

UNCORRECTED ADVANCE PROOF

A N O V E L

# AARON, APPROXIMATELY

ZACHARY LAZAR

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## ZACHARY LAZAR

*Aaron, Approximately*, first-time novelist Zachary Lazar's uniquely poignant and remarkably accomplished coming-of-age novel, tells with heart-wrenching clarity the story of Aaron Bright, a fiercely intelligent and resilient young man struggling toward self-acceptance, identity, and human connection in the aftermath of his father's death. When twenty-six-year-old Aaron's relationship with his girlfriend, Clarisse, threatens to crumble, Aaron revisits the trials of his past in an attempt to unearth the root of his lifelong alienation. *Aaron, Approximately* powerfully details the narrator's moving and often darkly humorous journey out of isolation and self-doubt and into adulthood.

*The Horace and Waldo Show* is the most popular children's television hour in Colorado, but being the only son of Horace Bright, the show's top-hat-and-purple-tuxedo-wearing clown, is a dubious honor for young Aaron. When the local radio station's resident shock jock spoofs Horace's show as a front for sexual misconduct, Aaron is ruthlessly ostracized by his peers. In a last-ditch attempt at positive publicity, Horace challenges the deejay to a parachuting jump. But when the stunt ends in tragedy, Aaron is thrust prematurely into the adolescent sphere of dislocation, self-doubt, and rebellion, struggling to find his way without his father. Intelligent, sensitive, and profoundly concerned with issues of identity, Aaron turns himself into a would-be clown, wearing strange vintage clothing and cracking jokes to hide his uneasiness, as he first rejects but ultimately comes to understand his inextricable link to his dead father.

Portrayed with equal parts humor and compassion, Zachary Lazar's Aaron Bright searches for answers to the questions that plague us all. An outsider from the very start, the hilariously endearing yet overwhelmingly conflicted Aaron shows us what it is like to need attention so desperately that one would sabotage both family and love to satisfy its call. *Aaron, Approximately* rings with the truth of what it means to have grown up at the tail end of the twentieth century and marks Zachary Lazar's debut as a refreshing and profoundly intelligent new voice in American fiction.

ZACHARY LAZAR has won fellowships from the Fine Arts Workcenter in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and the James Michener-Copernicus Society. He is a graduate of the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop and has taught most recently at Hofstra University. He lives in New York City.

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# WITHOUT

irony, sometimes even wistfully, we find ourselves talking about marriage. On Windamar Street the Chinese maples are just going red, the hydrangeas remain a faded blue. Clarisse has a fleck of green paint above her eyebrow, a last trace of her morning's work. "Let's get married," she says. "What are we afraid of?" All around us the lawns are spotted with gold and egrets fly across the Sound. I try to be sober and poised. We talk of honeymoons, clergymen, guest lists, swing bands, but as the groomsmen gather in their dark tuxedos I begin to fade into thin air. I can see everyone but the bridegroom; he is invisible.

If I'm not careful, I'm going to end up hurting her. When I stop talking, Clarisse imagines skepticism, but this is only part of the truth. I also have dizzying, oceanic thoughts on Windamar Street. The calla lilies have petals like conch shells. At dusk, the shadows and sea light swell old Fishbein's hedges into topiary beasts. Clarisse's slender hips appear up close to be as round as the Ponse dunes, as smooth as the stone mermaid outside the Garden Exchange. After four years, I'm still amazed by the glare of her body without its clothes. I lay my head on her breast and the last

thing I want is to leave. I can imagine staying. After five years of scrutiny, I can see that staying might be more than just weakness, or dependence, or sentimental mooning. I can see that it might be a form of sanity, difficult, yet perhaps within my powers.

I can also see that it's a test I've failed before. We've been coming here to Ponse on occasional weekends now, but two years ago we tried to live here together. Clarisse's family has a beach house on Paumanok Road they never use. It's a two-storied Dutch colonial with weathered siding and gleaming white shutters, a full complement of hedges and rhododendrons and a terraced yard that slopes down to a sandy beach. It's a place to cook elaborate meals and spend whole afternoons cutting the grass. It is at times inhumanly serene. I lasted nine months, then I left Clarisse in tears because I couldn't stand so many flowers.

Now we live in Manhattan, on Ninth Street, in an apartment too small and water-stained for us to imagine it as any kind of permanent home. We work until our brains are dim and fall asleep most nights amid a clamor of subwoofers and car alarms. When we wake up, we're still tired, it's dark, the radio brings us its reliable batch of outrage and despair. Four years of struggling has taught us not that we have it rough, but rather that the scale of roughness is broad and not fine, that you can drop forever and still be just a hair's breadth away from "Ease." On any rational scale, we have it easy. Clarisse can afford to share a studio in which to do her painting. I have a computer on which to type my endless, circular manuscript. In the summer, we're able to spend a few weekends in Ponse, bathing in the ocean or in saltwater ponds surrounded by pine trees and marsh grass.

"It makes you nervous," she says.

"Of course."

"Why?"

"A thousand reasons."

She looks down at my hand, moving her finger in slow circles over the knuckle. "We could have the whole ceremony at home," she says. "Afterward, you could sneak off to the bedroom and read."



I hug my knees, constricting, taking away my hand.

"Aaron, we're not going off to war. It's a wedding."

"I know."

Before me, the yellow blanket is spread with grapes in clear plastic, a bag of pretzels, some canned drinks in a backpack. There will be cola and seltzer and ginger ale, and there will be a single warm beer, which I will drink without really wanting to. Clarisse's father had liked to drink beer in the afternoon. It's one of her fonder memories, packing up a picnic, swimming or sailing for the whole afternoon in the Sound.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I want to say something exuberant. I really do."

"Exuberant."

"Excited. You know, what's in my brain."

"You're excited."

"Well, of course. Yes. Excited, terrified. It sounds asinine."

"What difference does it make? Nobody's here."

"You're here. You know what's asinine."

We have Aspatuck Pond all to ourselves this afternoon. On the far shore, a stray black cow drinks water amid a clutter of black rocks. The pool has a sandy bottom, but the first dozen yards are slimy, and I carry Clarisse in my arms, kneeling down to gently plop her legs in the warm water. Her bikini, checked like gingham, is a lighter version of the sky's blue. She watches the water rise past her waist, up her drawn-in stomach toward her shallow belly button, and when it reaches her rib cage she closes her eyes and bends back her head and I let her sink. Underwater, her long, dark curls feel like warm silk. She grips my waist with her thighs and lies there floating, my hands cradling her back.

"I'm a starfish," she says, pulling herself out of the water and into my arms.

"Are you cold?"

"Not yet."

"I can bounce you around. Give you a little ride."

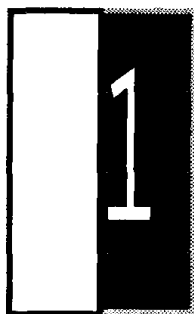
"Just a quiet ride."

"A quiet ride."

I bend my knees, trotting over the soft sand with slow, attenuated, astronaut steps. Droplets of water run down Clarisse's cheek onto my lips. As we move into deeper water, I stretch out my legs until I'm bounding from the balls of my feet, almost from off my toes. She holds me lightly around the back, legs free now, kicking a little. We're in that precarious gray area between walking and swimming, nearly weightless. And buoying her in my arms, her warm body pressed to mine, it occurs to me that this is what people do: they extend themselves. They raise themselves to a height and try to stay there. The desire is powerful, possibly irresistible. For the moment, there in the soft-bottomed pond, it seems anything but asinine.

# ■ PART ONE ■





**IT STARTS** with my family, of course. Childhood, adolescence, the American way of sorting out what is real from what is not. My family was credulous, idealistic, odd, old-fashioned. I trained myself to be otherwise. The result has been a kind of tetherball existence, an orbiting around the parental pole with more speed than grace, more movement than progress.

My forebears could not have known how audacious the name *Bright* would sound after three generations on American soil. They were single-minded people—Romanian Jews who traveled all the way to South Dakota to seek their fortune in dry goods. In Rapid City, they refined the homely *Breit* to a more Anglo-Saxon *Bright*, and I doubt that my great-grandfather tempered this affectation with even the slightest shrug of irony. The irony would come later, with my grandfather, the first of our line to have a mostly American childhood. Shortly before his death, my grandfather had visions of the color yellow. For a few swooning moments, the walls of the old apartment shone for him like sunflowers, someone had replaced his Dilantin with iodine tablets, my grandmother's hair had molted into a brilliant bouffant of golden fleece. He started

grimacing as if from indigestion, or was perhaps smiling in his grudging, sarcastic way. "It's in my head," he said, squinting. "I suppose it's some kind of joke." He was talking about the sun; he felt the sun inside his head. And what my grandfather might have smiled at was that after all these years of impersonal distance, that brightest of orbs had suddenly dropped itself into his skull, just in time for him to die.

He had never asked for such fanfare. He and his family must have looked up at the towering sky over Rapid City and felt blessed, saved even, as though God Himself had been disarmed by these new surroundings. They must have also felt shame and guilt for having fled with their Jewish hides. This last solar flourish might have seemed to my grandfather a divine mockery of his comfortable American life.

My father had no such worries about God's censoriousness. He was that rare thing, a Jew without dread. With his sheer, guileless optimism, he might have sprung out of a Yiddish folk tale, or a pyramid of varsity cheerleaders. Perhaps the best way to introduce him would be to whisk you into my mother's garage, where behind the croquet set and the garden hose we might find his old bicycle. It is an ancient three-speed with an outsized triangular seat and the type of broad handlebars that might have been useful on a paper route fifty years ago. It is an obsolete machine, comic and rickety, but eighteen years after my father's death, my mother has still not found the courage to throw it away.

He was named for Horace Mann, the famous American educator, though Horace Bright was no scholar. He was the star and writer of a children's television hour. *The Horace and Waldo Show* was aired twice daily, early morning and after school, in three states, from its home base in Denver, Colorado. There, before an adoring studio audience, my father would tap-dance between cartoons with his golden cane, purple tails, and giant purple top hat, while his sidekick, Waldo, fat, his brown bowler pushed down over his eyebrows, would try to follow along, grimacing all the while at the howls of laughter. A brace of Looney Tunes would ensue, and as my father and Waldo retreated to the wings to mount their uni-

cycles or gather their Indian clubs, the rapt studio kids would pick through their cavernous “Waldo Bags” for the candy lying among the yo-yo’s and plastic rings and invisible-ink pens.

“Thuhbudda-thuhbudda-thuhbudd-that’s all, folks,” Waldo might parrot at the end of a cartoon, and this was my father’s cue to roll his eyes at the audience, crossing his arms in disappointment.

“Waldo, you sound like a St. Bernard with a mud pie up his nose. That’s no Porky the Pig.”

Waldo, cocking back his bowler for a gigantic wink at the peanut gallery, would retort, “Oh? Well, I’ll tell you something. At least I don’t *smell* like Porky the Pig.”

And as we doubled over giggling, my father would cringe and weep beneath his purple top hat, almost turning into a cartoon himself. We had no idea then that we were actually laughing at ourselves, that through his burlesque our own recent crying jags had become distant, ridiculous memories. Of course, it was the rotund Waldo who usually played the fool, and then my father became a magician, quick and sly as a man pulling doves out of thin air. One of these gags, I learned from the videotapes, was used no less than twenty-six times in seven years, but I always laughed. The only variation was in the setup, and if the joke was funny at all, it was only because you saw the punch line coming so much earlier than hapless Waldo ever did.

“Hey, Waldo, come over here,” my father would begin with an inquisitive look.

Waldo would put his hands on his hips and skeptically tap his foot. “Whadduya want, Horace? Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“Busy?”

“I’m not feeling so hot, Horace. Someone told me I got a funny name.”

My father would then walk up to his friend, lean on his cane for a thoughtful moment, and put an arm around Waldo’s shoulder. “Who said that, Waldo? Why, you have a perfectly distinguished name.”

Waldo would grimace. “But someone said it sounds like . . . like . . .”

“Like what, Waldo?”

“Like—”

At this point, my father, standing right beside Waldo, would suddenly whirl his cane around in a deftly executed roundhouse and tip over Waldo’s bowler, exposing his comically hairless head.

“BALDO!” he would blurt out, in jubilant surprise.

Fooled, as if for the first time, Waldo would run around in a circle, covering and uncovering his head as though on fire, then finally hightailing it offstage.

It helped if you were eight years old. The comedy was generic, but one of Horace and Waldo’s secrets was that children, like a society of young Platonists, laugh at the mere *idea* of a joke. And if children will laugh at anything, then, according to Horace and Waldo at least, they ought to laugh at two flesh-and-blood human beings, willing targets who could laugh at themselves. Certainly it was more instructive than Tom and Jerry endlessly killing one another—cartoons on the show were more or less nonviolent, even if it meant running “Steamboat Willy” for the thousandth time. We, the children of Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming, were probably the last kids in America who would endure “Steamboat Willy.” As long as we felt that Horace and Waldo were watching, too, the cartoons seemed more like stories read aloud, as though our two hosts had created them backstage the night before, wearing their purple and green tuxedo jackets.

My sister Lucy and I, five and eight at this point, were obsessed with the idea of that backstage, our father’s exotic workshop. It was there that he toiled or lounged or did whatever he did in quiet solitude, since Waldo, a serious actor by night, had no hand in the writing of the show. My father had given up on serious acting. Every day he went to work for eight hours, but his was not just any office, and Lucy and I had worked out a deal with our mother that on the occasional Shabbat we could skip school and go visit. This was complicated by the fact that in our family the Sabbath was a movable feast, often falling on a Wednesday or a Thursday, depending on my mother’s schedule. She played violin in what was then the Denver Symphony, and whenever our princi-



pal called to express his “concern” about our absences, she took a pious, defensive tone, blindsiding him with inscrutable nonsense about the importance of religion and the arts. It was a small private school, always in need of paying students, and a little piousness went a long way with Mr. Desrocher.

Through these efforts, Lucy and I made it to the studio almost once a month, arriving just after the morning’s taping. Channel Five was the kind of independent station that subsisted on black-and-white sitcoms, minor league baseball, pro wrestling, and many hours of cartoons. They’d allotted *The Horace and Waldo Show* a section of concrete basement that looked much like the bowels of our school’s auditorium. There were almost no walls, just temporary-looking partitions that fenced in racks of clothing, miscellaneous risers and stacks of chairs, a forgotten Steinway, and a closet full of sports memorabilia—a few decades of aborted talk shows and prehistoric talent hours cached away, their props settling in dust, waiting for Lucy and me like undiscovered continents. I would push Lucy around on an enormous theater dolly, stopping here and there for us to try on sport coats and cowboy hats. Once we came to my father’s little office cubicle wearing bolo ties. He was sitting at his desk in civilian clothes, khakis and a blue oxford-cloth shirt, sketching something with an oil pencil.

“Aaron, where did you get those?” he said, eyeing my neckwear.

“In the basement,” Lucy said.

My father put down his pencil and looked at me. Out of costume, his long nose and straight eyebrows gave him a very earnest expression. Even as a child, I recognized that he was a little funny-looking, and wholly indifferent to his own appearance. It was as though he had been issued those rabbinical features so long ago that he had forgotten how pronounced they were: the nose, the full lips, the long black eyelashes that made my mother jealous. If there were such a thing as an “indoorsman” my father would have been a worthy prototype: his hands and eyes made for mild pursuits like reading and playing cards.

“Have you any idea whose ties those are?” he asked.