my-friend looks on their faces, it was as if Jade was the only one Zoe could see. She gave Jade this look that said we are going to be best friends forever and ever and ever no matter what. And when the teacher let Zoe choose where she wanted to sit, she went straight to the desk next to Jade's, even though there were way better open seats, like the one close to the window and the one with the little bar under it for your feet.

Jade watched as Zoe took out two sparkly blue pencils and set them on her desk. Zoe liked to have a spare, just like Jade did. In fact Jade had two of the same pencils on her desk. When Zoe looked over and noticed this, they giggled so hard that their teacher asked them to please go out into the hallway until they could calm themselves down.

Jade grinned through her laughter. She'd never been in trouble before, but today it didn't seem so bad. Nothing did.

*“I’m Zoe, by the way,” Zoe said to Jade once they caught their breath in the hall.*

*“I know, the teacher just introduced you. I’m Jade.”*

*“I know,” said Zoe.*

*“How?” asked Jade.*

*“Because you just told me!”*

*They got the giggles all over again. Jade had the feeling it might be awhile before they calmed themselves down enough to go back into the room. And that feeling was the best one she’d ever had.*

I stopped reading and looked at Dad again. His eyes were closed but he seemed calm, almost happy. His stomach rose and fell with every steady in-and-out breath. For a minute it felt like maybe we could still get that dog after all.

“Do you feel better?” I asked.

Dad opened his eyes. “Sure do,” he said.

Maybe I felt better too.

I knew my story wasn’t the cure for whatever was wrong with Dad or anything. It wasn’t medicine. It couldn’t actually have made him better. But what if it did, somehow?

What if Zoe did?

I’d written a ton of stories in my life, but none

like this. There was something different about Zoe. And I knew, right there in the hospital room, this character was here to stay.

Still, that Monday at school, I tried to talk to Nessa.

“I didn’t want to leave,” I reminded her. “My Dad is sick,” I said. “You’re still important to me.”

But Nessa made that same sour face and walked away. Again.

A couple weeks later, she moved to Ohio.

It would have been nice to make up. To somehow stay friends. But that wasn’t how things worked for me. Even if we had made up, we probably wouldn’t have kept in touch. Maybe we’d promise to write or call, but it would never actually happen. It was fine, though. I didn’t need her anyway.

Because I had created Zoe.