

A heartbreaking story of the many facets of love seen through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old girl who feels too much. When Daisy Doyle falls in love with handsome, popular, Will Banks, she begins to think that the family move isn't so bad after all. Her life is nearly perfect until a breakup and a family tragedy threatens everything. upside down, secrets come to light.

Daisy Doyle

by Madonna Ball

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Daisy Doyle

A Novel by

Madonna Ball

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1
Where's Denny?
Late Fall 1983

The silence that marked my brother's absence from the dinner table wasn't cause for concern—not at first anyway. Denny was dead, but we didn't know it at the time.

"Emily Post would turn over in her grave," Mom said, placing the still steaming pot of broccoli on a trivet in the center of the table instead of transferring it to a serving bowl, "but I'm too exhausted to make another trip back to the kitchen."

"Who's Emily Post?" asked Daniel.

"Never mind," said David. "You're such an imbecile. You don't know anything. Just shut up so we can eat. I'm starving."

Mom shot David a cautionary look before addressing Daniel's question. "Emily Post was a writer. I think she wrote a few novels, but she's mostly known for her books on etiquette—" she stopped mid-sentence. Neither Daniel nor David were listening to her explanation. They were too busy kicking each other under the table.

Dad also observed my brothers screwing around, so he reached over and swatted David in the back of his head. "You're both imbeciles! Now stop playing footsies under the table, sit up and listen to your mother!" he snapped, but Mom didn't bother to elaborate. She gave the table another once-over and removed the lid from the pot.

"Yuck! Gross!" yelled Daniel, holding his nose. "Put the lid back on. That broccoli smells like farts."

“If I leave the lid on, the broccoli will continue cooking and then it won’t be any good,” Mom said, ignoring his crude comment.

“Here she goes again,” Daniel complained. “You can’t die from eating overcooked broccoli, so what’s the big deal?”

To our mother, a self-proclaimed health guru who was always experimenting with new foods and diets, it was a very big deal. Her dietary regime *du jour* consisted of serving one green, lightly steamed or raw vegetable at every meal—even at breakfast.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “You’re not going to die, but overcooked vegetables have little to no nutritional value. Raw vegetables with their skins left on and dark, leafy green vegetables are really the way to go. Count your blessings that I’m not serving you a plate full of kale or raw zucchini spears.” David scrunched up his nose and Daniel stuck out his tongue. “Stop with the faces and smear a little butter on the broccoli if you must, but either way, the two of you are eating it. It’s good for you.” To appease my persnickety brothers, Mom placed the lid back on the pot and took her seat at the table. Only then did she notice the empty chair next to mine. “Where’s your brother?” she asked. Denny was frequently a no-show at the dinner table, so none of us bothered to answer.

“Can’t we just say grace and eat?” David asked. “I’m hungry.”

“No, but someone can tell me where Denny is. I’m quite certain I told one of you to call him in for dinner. Where is he?”

The three of us looked down at our empty plates in response to Mom’s question.

“C’mon guys,” Dad said, unfolding his napkin and placing it in his lap. “Your mother asked a question. Don’t just sit there like a bunch of deaf mutes.”

Accusatory glances bounced from person to person, but in the end, her inquiry was met with shrugged shoulders and blank expressions, which fueled her and Dad’s aggravation even more. Thoroughly disgusted, Dad pushed his chair away from the table, threw his napkin down onto his plate and announced that he’d go track Denny down. “I’ll go get him. You kids don’t listen worth a darn and it’s getting old.”

I didn’t want to be at the table in the first place, so I jumped up and offered to go look for him. “I’ll go find him. You don’t have to go.”

With an angry stare, he ordered me to sit down. “Never mind! It’s too late for that, Daisy. Maybe you should’ve worried about doing as you were told the first time around. I expect more from you. You’re the oldest! You need to start acting like it.”

“But she didn’t ask me,” I insisted.

Nobody said as much, but we all assumed that Denny was somewhere outside still playing and not giving a second thought to how dark or late it was getting. My little brother was stubborn and rarely came in the first time he was called. He’d beg for just a few more precious minutes of playtime. With him it was always, “Why can’t I eat later when I’m actually hungry?” Or, “Let me do x, y, and z first and then I’ll come in.” Like the rest of us, he was pretty good at pretending not to hear. Only when Mom or Dad threw down the gauntlet and threatened to spank him did he comply.

Dad always complained about Denny’s poor listening skills, but deep down we all knew that Denny was his

favorite, and that he secretly admired his tenaciousness. He was forever saying things like, “Denny’s his own man,” or “He’ll make a fine litigator some day because he doesn’t take no for an answer.” As for the rest of us, excluding Mom, we viewed our youngest brother’s inability to ever do what he was told as a sign that he was an overindulged little brat. Mom coddled him because he was her baby and made the lamest excuses ever for his bad behavior. She fawned all over him, and so had I in the beginning, but the older he got, the more annoying he became. He was a spaz and literally didn’t stop moving or talking until he passed out at the end of the day from exhaustion. More nights than not, he was found asleep on his bedroom floor with puzzle pieces or Lego bricks mashed into one side of his face. My parents often argued over whose turn it was to wake him, but in the end, it usually took both to get him into the bed after several minutes of gentle coaxing and sweet-talking on Mom’s part. “C’mon sweetie, get up and get in your bed.” He’d semi-waken, but act like a total space cadet. Once when Dad was steering him to his bed, Denny stopped in front of his toy box, pulled down his pants and started peeing all over his toys. Only when he was super tired or not feeling well did he go to sleep willingly, but it was never in his own bed. Instead, he’d crawl up on Mom or Dad’s lap or grab his ratty *Bert and Ernie* blanket and snuggle next to Gus on the oversized dog bed and fall asleep. Getting Denny to follow any kind of schedule was like pulling teeth for my parents especially once Denny started school. He began kindergarten the same year I entered middle school. I left in the morning long before my other two brothers even dreamed of getting out of bed, so it was just Denny and I in our bathroom. Denny played in the tub while I

did my hair and make-up for an hour or so in front of the mirror. Mom fixed breakfast and packed our lunches. Denny loved taking baths and played in the tepid bathwater until his fingers and toes resembled shriveled up prunes. I wouldn't admit it at the time, but he looked so cute splashing around in the tub surrounded by mountainous piles of frothy bubbles and bath toys. He looked like a miniature figurine in a swirling snow globe. Overall, Denny was a pretty happy-go-lucky kid, just as long as he was doing exactly what he wanted to do, which included eating when he was hungry and not at a fixed time. The night he went missing was no exception.

“He knows how important Sunday dinner is to me. It's the only time we ever eat in the dining room. Everything will be ice cold by the time he gets in and washes up and nobody will want to eat the fish then,” Mom complained as she eyeballed the platter of fried smelt and hand cut French-fries. The smelt were a gift from one of Dad's work associates and our freezer was full of the pint-sized fish, even though not even Dad really cared for them. The tiny fish were tolerable only fresh from the deep fryer when their golden-floured skins were still crispy. Soggy, cold smelt and smelt-flavored French fries—it never occurred to Mom to change the oil after frying the fish—were disgusting. Frustrated, Mom released a long deep sigh. “I guess it doesn't matter to Denny if dinner's ruined. He's not going to eat what I've fixed anyhow. If it was up to him, he'd eat a fried bologna and cheese sandwich for every meal.”

We waited at the table for Dad to return with his prodigal son. After several minutes, Dad came in from outside, but Denny wasn't with him.

“John, where’s Denny?” Mom demanded.

Dad drew a deep breath and said, “I think we need to make a few phone calls.”

Fear filled Mom’s eyes. “What? What are you saying?”

“Now stay calm, Linda. Everything is going to be okay. We’ll find him. It might just take a few calls to the neighbors.”

We called all the neighbors, even a few of his friends from school, but by 6:00 the consensus was that nobody had seen him since earlier in the day. Panicked, Mom phoned the police. It took nearly forty minutes for them to arrive, which really pissed Dad off. When they finally got to the house, their presence wasn’t very reassuring. They didn’t look at all how I’d imagined. One of the officers looked like a pimply-faced kid barely older than I, and the other one looked like a broken-down, senile old man. The older officer must have sensed Dad’s anger and quickly repeated the sentiments expressed by the dispatcher on the phone.

“Take it easy now. Most calls regarding missing children are false alarms. The child in question usually comes home within twenty-four hours or was never missing in the first place.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dad asked.

The younger officer spoke up. “When little kids get overly tired or upset about something they sometimes wander off to be alone. Often, they hunker down in small or enclosed spaces such as closets, old cardboard boxes or underneath beds. I guess they find it comforting. It starts off as some sort of game or means of escape, but then they get tired and fall asleep and then we get calls from panicky folks because they can’t

find their kid. He's probably tucked away somewhere in the house. We'll look around and find him."

The tiny hairs standing up on the back of my neck told me that the officer was wrong.

2
The Bathroom
Fall 1987

As I waited for the water to warm, I studied my reflection and unlike Narcissus, the ill-fated character from Greek mythology, I didn't fall in love with my own image. I looked as insignificant as I felt. With my pasty skin and purplish moons shadowing the thin skin beneath my eyes, I resembled a sad, droopy-faced basset hound. The vibrating pipes hidden within the walls and ceiling grumbled and growled and reminded me of my isolation. And though the communal bathroom of a college dorm isn't typically perceived as a perilous place, I'd watched one too many horror movies. Paranoia set in. I turned from the sink to eye the floors of the stalls. I nudged open each door to make certain there wasn't a deranged, masked killer standing on one of the toilet seats wielding an enormous knife and waiting to snuff out my miserable existence. They were empty.

The bathroom door squeaked open and in walked my fellow insomniac. Though we never actually conversed, it was implied by our silence that we were cool with one another. Reaching into the pocket of her robe, she pulled out her bejeweled pillbox and dumped its contents into her cupped hand. Only after counting six times, never five or seven, she popped two of the confetti colored pills into her mouth before returning the rest to their safe vessel. Like every other night, I was tempted to ask if I could bum one, but once again, I decided against it. That wasn't part of our unspoken arrangement. I hadn't slept well in weeks, and I

attributed my overwhelming anxiety to the debilitating insomnia that had hijacked my life.

After my satisfied companion exited the bathroom as inconspicuously as she entered, I made my way back to the sink and placed my hand under the running water. I embraced the comfort the warmth offered and concluded that my deserted surroundings weren't so bad. In less than five hours, I knew that the silent haven would be teeming with chattering girls readying themselves for their early morning classes. I took advantage of the solitude and tried to relax. The sound of the running water lulled me, and after a bit, I could feel my head inching slowly to my chest only to forcefully snap back to an upright position. It was as if, like a marionette, my head was attached to a wire that controlled my movement. The irksome buzz of a fluorescent light captured my attention and released me from my stupor. I wondered just how long I'd been standing in front of the sink like some drunkard perched on a barstool. It wasn't until I raised my hand to wipe the drool that had dripped from the corner of my mouth that I noticed the sticky medicine bottle attached to my other hand. Seeing it jarred my memory, and I remembered the reason behind my late-night visit to the bathroom in the first place. Desperate for anything that would knock me out and keep me asleep for at least a couple of hours, I resorted to cold medicine. Unable to remove the stupid cap, I tried running the bottle under the hot tap water for nearly a minute before taking a second crack at opening it. My hands were wet, which made it difficult to get a secure grip, so I used the bottom of my pajama top. Fortunately, the water had dissolved the hardened syrup from the encrusted neck and the cap twisted off with ease. I was quite certain

that I had ingested more than the prescribed amount on the dosing cup, but I didn't care. I was desperate for sleep. Blurred vision followed by a strange spaced-out sensation washed over my entire body like a tidal wave, and I braced myself for what would most likely come next by placing both hands on the vanity in front of me and shutting my eyes. My breathing became labored and I prayed that the imaginary elephant that had plopped down on the center of my chest would just wander back to the fictitious circus inside my head. A desire to flee consumed me, but I knew there was nowhere to go. Back to my dorm room was out of the question and traipsing about campus or down Grand River Avenue in my pajamas in the middle of the night wasn't a viable option either. The Michigan State Campus Police would certainly have picked me up. Angry with myself for not seeing it coming, I unlocked my sealed eyes and gave myself a firm talking to.

What you're experiencing is disassociation and nothing to be afraid of. Disassociation is just a big word used to explain the detached feeling you're experiencing from yourself and your immediate surroundings. It's your mind's way of trying to cope with the tremendous amount of stress that's been thrown at you. You're not losing your mind.

The self-talk helped, and surprisingly, I managed a smile despite how lousy I was feeling. The voice I heard, spewing wisdom as it related to the psychological phenomenon I was experiencing, was not my own. It belonged to only one person. Though I hadn't seen or talked to the woman responsible for saving my life for some time, I thought of her often. The commanding, no nonsense voice that was egging me on was that of my former psychologist, Ava Blume.

Never one to mince words, her unwavering certainty and unapologetic conviction made it impossible for me to dismiss her views, no matter how “out there” they sometimes sounded. I came to construe her opinions as fact and not a matter of personal credence. There was something about her haunting eyes and heavy accent that spoke to me. Maybe it was her refusal to conceal the blurred identification number on her left forearm that endeared her to me. She made no attempt to conceal her past by pretending that it didn’t happen. I suppose Ava had lost even more than my family had, but she’d somehow managed to flourish. When nobody else could say or do anything to put an end to my suffering, Ava had found a way to break through to me. She even understood the whole Will situation and didn’t pooh-pooh it or make it seem like our breaking up had been just some silly, teenage *Romeo and Juliet* thing. Under her care, I managed to crawl out from under my blanket of sadness.

I closed my eyes and took deep calming breaths. I wasn’t aware of any real medicinal qualities attributed to steam, but it felt nice on my skin, so I lowered my face even closer to the sink. Again, I heard Ava’s persuasive voice as plain as day.

You’re safe. Daisy, you’re not losing your mind. You’re not going to die.

There had been a time when I had wished I were dead. In that moment, I just wanted to find a way to silence my racing thoughts.

Water began pooling in the sink even though I hadn’t inserted the rubber drain stopper. Hair was most likely the culprit, strands of swirling hair, compliments of vain girls with tousled manes who stood in front of the sinks brushing their hair and scrubbing away traces

of sleep from their faces. I turned off the faucet and returned my focus to the Nyquil bottle. I replaced the cap. Guilt over helping myself to my roommate's cold medicine tapped me on the shoulder. Jane was a nice girl and I liked her. We had been well suited for one another because we kept to ourselves and didn't ask a lot of questions. I suspected that she too had experienced some tragedy or heartbreak so excruciating, that purging after every meal was the only way she felt solaced. I suspected that deciding what she ate, when she ate it, and when she rid herself of her undigested food might have been the only control she held in her own life. I could relate. Power over anything is therapeutic when you've lost everything. I didn't ask and she didn't tell...and vice versa. Our mutual silence was golden. We didn't speak of her eating disorder or of my brother or of my mom and her condition.

I wasn't certain if it was the medicine that made me feel all dozy, or if my body had finally thrown up the white flag, but suddenly I couldn't keep my eyes open. I made my way down the hallway and noticed light streaming out from under the closed door of my dorm room, and for a minute, I considered not going back in. I had assumed that Jane was out cold when I crept out, but I must've woken her.

"Hey," I announced, stepping into the room, "I'm so sorry for waking you." I forgot for a second that I was still holding her Nyquil bottle, but she didn't bat an eye as I clumsily attempted to hide it behind my back.

"Where were you?" she asked, stepping cautiously towards me with her hands awkwardly hanging by her side. She looked like one of those animal rescue workers approaching an injured animal and trying not to scare it off. I sensed that her strange behavior had nothing to do

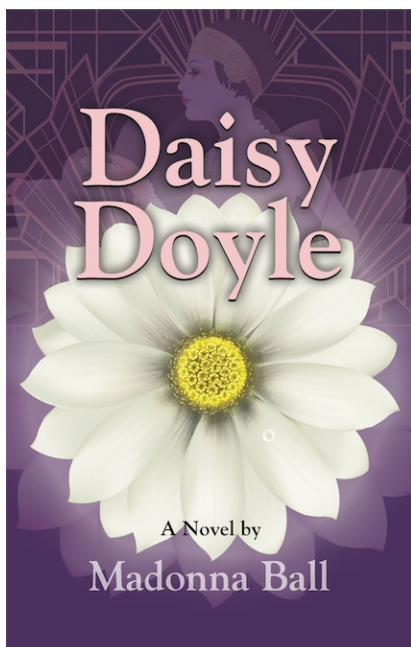
with me waking her. I'd pilfered her Nyquil and robbed her of sleep, yet she didn't appear angry. Empathy erupted from her expressive eyes and I could tell by her careful tone that she really wasn't interested in where I'd been. Her inquiry was nothing more than a segue for what she needed to say next, but she didn't wait for me to respond.

"Your dad called, Daisy. He needs you to call home right away."

I heard the urgency in her voice, but I didn't leap into action. Her eyes darted back and forth from the phone to me as if she were telepathically sending me a message to pick it up. Only when she began wringing her hands and blinking, as if she'd just walked from a dark theater out into the glaring sunlight of a parking lot, did I understand that if I didn't do something soon, she was going to start bawling. I took her hand and led her to the bottom bunk bed. We sat. In a motherly way, I patted her knee as if somehow the simple gesture would make everything okay. It soothed us both, but we remained silent. I was certain the call was about Mom. She was either dead or close to it and strangely, the morbid thought comforted me. For the first time in a long time, I felt that everything was as it was meant to be. Soon Mom was going to be reunited with her last born. I nodded and let go of Jane's hand. She walked over to the phone, picked it up and dialed the number as I rattled it off. Still holding the phone, she guided it to my ear. Dad answered right away, but did all the talking. I listened and nodded my head. When I finally opened my mouth to speak, I slurred. I couldn't tell if the words were really coming out in slow motion or if I was just imagining it. Dad must've sensed my incoherence and once again told me that I had to wait until morning to

drive home. I confirmed that I understood, and then handed the phone back to Jane. My eyelids felt like sinkers had been attached to them. I shimmied up the ladder and passed out in my bunk. Somewhere between sleep and dreaming, my thoughts shifted from Mom to my brother Denny. He was in the room with me, but he wasn't a little boy anymore. He was a baby. The sight of him triggered something in my brain and I felt the muscles in the corners of my mouth turning up to form a smile. My heart ached thinking about how much I loved him then. We were inseparable. I even took baths with him when he was very little. Naturally, Mom never let the two of us out of her sight while we were in the tub. The water had barely covered my outstretched legs, but that didn't prevent her from being a mother hen. "Keep a firm grip on him," she'd warn. "He's as slick as a baby seal." Again, and again she lectured me on the importance of never leaving an infant unattended in the bathtub. "Always use caution, especially when you're a momma someday. It takes but a second for a little baby to slip under the water. And then," she snapped her fingers to emphasize how quickly it could happen, "gone in an instant."

As Denny grew from a baby to a toddler to an obnoxious little kid, I grew less enamored with him. I selfishly cared only about my own life. I turned away from my brother for what felt like less than a minute, and when I turned back around, he was gone.



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