

The Year We Fell Apart

By Emily Martin

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In the tradition of Sarah Dessen, this powerful debut novel is a compelling portrait of a young girl coping with her mother's cancer as she figures out how to learn from—and fix—her past.

Few things come as naturally to Harper as epic mistakes. In the past year she was kicked off the swim team, earned a reputation as Carson High's easiest hook-up, and officially became the black sheep of her family. But her worst mistake was destroying her relationship with her best friend, Declan.

Now, after two semesters of silence, Declan is home from boarding school for the summer. Everything about him is different—he's taller, stronger…more handsome. Harper has changed, too, especially in the wake of her mom's cancer diagnosis.

While Declan wants nothing to do with Harper, he's still Declan, *her* Declan, and the only person she wants to talk to about what's really going on. But he's also the one person she's lost the right to seek comfort from.

As their mutual friends and shared histories draw them together again, Harper and Declan must decide which parts of their past are still salvageable, and which parts they'll have to let go of once and for all.

In this honest and affecting tale of friendship and first love, Emily Martin brings to vivid life the trials and struggles of high school and the ability to learn from past mistakes over the course of one steamy North Carolina summer.

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Editorial Review

Review
"The Year We Fell Apart is a poignant and aching tale of childhood love, loss, and the chances we get to try again. I was holding my breath page after page, hoping upon hope that Harper and Declan would find their way back into each other's hearts." (Jaye Robin Brown, author of NO PLACE TO FALL)

"A relatable story about choices and their consequences that will not disappoint fans of Sarah Dessen and Melissa Walker." (*School Library Journal*)

"Martin's insight into the teen psyche is spot-on." (*Kirkus*)

"A solid, nuanced love story." (*Booklist*)

"In a story about forgiveness and survival, debut author Martin takes on tough issues like the fragility of girls' reputations and the fear of potentially losing a parent." (*Publishers Weekly*)

This moving narrative is told through the past and present of a high-school junior. It explores motive and distance in relationships and the effects of sickness on a family. The subject matter should be inescapably miserable, but Martin seamlessly infuses humor, wit and nostalgia, bringing fun into an otherwise sad story. (*RT Magazine*)

About the Author
Emily Martin grew up in a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. She attended graduate school in North Carolina, where she fell in love with sweet potato pancakes, deep fried pickles, and the boy who later became her husband. Emily now lives and writes in Boston, Massachusetts. *The Year We Fell Apart* is her first novel. You can find Emily online at EmilyMartinWrites.com, or follow her on Twitter @ThatEmilyMartin.

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Year We Fell Apart

One

SOMETIMES I THINK THE WHITE oak tree was listening that night last August. That it knows about the promises we made to each other up in our tree house. That it knows I kept only half of mine.

I circle the oak's trunk—trying to make sense of the bright orange X spray-painted across it—and wait for Cory to catch up. The graffiti should come as a relief: Soon the tree will be gone, and another reminder of that night with Declan gone with it.

"Dude." Cory doubles over, resting his palms on his knees. "What is the matter with you?"

My fingertips trace the bark. "They're going to cut it down."

"What? Harper, you almost gave me a heart attack. Who jumps out of a moving vehicle?"

Please. We weren't even driving that fast. "The trees up by the road were marked and I couldn't tell how far into the forest it went. I needed to know if ours was tagged too."

"Hey, here's an idea. What if next time you wait for me to pull over before sprinting into the woods like an insane person?"

Light filters through the trees and paints the undergrowth a golden yellow. I've spent countless afternoons in this part of the forest, but today it feels different somehow. Like it's no longer a place of my own.

I close my eyes and listen for the spray of an aerosol can or some sign of the people responsible for marking the area, but all I hear is Cory mouth-breathing and the leaves shuddering on their limbs.

"You don't think it's our fault, do you?" I gaze back up at the tree house, the sanctuary that Cory, Declan, and I built six summers ago when we were eleven. We pooled our allowances for months to buy the supplies and spent most of the school year meticulously planning the design, being extra careful to use supports to take the stress off the tree. The floor still turned out crooked, and there's a hole the size of a quarter in the shingled roof. But it's ours.

Cory points to the matching X?'s on nearby trees, all the color of Doritos dust. "I don't think it's because of the tree house. They're probably clearing the area for development or something."

"Oh." My palm runs across one of the boards we nailed to the trunk for a makeshift ladder. The wood is splintered along the edge and I pick at it with my fingernail. I try to remember all the stuff we left behind—a deck of playing cards, maybe the binoculars Declan took from his parents' garage. And a blanket. A scratchy wool blanket, also borrowed from Declan's house. Everything neat and organized, waiting for us to come back. I want to climb up now and see if it's all still there, but I won't. Can't. Haven't since last summer. "I assumed it was sick."

Cory scrunches his nose to lift his glasses. He looks at the tree house, finally. Then back at me, wearing a smile that's a little too sympathetic. "We should get going. My mom wants me home for dinner."

Mine does too. But after last night's unsettling family sit-down, I may never eat dinner again.

"Listen, Harper . . ." Cory swats away a mosquito and shuffles his feet. The bed of soggy leaves squishes beneath him. "I'm really sorry . . . you know, about your mom."

My fingers freeze. I haven't told him yet, but I can't say I'm surprised he's already heard. Our moms are best friends, plus Bridget is a doctor.

A lump swells in my throat. I swallow, swallow again, then stuff my hands in my back pockets. "Thanks."

He knuckles his glasses farther up his nose. "You okay?"

My eyes travel up once more, landing on the window on the side of the tree house. A memory surfaces, of me and Declan and Cory armed with water guns, ready to defend our turf.

I shake it off and start walking in the direction of the road. It rained all yesterday, and with each step my sandals fling a few more specks of mud up the backs of my legs.

“Can you just drop me at Sadie’s?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer until his ancient silver Honda comes into view through the trees. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

“Yep. Thanks.”

We don’t talk on the way back through town. The air conditioner in Cory’s car has seen better days, so I lean out the open window and let the sticky breeze tangle my hair. Sunlight glints off the shop windows along Ninth Street and the windshields of cars we pass, and I have to make a visor with my hand to keep my eyes from watering.

When we stop in front of Sadie’s town house, I lick my thumb and rub some dirt off my thigh. Cory fidgets with the radio, finally settling on an alt-rock station. But his fingers keep on tapping, and now he’s sending me all these sidelong glances.

“Would you stop looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m a bird with a broken wing.”

He squeezes his eyes shut. “Better?”

I flick his shoulder and grab my purse off the floor just as Sadie throws her front door open. She struts over and bends down, draping her forearms across my window. She catches sight of my mud-stained legs and scowls. “It’s a good thing we have a few minutes before the guys get here.”

I should have cleaned up before coming over. Should be wearing mascara and the lacy black top Sadie bought me for my last birthday. Plus something closer to excitement on my face, because it’s the summer before senior year, and that’s how we planned it.

The car jolts a few inches forward. Sadie jumps back and Cory stifles a grin. “Sorry. Foot slipped.”

Sadie glares at him and I open my door before he can do any more damage. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

Cory lifts two fingers off the steering wheel in a lazy good-bye.

“We’re still on for the quarry tomorrow?” I ask over my shoulder.

“Yeah, sure.”

I step out onto the sidewalk and watch him drive away. Sadie pulls me inside and up to her room. She grabs a pack of makeup-removing wipes off her vanity and hands one over. “So. He asked about you again.”

The cloth darkens as I scrub the backs of my calves. “He who?”

“Kyle Marcell. He’s coming out tonight, with Will.”

“Kyle,” I repeat.

I try to focus on this new name, but my head is scattered all across Carson County. My dining room table, where my family is gathered without me. Underwater at the quarry, where I can scream without anyone hearing. And especially the tree house in the middle of the forest, where I still feel the ghost of the girl I used to be.

Sadie’s phone vibrates on her vanity. She checks the message and her lips creep into a smile.

She doesn’t notice I’m not smiling back.

* * *

A beat-up Ford Mustang stops at the curb. Will’s Mustang.

Kyle gets out and pulls the passenger’s seat forward. His angular face is partially obscured by expensive-looking sunglasses, and his narrow mouth is stretched into a smirk. I cast Sadie a quick glance and crawl into the cramped backseat. Kyle slides in after me.

He moved to Carson a year ago, and although we had two classes together last semester, we’ve exchanged only a handful of words. One time he borrowed a pen from me and never gave it back. And he plays lacrosse. This is the extent of what I know about Kyle Marcell.

He’s wearing a T-shirt with an outline of Michigan on it that says AMERICA’S HIGH FIVE.

I gesture to the logo. “Is that where you’re from originally?”

Kyle pulls at the bottom of the shirt and looks down, as if he forgot what he had on. “Oh. No.”

The conversation dies on the spot. Meanwhile, Sadie closes her door and the smell of pot mingled with Kyle’s acrid cologne gets trapped inside. And something cloying—a pineapple air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror. A headache brews behind my eyes and I start breathing through my mouth.

Kyle takes off the sunglasses and slouches down beside me, his eyes bloodshot and heavy-lidded. His knee falls out to the side and bumps against mine.

Will puts the car in gear. “What do you ladies feel like doing tonight?”

Somehow I don’t feel any less trapped here than at home. But every escape has its catch, and beggars can’t be choosers. So as Kyle’s arm slides across my bare shoulders, I don’t angle away or shrug him off. I sit perfectly still and stare out the window.

“Anything,” Sadie drawls in the voice guys always find irresistible. She turns her head toward Will. “We’re up for anything.”

Will’s parents are conveniently out of town until next Tuesday. We go to his house. He swipes a bottle of vodka from the liquor cabinet and Sadie contributes two cans of Boomerang Energy Enhancement.

Boomerang, for the record, tastes mildly of dish detergent and perfume. But Sadie is woefully addicted and

at the moment, I'm not overly picky.

I chase a large shot with a small sip of Boomerang. Sadie sidles up to me and uses my phone as a mirror while she reapplies her lip gloss. She dips down and presses her lips lightly onto mine, and I smooth the lip gloss she left behind across my mouth. And just like that, the boys are hooked.

This flirtation comes standard with Sadie, as forced as it might feel to me. Sadie is a lot of things I'm not: glamorous, brazen, and blond, for starters. Add her C-cup to the mix, and it's really not all that surprising she has the effect she does on guys.

Approximately ninety seconds later, Will grabs Sadie's hand and they disappear behind his bedroom door. I take another shot.

Will's kitchen is modern with stainless steel everything. A lighthouse calendar hangs on the wall above the light switch. Mom has the same one. I pour myself a third drink and walk over to the calendar, turn the page from May to June. Then I begin a self-guided tour of the house. I find a small, dimly lit den situated off the far side of the kitchen.

Leaning against the door frame to the den, I down the shot and grip the glass in my fist, then turn back to the kitchen, where Kyle is perched on a bar stool at the island. He's watching me but seems reluctant to come any closer. Probably because aside from that first failed inquiry into Kyle's past, I haven't uttered a single word since the guys picked us up an hour ago.

"Come here," I say, not even trying to sound alluring like Sadie.

He takes his time, like he could think of a dozen other places he'd rather be. Right.

Kyle stops in front of me and squares his shoulders. He's close to my height, maybe half an inch shorter. I can't recall whether he always has this drowsy look on his face, or if he's just stoned. I nod my head to the couch. "Sit."

"Bossy, aren't you?"

He hesitates a moment longer, then slips past me and sits on the black leather sofa. His eyebrows rise like he's waiting for his next order.

Setting the empty glass down on the coffee table, I edge closer. I guess Kyle is decent-looking, in a preppy-jock-gone-hipster kind of way. His jeans are a bit too tight for my taste, but why sweat the small stuff?

Kyle's sudden interest in hanging out with me probably has more to do with the rumors about what happened after-hours in the school pool this past spring than the fact that I loaned him a pen that one time. And I've been careful since the pool incident, determined not to give my classmates any more ammunition. The problem is, tonight I don't care.

Tonight I need a distraction. So without another word, I slide onto the couch and straddle Kyle. His too-cool-for-school act wears off pretty quickly after that.

He meets me halfway, his mouth moving slowly against mine at first, but building momentum as one hand grips my hair.

Kyle's not a bad kisser, per se. Just not my preferred style. Exhibit A: What is happening with his tongue? Maybe he's trying that thing where you spell out the alphabet? Except he seems to have only awkward letters like k and z in his arsenal. Or he doesn't know it's supposed to be in cursive?

He pushes against my right hip and turns so that he's half on top of me. I'm short of breath, and Kyle seems to interpret this as a good sign. His legs tangle with mine and his hand starts to roam up my side.

The air-conditioning kicks on. I listen to it blast through the vent in the corner. Then a dog barks outside. I've always wanted a dog, but Dad's allergic. And Mom would never be able to stand the mess and besides, pets just get old and die.

Probably from cancer.

No clock in the room. I sit up a little and move Kyle's hand away from my back pocket so I can grab my phone and check the time. He takes this as an invitation to go after my neck. Which, actually, I like a little better.

But it's later than I thought, well past the dinner I was supposed to be home for, and I decide it's time for me to round up Sadie.

"Gotta go." I spring off the couch.

Kyle freezes with one hand where my hip used to be. "Seriously?"

I knock on Will's door and call to Sadie that it's time to leave, then go wait for her in the kitchen.

Kyle walks in and leans against the counter, looking decidedly less enthusiastic than a moment ago. "What's the hurry?"

"I have a curfew."

He looks out the kitchen window. It's only just getting dark. He slides closer and hooks his finger through my belt loop. "Come on, it's early. I can drive you home in a little while."

I slip out of reach and call Sadie's name again. Kyle crosses his arms and slumps back against the refrigerator door.

Sadie wraps it up in record time, running her fingers through her hair as she walks into the kitchen. Will steps behind her and gropes her waist. She giggles and whines, which seems to be exactly what Will wants to hear.

"Can we go?" I ask.

Will shoots me a dirty look and pushes a fringe of sandy-blond hair off his forehead. The hair stays put, and I imagine his fingers come away greasy. Sadie rolls her eyes at him but follows me out the garage door.

Kyle takes the wheel on the way home, so I ride shotgun while Sadie keeps Will occupied in the backseat. My foot taps out every second that ticks by as we wind our way through town. I've got ten minutes. Then five. Then none and we're still four blocks away.

The car swings into my driveway and I glance over my shoulder. Mistake. I turn quickly back around because there is nothing in the backseat I want to see.

I push the door open.

“Hey.” Kyle catches my arm and pulls me into one last thin-lipped kiss I do not close my eyes for. He releases me with a smug smile. “I had a lot of fun tonight,” he says, which seems like the kind of thing guys say when they want to leave the option open for repeat performances.

I tuck my hair behind my ears and inch out of my seat. “Yeah. Good times.” I jump out and lean down. “Sadie? You coming in?”

She breaks away from Will’s face and smiles. “I’m good. Night, love.”

“Okay.” I hold on to the door a moment longer. I wish she would just come in. “Drive safe.”

On my way up to the porch, a jingle of keys a few yards to my right grabs my attention. I squint to make out who they belong to.

My feet stop.

He’s strolling down Cory’s driveway next door, twirling the key ring around his index finger. He looks taller. I mean, he’s always been tall, but definitely over six feet now. Stronger, too. He used to be so lanky. Now broad shoulders give way to muscular arms, and his hair is longer than he’s ever worn it—reaching all the way down to his chin. Everything is different. But it’s him.

My heart is helicopter-loud, pumping blood through me. But I’m rooted in place, watching the highlight reel of my childhood flash before my eyes.

He holds my gaze as we pass each other. Or rather, as he passes me, since I’m still standing here staring at him like a total freak.

“Night, Harper.” His voice is soft. Completely at odds with his rigid posture.

Will backs out of the driveway. I watch the car over my shoulder, and even in the darkness, I can see the front seat clearly from where I stand.

I wonder how much Declan saw.

When I turn back toward him, Declan’s gaze is fixed on the ground. He stays that way until he reaches his own car in the street.

“Good night,” I call, forcing my heavy limbs into motion.

I peek over my shoulder once more before going inside. Declan is already driving away.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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