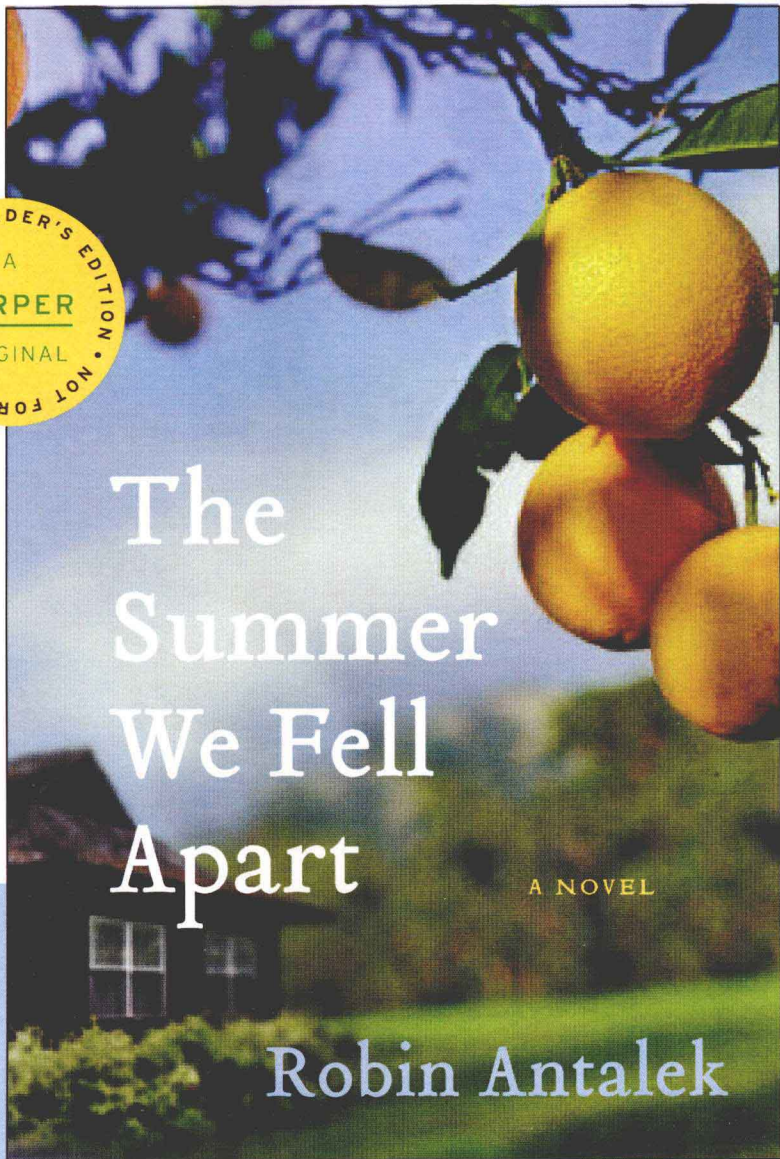
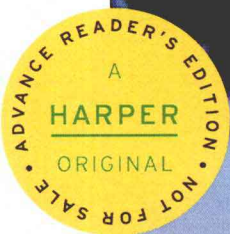


COMING JANUARY 2010



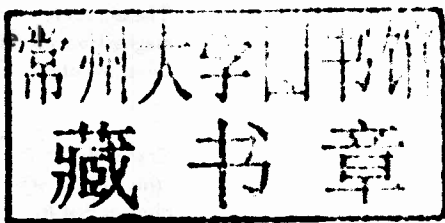
The  
Summer  
We Fell  
Apart

A NOVEL

Robin Antalek

*the summer we fell apart*

a n o v



ROBIN ANTALEK

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

## HARPER

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

THE SUMMER WE FELL APART. Copyright © 2010 by Robin Antalek. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

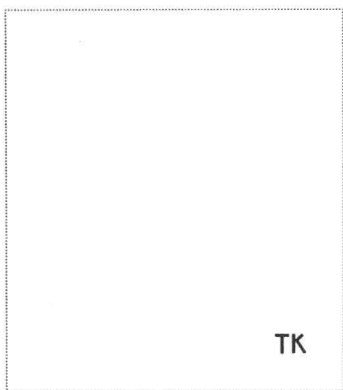
FIRST EDITION

*Designed by Janet M. Evans*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-06-178216-9

10 11 12 13 14 OV/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Emma Dodge Hanson

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBIN ANTALEK lives in Saratoga Springs, New York, with her husband and two daughters. *The Summer We Fell Apart* is her first novel.

*the summer we fell apart*

*For Frank, Hannah, and Tessa*

# CONTENTS

## part one *Amy*

- one    *You Are Not You, Yet*    3  
two    *How to Clean House*    38  
three    *Kissing in Church*    71

## part two *George*

- four    *I'm Pretty Sure Holden Caulfield  
      Could Date If He Wanted To*    109  
five    *You Should Have Said Hello*    139

## part three *Kate*

- six    *Things I Want(ed) to Do Today*    189  
seven    *This Is the Part Where History  
      Repeats Itself*    224  
eight    *Dreams We Miss While  
      We're Sleeping*    278

## part four *Finn*

- nine    *To the Boy with the Red Umbrella  
      Who Saved My Life*    315

## epilogue *Marilyn*

- ten    *The Haas Archipelagoes*    337

part one

*Amy*





## YOU ARE NOT YOU, YET

The summer we took in a boarder my mother started wearing headscarves. They were adorned with elaborate patterns and colors as if a fistful of crayons had melted on her head. Often she wore more than one at a time twisted around each other and tied low at the nape of her neck so a plume of silk cascaded down her back. The scarves swayed from side to side as she walked, like the dragons in the New Year's Parade in Chinatown. They were so odd an affectation that it prompted our boarder, Miriam, to ask me if my mother was sick.

Miriam was from Switzerland and spoke French, with only a minimum of English, so she pronounced the word *sick* as *seeeck* and it took me a few moments to understand what she was asking. I was left to shrug and roll my eyes as if to say: Parents? Who can explain them? Truth was I had no explanation for the scarves, although I guessed they were probably a result of my mother getting home late from the theater with mussed up, dirty hair. She was in a play in New York that required her to wear a wig—some depressing Bertolt Brecht thing. My mother was excited about it because she thought it lent her credibility as an actor. My brother George and I had used her comp opening-night tickets not so

much to see our mother as to see the stage debut of a TV actor George thought was hot.

So the weird head scarf affectation could be explained like this: by the time the car she'd hired brought her back from the city to our house in Nyack it was close to dawn. My mother was vain and, frankly, uninterested in the mundane lives of her last teenage children—she was done—*fini*, as the French say—but I didn't know how that would translate, so I gave Miriam the universal shrug. I could tell from the expression on her face that she wanted more than I could give.

I'd caught Miriam more than once studying the dusty family photos that lined the halls of our house and ran up the steps like crooked teeth—her face up so close to some of the old black-and-whites that shreds of cobwebs clung to her chin and nose. In pictures I can see we translate well and so I understand her fascination. Our parents back then were often together, smiling wide, showing all their teeth, and holding cocktails or being hugged by someone famous (if only in their obscure theater circles). The rest of us—we are four in all—looking mildly amused or bored in all the pictures, even when we were babies.

Miriam had not met the rest of us yet since it was only George and me still at home. Miriam occupied Finn's old room with the crew paddles and lacrosse sticks hanging on the wall. Being the only female in the house besides my mother (who was most definitely not participating in the Miriam project), I was the one to get Miriam's room ready and I chose Finn's room because his has a little bathroom tucked under the attic stairs. When I was turning the mattress to freshen it, I found several *Penthouse* magazines and, tucked between the appropriately suggestive pages, love letters from an old girlfriend, Holly, along with an ancient crinkled condom pack.

I pocketed the condom (wishful thinking—I was going to college a virgin) and threw away the magazines, but I kept the love letters. I planned to surprise Finn with them when he came back from Europe at the end of the month.

Finn was off on a backpacking trip with our father and at some point they were supposed to meet up with my older sister, Kate, who lives in Florence and teaches English. Finn was the only sibling actually *invited* to join our father. George suspected Finn was asked because he is the true coward among us and will not question our father on why he has abandoned our family.

When George says things like that, I feel bad that Miriam seems to be idolizing us—at least the “us” in pictures. Our father is responsible for Miriam’s presence in our house, which explains everything and nothing. All we know is that she is an exchange student for the year without a place to stay. She would be attending high school with me for senior year. I had no idea my father even knew such a thing as an exchange existed, let alone a single person in town who would even consider allowing my family to take someone in. I thought the whole concept of exchange involved another student participating in the exchange, but in Miriam’s case that didn’t seem to apply.

Miriam showed up on our doorstep the day our father’s bags appeared in the front hallway. Their luggage commingled for a few hours while George (who frequently took our mother’s side—because it seemed there was always a side to take) scowled at Miriam from the top landing, vowing to have nothing to do with her (lucky for Miriam his vows usually last all of five minutes), and I destroyed the French language in an attempt at conversation. Our father was, as usual, absent. Our mother was hiding on purpose in her room with the door bolted. I could smell the cigarette smoke from downstairs and I pictured her in her bed, the curtains drawn

against the early August heat. She would be smoking furiously, lighting the next cigarette off the last, all the while blinking and applying eyedrops (while she tried not to light her hair on fire) because her eyes watered from the gray cloud above her bed. The day would be no different from the others just because Miriam had arrived. My mother would only rise to shower and emerge from her room moments before the car came to take her into the city.

This is why I know more about Miriam than anyone in the house. She puts double the amount of coffee and half the amount of water in the pot so the coffee is deep and thick and bitter. She prefers baths to showers—when she takes them—and she often wears the same skirt several days in a row, although she always changes her blouse. She eats bread and jam and cheese in her room or standing up at the kitchen sink. Sometimes she cuts the cheese with a knife and fork. She dislikes tomatoes and eggs. She carries an old-fashioned floral handkerchief in her pocket and adores television. I have found her several times sitting in the middle of the den transfixed by the small black-and-white my siblings have long derided because everyone we know has large color televisions where you can identify the actors without the aid of a magnifying glass. Miriam actually cleared off the accumulated detritus we'd neglected so that she could have an unobstructed view of the minuscule screen. Although I had no idea what to think about her viewing choices of the sitcoms—*Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*, *Home Improvement*, and *Cheers*—it must have given her glimpses of American life that she wasn't experiencing by living with us. After several weeks at our house she surely must have figured out that no television show could accurately portray her existence in our world.

Since I was desperately searching for a way not to be me, studying Miriam became my secret hobby. As soon as I saw her

leaning against the newel post in my front hall I'd wished I'd been born a mysterious European. I was tired of being the smart, creative, yet totally nondescript Amy. I was tired of those trite adjectives, period. The night before Miriam arrived, George and I held a bonfire fueled by the journals of my adolescent longings. I'd burned everything because I was sure this would be my last summer at home and I didn't want to take a chance that one of my siblings would take them and use them as fodder for yet another familial drama.

My guidance counselor had assured me I was smart enough to get into college and probably would get a scholarship to pay for some of it. I think he took pity on me—he had seen all of my siblings through this school, guided them all to college despite the apathy my parents displayed. I mean it was seriously all they could do to sign off on the applications. The guy deserved a medal. Before college I planned to spend my last summer traveling—even if I had to earn the money by working the arts-and-crafts table at the after-school camp for overindulged five-year-olds again all year long.

George fought with me over burning my journals—said one day I might want to write a book about our family. He was joking, I could tell. George was just a packrat. Burning the journals didn't bother me. If an occasion ever arose for me to pen my memoirs I was positive my childhood would never, ever leave me.

*My summer job consisted of scooping ice cream and making milkshakes at the dairy shack late afternoons and evenings. Usually I spent the time before work sleeping, then fooling around with some fabric or paint, maybe a book (George and I had just gone to the library and the pile between us included: *American**

*Psycho*, *Shampoo Planet*, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*), but this August was different. Now in the mornings I led Miriam to the swimming hole at the very back edge of our property. It was actually more than a hole, but that's how our father always referred to it back when he enjoyed playing the role of country dad. Going swimming meant a hike through waist-high weeds and prickly vines all the while swatting away mosquitoes and no-see-ums, but Miriam seemed to take it in stride. The yard and surrounding property, like the house and its inhabitants, were simply worn-out from years of neglect. I liked to imagine that when my parents had purchased this odd crooked house twenty-five years ago they had the best intentions for their young family—when in truth its purchase had been a recommendation from an accountant during a particularly flush period for my father.

Once we got to the water, Miriam stripped down to her underwear and sunbathed topless. Her breasts were small although almost completely overtaken by large brown nipples. Under her arms were thick tufts of dark hair—at odds, it seemed, with her pale pink skin. On the middle toe of her left foot she wore a silver ring. I tried to look sophisticated in my one-piece black Speedo as I spread out on the blanket next to Miriam—but I failed miserably and ended up spending most of the time picking at the suit and redistributing the spandex around my midsection. All I could think was that facing my senior year of high school with Miriam, who was so comfortable in her skin, could only mean I had less of a chance with guys than I currently had.

On the days George joined us I expected Miriam to attempt to cover up, but she barely paid any attention to him except for when he dove into the water. George had been on the swim team all four years of high school. He was tall and thin with broad shoulders and

a flat stomach and, with the exception of his time spent in the water, was extremely clumsy. Actually, much to the disdain of my parents, who had assumed their children, like them, would have a penchant for the arts (my collages and fabric creatures were not exactly the Great White Artistic Hope my parents might have dreamed about), all of my siblings excelled in one sport or another. Besides swimming for George, there was crew and lacrosse for Finn. Like my sister, Kate, I was a runner, although I only ran when I was feeling puffy and I exhibited no extraordinary athletic prowess and refused to join the track team as Kate had. I'd say my parents got exactly what they deserved by choosing to live in a small town that, despite its "artsy" reputation and access to New York City, was just like any other cookie-cutter suburb across the country.

When George climbed up to the highest ledge and performed an elegant swan dive—his body sluicing into the water like a knife, barely disturbing the surface—Miriam propped herself up on her elbows and nodded approvingly. "Beautiful," she whispered under her breath. "The boy can fly."

I nodded and was horrified to find water leaking from my eyes down onto my cheeks. George would be leaving for college in New Hampshire at the end of the month and I didn't know what I was going to do without him. There wasn't a moment of my life that I had ever been without George. As family lore goes, my first steps were not to my mother or father but to George. From the ages of three to five I slept curled against him in his twin bed because I was afraid of the monster in my closet. I would have stayed there forever had George not convinced me that he had erected a super-secret monster-detection system in my room that would keep me safe at all times. Miriam reached over and patted me on the thigh—an odd grandmotherly gesture—but she didn't say anything; she was still concentrating on watching George dive.



I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sun; the dried tears left my skin with a tight feeling high across the cheekbones by the time George got out of the water and came over to us, shaking off like a wet dog.

With my eyes still closed, I lifted my leg to kick George away from me—the water in the pond was spring-fed and felt like pin-pricks of ice. I always waited until the last minute to get wet; I had to be uncomfortably baked before I could be coaxed into the water. George laughed and then dropped down on the other side of Miriam. I knew this because she rolled closer to me to give him more room on the blanket. A few minutes passed in which I could only hear the sound of George's huff-like breathing and Miriam swatting away flies; then Miriam broke the silence.

"Teach me to do that, George?"

"Huh?" It sounded like more of an exhale than George actually answering.

"To dive," Miriam explained. "To fly."

So far I had seen Miriam venture into the water only twice, and each time she did that tiptoe wading-in thing people do when the water is too cold. With her stomach sucked in and her nipples hard and pointy, she patted at the water with flat palms. I can't even remember if she actually swam.

George seemed to be reading my mind because he said, "Do you swim?"

Miriam laughed. "Of course! Do you think I want to perish?"

I was still mulling over her choice of the word *perish* for *die* when I heard George say, "Okay then—let's go."

Miriam hopped up. I opened my eyes and looked at George. He was scrutinizing Miriam and scratching his head. I could tell he knew I was looking at him and that he was purposely avoiding my glare. I never jumped off the ledge. When George first joined the