

PiNK

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Every time I go into a bookstore I want to vomit. It usually starts in the G section of fiction, but it's in full swing by the time I reach the Os. It's the type of feeling you get after eating too much ice cream. It hits you between the lungs, at the base near the gut. By the Os I want to shout: Hey, you forgot me! I look around, but all that I see is the book I will write. I can see the camera-ready art and everything. A slick title that will sell a million copies. It'll be me they're talking about on the news. They just don't know it yet.

The book I will write will make men sigh and bring tears like the best movie, the one you've seen a million times and can recite nearly by heart. My book will become a substitute for friends. It will be so sad that people won't want to finish, but they will skip to the back of the book to see if what they think will happen does, but it won't. My book will have a

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pink cover like the brightest cotton candy you loved as a kid so that every time you look at it you think of Ferris wheels. And there will be a gaudy display in the stores that I will tell everyone I hate, but that I will secretly love.

There will be a picture of the main character, me, standing in the middle of the desert. Low clouds will swirl behind me, in sand-like patterns, like at the beach when the waves retreat back into the ocean and the sand is all bumpy and streaked with imprints of the waves. That's how the clouds will be above me. And the title will be a thick black stripe across the top. But my name won't be on the front cover, only on the side because, aesthetically, I want the one-liner title and the picture. It will give you the feeling you had when your fifth-grade teacher used your paper as the perfect example in class, even though you laughed, you will agree that somehow you are better than the rest.

My book will not have anything to do with self-help, self-love, or self-discovery, though it will lie next to those books on the shelf. When you enter the bookstore, you will hear people whispering what a great gift my book makes. The Pattersons will give it to the Thompsons and the Suttons will buy it for the Bradfords, who actually already had it, so the Bradfords will give it to the Bickfords and it will be the most talked about book on the Internet. In fact, passages of it (even though it will infringe copyright laws) will be passed around in e-mails, traveling tens of thousands of miles a second, to over 60,000 nine-to-fivers in one day.

In a week my book will be quoted like everything in it was cliché, because in a week's time everyone will have heard about it and thought it was written way back,

like before computers. When the sales clerk in Borders bookstore overhears people talking about it over coffee she will tell them it's sold out at the moment, but that a new shipment will be arriving shortly. Or if they want, she can call another store to see if they have it in stock, but the other store won't. The people having coffee will look at one another and pretend they've already read it. But they wouldn't have. They'll just want to. So they'll drink their lattes and look at the sales clerk and tell her thank you very much but that her help isn't necessary.

The pink of the cover of my book will catch everyone's eyes and hold them. The publisher will call me and ask if I want to go to California because a movie studio has decided my book will make a perfect film. Not movie or flick, but *film*. And not shot in video either. I will tell the publisher that I am trying to rest a little and that I will consider the offer, but that I'll need time to myself. After all, my book will be number one on *The New York Times* best seller list. I'll need time to bask. At least for a week or so. So I will hang up the phone and order Chinese.

My book will be shoved in between a pile of old copies of the manuscript, in my front hall closet, that will seem to be cleverly out of view, but if anyone comes over and hangs up their jacket they'll be sure to see it. It's like a condom in a guy's wallet. And I will consider whom I would like to see play myself as the lead. Though certainly it will depend on who's directing. Of course Woody Allen would be the natural choice if it was a comedy, but it's not. If I got what's his name, the *Platoon* guy, well, I'd have a paranoid version of my book, so maybe I'd choose the biggest of them all—

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Spielberg—even though I’d secretly be rooting for a French version so that everyone can die. But that might be too close to the truth. Spielberg, on the other hand, could do wonders with my little pink book.

My little pink book will cause a fashion trend in Europe the likes of which hasn’t been seen since Coco Chanel came on the scene. There will be book-shaped hats of bright pink in shimmery material so that the hat is as slick as the cover of my book, and there will be matching shoes with an ever-so-slight heel, enough to make a woman’s calf look sexy but still low enough to be comfortable. After all, my book is intelligent.

The first time a reporter calls my apartment in Chicago I will have a mouthful of food and will have to excuse myself to spit it out. She will be from *The New Yorker* and I will say how sorry I am in a terribly charming way and she will laugh and apologize for catching me off guard and then write an article about how really sincere I am, about how shocking it is that I’m so simple while my writing is so insightful. She will ask how I can see through people that way. Do I believe in reincarnation? I will suggest we meet for lunch. But not anywhere fancy. It will be a family-style diner, the kind with fake plastic seats, where everything tastes like meat and potatoes, even the milkshakes. And I will warn her not to get a milkshake because of that. After she’s gone, she will call and leave a message. “Can we meet? I think I have a few more questions. What about dinner?”

I will twirl a piece of bright pink ribbon in my hands, feeling the silk of it against my thumb, and I will consider the reporter. Consider a dinner. Would this be a date?

When I first get the acceptance letter from the publisher about the book I will write, I will walk inside my apartment and call my parents who will be as dumbstruck as me. We will laugh because it's the only thing we can think to do, like when someone dies and you lose your senses for an instant and you're trying to gather your thoughts, only it's so jumbled up you end up reacting in a way that's totally inappropriate. That is how it will be. My parents won't say anything at all. So I will hang up the phone, turn off the ringer, and cry. I mean pour-my-eyes-out cry, so hard that my stomach will contract and pull and hurt like someone's punched me because I will be suddenly terrified. I will feel all the blood rush in my veins, the way I do during a horror show, which is precisely why I won't go see horror shows. But I will feel the same way. That slowed down feel. So slow you think you can see the sun inching down beneath the horizon. That scared feeling will stick with me for days. I will talk about the book a lot because I will be trying to talk all the fear out of me. But it won't work.

I will think that I made a terrible mistake. Maybe I should call up to New York, my editors, and tell them that the book needs a lot of work, that it's not ready. I will think that I need to put a stop to it. It can be better. I will swear. I will try to find some means of control but there won't be any. It will be sitting on a desk halfway across the country, being discussed and evaluated by a group of eleven executives. It will be out of my hands, so I will stock up my refrigerator and let all the food go bad. At first I'll think I'm going to eat it, but I will have lost my appetite, so I end up staring at the inside of the refrigerator for long stints of time, wondering if

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everyone who reads my book is going to hate it. I will think about taking a razor to my arms and slicing myself until they bleed. I will crave that sense of relief. I will imagine the blood falling out of me, and each drop that leaves me makes me feel slightly better. But I won't have the nerve to pick up that blade.

When my little pink book is finally sitting on shelves in bookstores around the world, I will dance in my tiny apartment with all the windows wide open. I will turn on my favorite music, Nina Simone, and twirl around my apartment, letting my hips direct me. I will put my arms in the air up above my head and dance in slow circles. I will let the sound of her voice fill the room and me, and I will dance until I have to flip the record. I will dance all the way through side B too. And when I am feeling reckless, I will play The Beatles and jump up and down. John Lennon will sing to me, and I will think of all the dead people that have been and all the dead people to come. So I will turn up the volume and dance some more.

When I get tired, I will collapse on my hardwood floors and I will stare up at my cracked ceiling and wonder if this means I'm a success. I will have no way of knowing what success means, how to judge. Since I am alone in my apartment staring at my ceiling, I cannot be certain.

My little pink book will be number one on *The New York Times* best seller list for months. I will keep my refrigerator empty to remind me not to be so hard on myself, which will not make sense to anyone but me. But it will make sense. One of the oddest things will be that first check. The big payola. When the money comes and I go to deposit it

I will have the odd feeling that the woman at the counter is shocked to see my balance over \$800. It'll be that high only right before I pay my rent and then it will go back down to the normal one or so hundred. I'll see her staring at the balance line wondering if she's accidentally punched up someone else's account on the computer. But she double-checks and it's me. It's right. I'll take a deep breath.

I won't know what to do with the money so I won't do anything. I'll go home. I won't feel guilty about going to a full-price movie. I'll buy the expensive organic peaches at Whole Foods Market. And inside my apartment, I'll sit in the middle of my living room on the floor—because I prefer it to the couch—and eat my organic peach and stare out the window and watch the lights come on in the homes across the street. The mailman will walk by and I will take a bite of peach.

I will stare out my windows, to the house across the street, a Victorian-looking thing with big bay windows. I won't see anything except the fuzzy glow of TV, but I'll like that it's a home and that a family lives there. While I eat my peach I will wonder if I will ever have a home of my own. I won't get it that I'll be able to afford one. A modest one, say, in the middle of nowhere with two bedrooms and one full bathroom. I will lie back on the floor and close my eyes.

The book I will write will never reveal the truth about me. Instead it will encapsulate everything I wish I were. It will not tell my readers that I do not have any friends, the kind who call you up and ask how you are. It will not reveal how my friends are the sort of friends who say we “used to be so close” and “my best friend from high school,” those

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sort of past-tense relationships that people use to make themselves feel better. I won't even mention the ones who call me up only when they need something. My book will not have witty metaphors for my loneliness the way some authors do. Instead, my little pink book will mask all of this; it will make people think that I have always been this lovable thing, this person everyone wanted to know but didn't. I will not let my fans know, especially the ones just like me, that, in fact, I am paralyzed. That I feel this wound inside me that I can't seem to shake, as if something was torn out of me when I was too young to remember. And I won't connect this to my grandfather because this is something I will never think about. I will only know that no matter how hard I try, I cannot bridge the space between myself and others. That I am terrified by the prospect of knowing anyone.

I will think about my friends. The ones I called "friend." And I will wonder about fiends, about the missing "r." What is it about one small shift that can change an entire structure? I will wonder if it's worth it. Whether the book I will write will be worth it. Will it be worth it to be known?

Pink shoes, pink hats, pink umbrella. Pink slipcovers for the couch and curtains. Pink colored candles that line a bathtub, pink throw mats, and pink frames for paintings. Pink mugs, pink forks, pink refrigerator. Pink highlights in a Persian carpet, pink-colored scarves. All the pink you can eat.

Mr. Spielberg, who of course will fall in love with pink on his first read, will call me up and leave a message that he wants to "do" pink. He will say that he is calling from the gym (and I will be able to tell by the panting) and that he wants me to come out to LA. He'll say, "Call me back,

I want to see you by the end of the week.” Mr. Spielberg will be hard to reach but his assistants will assure me that yes, yes it’s in the hopper. I will wonder about the word *hopper*. 1. a person or thing that hops. 2. any hopping insect. 3. a box, tank, or other container, often funnel-shaped, from which the contents can be emptied slowly and evenly.

Mr. Spielberg’s assistant will be named Alison or James or Henrietta. It will keep changing because so many people work for him that every time I call I get another assistant, so I will collectively call them Henry, but never directly. Henry will always answer on the third ring, this way I will always know they’re busy. Henry will say *hopper* again and something about fabulous. Pink and fabulous and chenille.

When I get to California, Mr. Spielberg will be nicer than I expect. The book I will write will be in his right hand and he will be thumbing through it with his left while a crew of young people hover around him wondering whether or not they should know me. So they don’t say anything directly to me until after he does. When they realize I’m the author of the little pink book they will run and get me bottled water in a mug. There will be a rainbow on the mug and it will say, “California! The Place of Dreams.”

I will get sick of California quickly, except I will like Venice Beach, because even if it is California it’s dirty enough to look like it doesn’t belong. I will take long walks in the morning along the boardwalk before any of the vendors have set up, when there are men still asleep, curled on a bench between the ocean and the homes, and everything will seem as it should, as if I were a part of the scene, a figure walking confidently alone in the morning, maybe

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with a cup of coffee in my hand, and the steam escaping up into the seventy-something-degree weather. But I will be due in Hollywood at an appointed time so I will never feel as if I've gotten to walk quite as long as I would like.

My book will be displayed in the window of the last shop I walk past on the way back so that I will be reminded of purpose. I will realize, briefly perhaps, that the book is just this thing and not who I am at all. But then, I'll be in LA, and Spielberg will be waiting, and they'll be casting actors, and I'll forget all about it within an hour.

After the fifth or sixth trip between Chicago and LA and repeated begging by a Henry, I will decide to get an apartment in Venice Beach. Henry will keep saying, "Wouldn't you be more comfortable in your own place, not just a hotel?" I will think about it and think that I'm just fine with hotels, but maybe that's the wrong answer, so I will say, "Yes, why yes, of course I'd be more comfortable in my own place." So I will find the place on Bernard, off of Rose Avenue. It'll be cheap and about nine or ten blocks from the beach. I'll have an attic room in a house that a couple owns. I'll have to climb up a ladder to get to my room that is so small it does not even qualify as small, but, rather, tiny. The sloping ceiling will make it so that I can slide a mattress only on one side. I'll bring up a tiny table and matching chair that I'll shove under the one bay window facing the ocean, and it will fit exactly. I'll have piles of books and that'll be it. The couple will let me hang my clothes in a closet downstairs, the one with all the cleaning supplies. I will vow to never let anyone see my room because I won't want to answer why I chose this when I can clearly afford better.

Perhaps after the book I will write is published I will think back to Tucson and my days there in college, about how I wanted to be a poet so bad it hurt my bones. I will not know if it was the age or the place. All that angst and lust. Booze. Maybe it was just the heat because it was always so damned hot. College was a four-year blur. But I will certainly remember one girl. The one who snubbed me, the one I've technically never met and whose name I never knew, but who I've always simply referred to as "evil review girl." It was the first and only reading I ever gave. I made up little chapbooks to pass out. Back then it didn't seem vain or anything, just like, why the hell not, right? Turns out the local newspaper sent a student intern to cover the event. The next day I went to pick up a paper to see what they wrote and there it was in black and white: *Junior Poet Doldrums*. The article was a full body slam; I dropped out of my poetry class the next day. I was horrified. I jumped in my '68 Rambler and headed out into the desert. I remember crying and crying and that stupid desert expanse. I remember thinking maybe a scorpion could just sting me and I'd be done with the whole thing.

I was dramatic like that.

After the book I will write is published I will not even realize how petty I can be. I will have images of evil review girl reading my little pink book and not even know I am dreaming of my ultimate comeback, which no one will even realize is a comeback except me. I will want to be adored. I will want adoration. But I will never say it out loud. Instead, I will skip reviews altogether and just pretend they're all good.