

*TELL ME EVERYTHING. YOU CAN TRUST ME.*

# ALL OF THIS IS TRUE



**LYGIA DAY PEÑAFLO**

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IS ~~TRUE~~**

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## **NAKED TRUTH TV**

Nelson Anthony interviews Miri Tan and Penny Panzarella

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### **MIRI**

*So, tell me about Fatima Ro. There are a lot of people who are curious about her right now.*

All right. But I'm just going to say this outright because it's probably the one thing we still agree on—me, Soleil, and Penny. We were shallow before we met Fatima Ro. We were all about the scene. You know what I mean about the scene: the parties, the trinkets, the lifestyle. We hosted.

*Hosted?*

House parties at Penny's place. It feels like forever ago. Ugh. [shakes head] All those people, the throbbing music . . . handling all that money.

*What money?*

We collected a cover charge to fund subsequent parties.

*Very industrious.*

That's us. [sighs] We met on Orientation Day in seventh grade when we were grouped together for the Graham scavenger hunt. Winners become orientation leaders the following year. We won by splitting up and then finding the last clue together—the school seal on the roof.

*You're a good team.*

We were, yes . . . before this. Anyway, our parties were epic. The last one we hosted was casino night. We had game tables and chocolate poker chips. It won't be outdone for years.

*That's pretty impressive.*

[laughs] Oh, please. We thought taking selfies on the roulette table was the stuff of life. The reality was we were bored out of our skulls. You see, the basic human need for emotional intimacy can't be satisfied by a sushi station or a celebrity DJ. Fatima made us realize that. She changed everything for us. Even that phrase, “the stuff of life,” that's something I picked up from her.

I wouldn't have said that just now if it weren't for her; I probably would've said something more like "We thought taking selfies was so *Vogue*-worthy." But now, I'm saying "the stuff of life" because Fatima pretty much gave us a whole new language, a new way of thinking, of living. When she took us in, all of a sudden I realized . . . we *all* realized that we were starving to be part of something meaningful. Becoming friends with Fatima Ro—I mean, actually being part of her inner circle—was *it*.

*Were you a fan of her novel Undertow?*

Definitely. That's how this whole thing started. Absolutely. All of us were fans. Well, we girls were, anyway. Jonah was along for the company. But still, even he was fascinated by her. I read *Undertow* when it first came out. When I found out how young Fatima was—barely out of college—it made sense that I felt close to her writing. She got me. I love *Undertow* as if it's a living being, which is passion in its truest form. That's what separates a casual interest from a passion. I credit Fatima for my understanding of that.

You see, you can be in love with a thing the way you can be in love with a person. A thing can physically trigger the same chemical responses as another human can: oxytocin and vasopressin. Fatima taught me this. Her book proved it. But I just cringe at how the media is comparing it to other novels. Because

what you have to understand is that *Undertow* was never a Harry Potter phenomenon. I mean, nobody's wearing *Undertow* Halloween costumes. There's no *Undertow* Disney theme park. But that's what's so authentic about it. If you love *Undertow* it's because you get it, not because there's a Tom Hanks movie and a Happy Meal. This book has a much quieter, more thoughtful following. And to me, it feels more genuine to be part of something personal like that.

Think about it: if you know and love *Undertow* and you meet someone else who truly knows and loves *Undertow*, instantly she's your kind of person. [snaps] You cannot possibly feel that kind of connection with, say, a Hunger Games fan, because that fandom is just too big; it's too *commercial*. It's like, of *course* you like the Hunger Games. Everyone likes it, so big deal, right? But Fatima's following is simply more intimate. Her novel takes a certain, more concerning, er, uh, *discerning* reader. So to be a fan of *Undertow* is deeper . . . there's an understanding between people who love it. We share an appreciation for the depths of its messages and for its language. There's a *simpatico* between *Undertow* fans. It's one beating heart meeting another beating heart. [laughs] There I go, I'm sounding like her again. I know. But I'm grateful for that, for her words—the *simpatico* and the beating hearts. [laughs] Do you know why I agreed to speak with you, Nelson?

*You were impressed that Naked Truth is number forty-seven in the ratings?*

Hardly. It's because you were the only reporter who actually read both *Undertow* and *The Absolution of Brady Stevenson*. I asked every journalist who contacted me.

*Oh, really?*

I don't care about ratings or Emmys or how famous a journalist is or isn't.

*Thanks.*

I wanted to talk to someone who isn't out to persecute Fatima for her art and who would understand how incredibly lucky we were to connect with her. And you do get it, don't you?

*Yes. I really do. That's why I want you to tell the side of this story that no one else is telling, about the real Fatima Ro. No one knew her the way you did. This is your forum, Miri.*

[smiles] I can't tell you how much I appreciate that, Nelson. I knew I chose the right person. Oh, I'm sorry. I've been so rude. I should've offered you something to drink. May I get you something?

*No, thank you.*

Water? Iced tea? We have a SodaStream.

*I'm good, thanks.*

Suit yourself.

*Can you talk about how you met Fatima?*

Yes. You see, we had a plan when we met her. Soleil will never admit to this now, but we went to Fatima's signing at Book Revue with—I exaggerate you not—a premeditated *plan* to get close to her. It was our *goal* to get noticed by her. That's why I cannot and will not understand their outrage over the new book. Seriously, Soleil and Penny have become so ungrateful when what we wanted from the beginning was to be associated with her. It's sad, really, how bitter Soleil and Penny have grown. I should pity them, honestly. I feel sorry for people who don't believe in loyalty.

*They have reason to be upset, though. Fatima did base her new book on you girls and Jonah without even telling you. The book isn't flattering. You're not angry at Fatima at all?*

We befriended Fatima *because* she's a writer. You can't hug a lion

and then be surprised when he bites you.

*But Jonah was beaten into a coma in the Graham School parking lot because of what Fatima wrote.*

It wasn't her fault.

*The cops found a copy of Absolution at the crime scene. The perpetrators left it on Jonah's chest while he was fighting for his life.*

Dateline and Mario Lopez just love to play up that detail, don't they? It's sick the way attractive women are portrayed by the media. They're either victims or villains, because those make the sexiest headlines. [sighs] It's easy to win ratings by connecting the crime to a young, pretty writer, isn't it? Think for a second. What do they plaster on the screen every single time they cover this story? Fatima's face.

*You're right.*

Half the time they don't even show Jonah's. "Beautiful author who seduced teens into revealing their dirty secrets now responsible for boy's coma. Full story at eleven." That's cheap bait. That's not the truth.

*Then what is the truth?*

That there isn't anyone to blame. You read the book. Art doesn't harm. Art saves. [shakes head] You know, we shared hours upon hours of conversations with Fatima about creative freedom and artistic expression. Soleil documented every word from Fatima's mouth on her phone and her laptop, so I thought she respected all of that. Really, you couldn't stop Soleil from documenting. She was nothing less than obsessed. Her notes were all "Fatima this, Fatima that." Ask her.

*I'm not interviewing Soleil. She turned me down. Low ratings. Penny agreed only when I told her that you were in.*

Huh. [pauses] Then you should look into getting ahold of Soleil's journal. That would shed light on how desperate she was for Fatima's attention. Seriously, get her journal and her emails with Fatima, too.

*I made an offer, but she already sold them to New York City magazine.*

You're kidding. [picks up her phone]

*No. They're featuring them in a series of online articles starting today, actually. The public's been glued to stories about high school violence for a couple of years now. Fatima, whatever her involvement, has added a whole new element of interest.*

[browses on phone] Well. There it is, side by side with an article about Jonah and Fatima Ro. Oh look, a photo of Fatima. What did I tell you? And nice byline, Soleil! [laughs] What a hypocrite!

*How do you mean?*

Soleil hates Fatima for writing about her, but she's publishing journal entries about Fatima? She can't possibly defend that.

*I hear you.*

Screw her, right? If Soleil's publishing her side, I'm not holding back.

*You shouldn't. Don't let her control public opinion. Don't let her get the last word.*

No way in hell.

*So, talk to me. Tell me more. What happened at the book signing?*

[clears throat] The night of the book signing we took the back of the line on purpose; we strategized that we could talk with Fatima for longer if we were last. We might even get a chance to walk her out; we wanted pictures and to ask her to follow our Instagrams.

The back of the line was all Soleil's idea. She was the writer, as you well know. As the whole free world now knows. She was the one who wanted to wriggle her way into Fatima's life. No. That's not even the extent of it. Soleil didn't just want to be in Fatima's life. She wanted to *be* Fatima. Like I said, people always want to be in the front of the line. But there's a different strategy for everything. Well, I was terrified to meet her, to be honest. I'd built up that moment in my mind; it felt so once-in-a-lifetime. I didn't want to make a fool of myself. Have you ever met someone famous that you loved? Isn't it surreal? To suddenly, after dreaming about it for so long, see that person in front of you? I mean, flesh and blood and breathing and moving and talking and you can reach out and touch them if you wanted to?

*I saw Quentin Tarantino once.*

So then, you know.

*Yeah, I get it.*

Well, Fatima was poised and very striking. She's attractive, that's a fact. But in person it's more about her presence than her looks; she's so completely self-possessed that you really can't help but just . . . *stare* at her. Plus, what was so amazing was to look at her and know that *Undertow* came out of her brain. I don't even

know how to describe that. I kept thinking about how she had conceptualized this novel that I love; she had crafted it and created it out of her own head. And she was so petite. I don't know why, but that was surprising to me. I just kept marveling at her: How could all these words and thoughts come out of her? Am I sounding like an insane person? [laughs]

*Not at all. I couldn't get over how tall Tarantino was.*

Really?

*Six feet, easily.*

See? It's overwhelming when you see these people in a room with you.

*Tarantino was on the street. I passed him on my way to the subway.*

Great. Well, with Fatima I was so nervous; I had to keep going to the bathroom. We waited in that line for an hour. But when our turn came, Soleil, who'd orchestrated the entire outing, she shook my arm and told me to go up first, so I did. Someone had to take control of the situation. I had my copy of *Undertow* in my arms; I was hugging the thing like a blankie. [laughs] [pause] Excuse me. [blows nose] Allergies. [clears throat] I had the book against my chest like this, and I just talked with her.

*What did you talk about?*

It's funny because I can hardly remember what I said, but I memorized everything she said to me. I must've introduced myself, and I probably quoted my favorite line from *Undertow* and told her how it affected me. I'm sure I did, since I rehearsed it. I'm not embarrassed to admit that. Each of us rehearsed what we were going to say. We talked about it in the car. If they tell you otherwise, they're lying. Fatima looked straight at me and said, "I'm very pleased to meet you. You have such great energy about you, Miri." That's what she told me. I had great energy. Imagine if Tarantino told you that you had great energy?

*That'd be pretty cool.*

That's exactly how I felt about Fatima. And she addressed me by name just like that. She was intense. But strangely, at the same time, she *calmed* me. That was her aura. [sighs]

Then I gave her my book to sign, and I introduced Soleil and Penny and Jonah. I was lucky to be first. I think Fatima and I had a special bond because I was first. She considered me a leader, you know.

*Do you remember the conversation between Fatima and your friends?*

[laughs] Jonah was so funny about the whole thing because he hadn't even read *Undertow*, but you had to buy a copy to be in the line, so he bought one. He didn't have a thing to say to Fatima, so he rambled something utterly ridiculous about novelists being today's most valuable artists. He went on and on about technology—iPads versus television versus books—I don't know what he was babbling about. [laughs] [sighs] [silence]

*Is there something you'd like to add?*

[checks her phone]

*Miri?*

Sorry. I'm just anxious about Jonah.

*Any news?*

No. [sets phone down] Do you think they'll catch the guys that jumped him? They're probably all from his old school. It shouldn't be a huge mystery.

*They're working on it.*

They'd better. And then everyone can finally lay the blame where it belongs instead of on Fatima Ro.

*I'd be down for that. So, after Fatima signed your books . . .*

Right. [drinks from a water bottle] It was late. We were the last ones in the bookstore. The staff was stacking chairs, and the lights were off in the back. The register was already closed. Fatima gathered her bags, and the next thing we knew, we were actually, literally walking her out, just like we had fantasized. It was fantastic. I would've said fate, but Fatima doesn't believe in fate, and neither do I now. We carve our own paths.

*Does that go for Jonah? Do you believe he's in a coma because he carved his own path?*

Maybe I do. You probably think that makes me a terrible person.

*Not at all.*

I'm just being honest.

*I appreciate it.*

Anyway, Fatima asked us what school we went to. When we said the Graham School on the North Shore, she was thrilled because she'd just moved into the area—Old Westbury! Are you from around here?

Yes.

So you know it's only two towns from Graham. That's ten minutes from me, five minutes from Penny and Soleil. How did we not know that she'd moved in? We were *neighbors*. [shakes head] We couldn't believe it. We chatted about our school and the shops at Americana. And then, get this—I couldn't even make this up—Fatima said [clears throat], “If you're not busy Thursday night, you should come to the Witches Brew café. I'm giving a book talk at eight.”

*Awesome.*

We were *undone*. I could have died right there on that sidewalk. Cuddling my *Undertow*.

## Stranger Than Fiction

The True Story Behind the Controversial Novel

*The Absolution of Brady Stevenson*

SOLEIL JOHNSTON'S STORY, PART 1

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### *Journal Entry*

September 22, 2016

Witches Brew, Hempstead, Long Island

OMGGGG Fatima remembered us when we walked in!!! She waved and said, “Hello, readers from Graham. Glad you could make it.” I waved my signed *Undertow* at her. Why? Because I am officially the biggest dork in the universe!

This place is so cool. I love the whole bohemian/mismatched furniture vibe. I’m trying to act like I’ve been here a million times. As of now, I vow to become a regular. This is it. Our new spot: the Witches Brew. It’ll be like our “Central Perk.” (I know—must stop watching *Friends* reruns. What have I been doing with my life?)

I’ll have a regular order here and the server will know my name. I’ll have a favorite table: this one, in the sunroom at the back of

the café, this spot against the wall, at this little round table with mosaic tiles in a sunburst design.

Perfect crowd: 12 other people—some our age, others older. Very intimate, like seeing Ed Sheeran at Artists Den. (Gaah! Note to self: Must rewatch the concert video. I've missed you, Ed, my favorite ginger.) Here at the Witches Brew we are the truest of the true Fatima Ro fans. And the four of us have been—wait for it—*invited!*

Fatima: oversized white linen shirt over jean miniskirt, loosely laced Tretorn sneakers, sans socks. Smoky eye makeup. Pale cheeks. Bare lips. Messy hair.

Why can't I look that glam with half my makeup and bedhead? I'd look like an asylum escapee.

Fatima is ordering green tea. I've heard that it has magical properties.

Note: start drinking green tea.

Fatima welcomes the crowd, thanks us for coming. She comments on how cute the café is. She's never been here before either. Hey, maybe she'll become a regular and I'll become a regular and I'll see her here from time to time. We'll be on a

“Hey, how are you?” basis. How cool would that be?

Jonah (rude boy) is playing with his phone. I jab him with my umbrella.

*Undertow* book talk with Fatima Ro begins NOW:

First draft written over six months at a feverish pace after her mother passed away, very little sleep, very little to eat, limited communication, virtually unreachable other than by landline. The internet did not even exist, as far as she was concerned. Family and friends thought she was grieving, which she was, of course, but she was “not grieving in stillness” but “grieving with ferocity.”

“Grieving with ferocity.”

Her mother was her grounding force. Her mother was common sense and hard work anchored in reality. Without her, Fatima felt detached from Earth, set in a sudden spiral. As a child, Fatima had too much imagination, was too distractible, too restless. But it was always okay for her to be who she was because her mother kept her tethered to the ground by one toe. When her mother died, *Undertow* was a desperate way to hold on to her mother’s love, so that it wouldn’t float away forever.

The title, *Undertow*, existed in her consciousness even before she began writing, because she felt as if she were trapped inside one.

UNDERTOW: the underlying emotion

UNDERTOW: rip current, underlying current, force in opposition

Writing *Undertow* was the most difficult thing she has ever experienced because it was her grieving process. By writing the character of “Lara,” Fatima was able to drown in loss, feel loss in its deepest depths. She doesn’t know how she would’ve grieved without this place to do it.

Place = the mental state of being “Lara” and writing *Undertow*.

Revision was very much a swimming to the surface—a period of pushing and fighting to propel back into the world—emotionally, physically.

[Fatima is watching me as I’m taking notes. I’m now self-conscious about taking notes. I’m uncomfortably aware of my hands and my fingers and my shoulders and wrinkling my forehead the way bad actors do to fake that they are taking notes about *Undertow* when Fatima is watching.]

Losing her mother was transformative at 20 because it marked an inevitable transformation from child to adult. As a child she was so carefree, but when her mother died, she suddenly felt old. Fatima chose to write *Lara* as age 17 because that's how old Fatima was when her mother got sick.

Revision of her manuscript was torturous in a different way—it meant revisiting her loss again and again. In shedding the manuscript (from 120k to 80k) there was an emergence of her new self and seeing her own grief from a different perspective each time she reread it. But she fought against the change so furiously at times that revising *Undertow* became so painful she had to put it away for lengths at a time—weeks, and, for a spell or two, months.

In the end, she had this completed manuscript. She had printed it out and couldn't believe the weight of it, literally, the *weight* of its pages. She kept marveling at its weight in actual pounds; she would estimate it, compare it to other objects around the house:

These papers are heavier than this box of tissues.

These papers are lighter than this boot.

< carton of milk

> picture frame

> shampoo bottle

< Bible

Over and over, no matter where she went, she would think about the weight of the manuscript because she was amazed that her grief had literal, physical weight. Grief could be measured in pounds.

“Grief could be MEASURED IN POUNDS!”

She became obsessed with finding out exactly how many pounds.

[Am I really hearing all of this right now? How is this not being filmed and documented for future generations? Even Jonah is listening, balancing a spoon on two fingers. I think he’s *weighing*.]

Fatima didn’t have a scale at home. But one day she had a gyno appointment, so she brought the pages to the doctor’s office, and when she was waiting in her paper robe for the doctor, she pulled the manuscript out of her bag and weighed it on the scale. It was 3.8 lbs.

3.8 lbs.

[Fatima lingers on that thought. We all linger on it.]

[What is Jonah *weighing*?]

Knowing the weight of her grief in pounds, Fatima had a revelation that grief could be contained. It could be purged and then revised to make sense, and it could be *contained*.

[Fatima is looking at me again. Does she want me to stop typing? Is this too personal and I shouldn't be taking notes? Then why is she talking about it to a bunch of strangers?]

[I stopped writing for a few minutes. She stopped watching me. Now I'm writing again.]

She stood in her paper robe at the doctor's office, suddenly very proud of her manuscript. It was the first time she thought of it as a novel—an entity separate from herself—because it was outside of her body and her mind now, contained in this 3.8-lb. package. *Undertow* wasn't a "book" yet in her mind until that moment. Most days it was a beast she was attacking. Other days it was like a wounded animal she was trying to nurse back to health. But there, in the gyno office, it was all of a sudden a *novel*.

She was proud of this *thing* for the first time. But ironically, the person she wanted to call and tell about it?

Her mother.

[My heart is breaking, breaking. It's broken. I'm shattered. I'm sitting in Witches Brew in tiny little shattered mosaic pieces. I never thought I could love *Undertow* more than I already did.]

I. Was. Wrong.

Later . . . 11:53 p.m.

Home

Our plan worked again. We lingered behind. Guy-in-red-baseball-cap did the same, but he only thanked Fatima for the discussion and asked her to sign a book and then went on his merry way. I told Fatima that she made me see *Undertow* in a different light, and that there's so much more to it than I thought. But then she totally blindsided me, practically whacked me in the head with a brick. She said that she saw me taking copious notes during her talk and she ASKED TO READ THEM!

Complete and total panic! I had quoted her. I had mentioned the way she was staring at me. I had injected my thoughts into her book talk about the most difficult period of her life. I'd commented on her makeup. I wrote about her visit to the gyno! What was I thinking taking notes on that? Why would I even think that it was okay to document that? What else had I written? I couldn't even remember.

I asked Fatima if I could clean the notes up first; they were a jumbled mess. If I could just clean them up then I would email them to her later. But as that was coming out of my mouth, I knew she was going to say no. Why would she wait on notes from me? And why would she ever give me her email address?

“I’d really like to see them now,” she said. “I’m interested to see what you found most compelling, you were so intense over here, writing everything down. Are you a writer?”

“Not even. But I might want to be,” I said.

“Then I’d really like to read them, from a future writer’s perspective.”

What was I supposed to do? I didn’t have any choice but to show her. I felt like she’d caught me cheating on a test and was going to check my answers right in front of me. Miri and Penny were like, *Go ahead. Show her. What’s the big deal?* Plus, Fatima called me a *future writer*. So, I sat back down and opened my laptop and I showed her.

I kept thinking *Fatima Ro is sitting with me. Fatima Ro is reading my notes. She’s touching my keyboard. She saw my dumbass desktop picture of the movie The Bling Ring. I swear, I like the image as an actual photograph—meaning, its composition and color and use of*

*positive and negative space—not because it’s from The Bling Ring. Okay, I did like the movie on a so-bad-it’s-good level, but that doesn’t mean I’m a Bling Ring person.* I wanted to explain all of this to Fatima, but I was too frazzled.

“Thank you.” That was all Fatima said.

*Thank you?* Was she trying to kill me with awkward? “You’re welcome.”

She stood and stared at me.

I closed my laptop. Damn *Bling Ring*.

But then she shocked me again. “What are you guys doing right now?”

The only acceptable answer, of course, was “Absolutely nothing.”

“Well,” she said. “The new book I’m planning is set in a private school. I haven’t been to one since I graduated. I would love to see Graham. Will you take me there?”

WHAAAAT?????!!!



## PENNY

*Can you tell me about the night you took Fatima to Graham with Miri and Soleil?*

Uh-huh. [laughs] Oh, god. I ruined my lace-up flats that night. Nobody else had them yet! I wanted them to be my new look, like, instead of sneakers or flip-flops. I was trying to up my fashion game. And I thought we were going to sit in a café, not run around Graham at ten o'clock at night. Also, it rained a little that morning, so it was muddy, just my luck. [sigh] It was worth it, though, for Fatima. [pause] Or I thought it was, at the time.

*You don't think it was worth it now?*

My friend is in the hospital, so no, it wasn't.

*I'm very sorry about Jonah.*

[checks phone] I keep checking my texts for news, you know? I'm afraid that if I stop thinking about him, something bad will happen and I'll miss it.

*If anything happens, I'm sure someone will give you a call. Texting is no way to deliver big news.*

[puts phone down] Have you spoken to Miri yet?

Yes.

Does she even care about Jonah?

*She's terribly concerned.*

I doubt that.

*Why's that?*

'Cause she doesn't care about anyone but Fatima Ro. She only wants Jonah to get better so that Fatima will be off the hook.

*That's a pretty bold statement.*

[shrugs]

*Miri was that close with Fatima?*

For real? She was, like, Fatima's clone.

*What about the rest of you? Tell me more about that night.*

[deep breath] Yeah, well, the gate to the courtyard was open, so we went in. It was exciting, like we were breaking and entering, but just the entering. I'd never been at school when I wasn't supposed to. And I'd never hung out with anyone famous

before. Well, Soleil's older cousin was on *My Super Sweet 16*. But that's not Fatima Ro kind of famous. Anyways, we were sneaking into the courtyard, and Soleil and Jonah were doing the *Mission Impossible* song. [laughs] We felt, like, such a rush, you know? She was Fatima Ro!

*Go on.*

That night the stars were just, wow, they were so clear. I'll never forget it. We could see the layers, I mean, the stars at different depths. It was like when I went to the planetarium in elementary school, only real. Fatima got up on one of the tables, she lay right on top of it, and she said, "You have to do this! Come on. Do this! Pick a table." So, we each picked a table and lay on our backs. That reminded me of the planetarium, too. Have you been?

*No.*

The chairs recline all the way back.

*Oh.*

I picked our regular table where we have lunch on nice days. It was wild lying there at night, and with *her*. I mean, we'd sat at that very table and talked about Fatima Ro almost every day that year, and then all of sudden she was with us, lying on

the table and staring at the sky. [pause] It was, like, this crazy-perfect moment. Oh. Except for my shoes. [laughs] Did I tell you they were Stuart Weitzman?

*No.*

Yeah . . . [sigh] But then Fatima told us the funniest thing. She was at an Amtrak station a few months after she was published, and there was a song playing over the speakers by some old fart—Conway Twitty, she said. An old lady tapped Fatima on the shoulder and whispered that when she was sixteen she fell in love with a boy at the beach club and they made love in her cabana every night while their parents went dancing on the boardwalk, and even all those years later, every time she hears “It’s Only Make Believe” she has an orgasm. [laughs]

*[laughs] That’s a great story.*

We were dying laughing. I mean, who says that? And how weird was it that we got to hear it from Fatima Ro? Like, we heard Fatima Ro say *orgasm*.

*[laughs] That’s funny.*

Uh-huh. But that story changed Fatima’s life because that’s when she developed her theory of human connections.

*Human connections?*

It's the idea that we should, like, approach each other with open hearts and reveal our authentic selves through precious truths.

*What are precious truths?*

Um . . . like the old lady's cabana story. That woman was a complete stranger, right? But in a few seconds Fatima knew her better than friends she's had since she was a kid. So, Fatima believes that looking people in the eye and sharing intimate thoughts breaks barriers, makes people fall in love, and can, like, literally end wars.

*Huh.*

I know it sounds wacky, but it wasn't. It was Fatima Ro, and we were watching the stars, and it made more sense than anything, like, ever. She was talking about how you can know someone for years but never really *know* them.

*That's true.*

You *see*? Fatima said that it's true of neighbors and people who sit next to you in class because your names are alphabetical, but also your own family members. So, I started thinking about Soleil and Miri and me. I mean, we threw, like, the hottest

parties on Long Island, we went to Natsumi, we went to Ed Sheeran, we talked about *Undertow*, but I never felt like part of it, not really. I know what my friends thought of me.

*What do you mean?*

They thought I was basic, that I was only about clothes and guys and *Pretty Little Liars*. Since they were into their books and were in honors classes and taking AP Psychology, which was, like, the trendy class to take that only accepted a few juniors a semester, they acted all deep and intellectual. It bothered me—a lot, actually—because I had opinions and goals and things like they did.

*Sounds frustrating.*

[nods] But while I was listening to Fatima and looking at the sky, I realized something sort of big for me.

*What was that?*

It was *my* fault they thought I was an airhead. Like, how were they supposed to know my thoughts if I didn't tell them? I wasn't transparent the way Fatima said we should be. I wasn't living inside/out or offering precious truths. Like, what did I ever do besides style our party outfits and collect the fifty-dollar cover charge at the door?

*Fifty dollars? Holy crap!*

Well, they were super-exclusive parties. You wouldn't want just anyone walking into your house, would you?

*No, but still. I was thinking more like five bucks.*

Do you know how much it costs to rent blackjack tables?

*No.*

A lot.

*Apparently.*

[sighs] That night at Graham was the stuff of life. It was the best night since, well, ever. Way better than casino night. But I was complaining about my shoes. Yeah, I was upset about them, but I had revelations and stuff, too. I could've talked about that, but I didn't.

*Why didn't you?*

I wanted to. But then better things happened.

*Better things?*

Jonah started singing that old Coldplay song, you know, the one about stars? It was nice. He was happy. [pause]

*Jonah wasn't usually happy?*

Uh, um . . . I don't really want to talk about him.

*That's fine. It's just that you mentioned it.*

I just meant that we were all happy.

*All right. So what else happened?*

We shared being in the universe together.

*Hm.*

It wasn't weird.

*I didn't say it was weird.*

Fatima said that human connections don't have to come through precious truths. They can develop through sharing precious experiences, and we were having one by being in the universe together under the stars.

*I can see that.*

She had shared *Undertow* with us, and we were sharing the stars with her.

*I get it.*

Most kids start at the Graham School in ninth grade, right? But me and Soleil and Miri, we'd been there since seventh. I was sorta tired of it. I was dreading that junior year would be the same as every other. I don't love Graham the way Miri and Soleil love it. I'm not captain of anything like they are. School's not as easy for me. But that night in the courtyard I knew the year was going to be better; sharing the sky with Fatima Ro was the start of that 'cause I got to do something with my friends that wasn't shopping or Snapchat, you know? It felt, like . . . important.

*Cool.*

Yeah. And then you won't believe what Fatima said next. She said that she felt positive energy from each of us and that she'd moved to Long Island because she wanted to open her life to new friends and new perspectives. She sat up on her table and looked around at us and said, "I want you to be my people."

*Whoa.*

For real. [shakes head] Fatima Ro wanted us to be her people.

*That was something, huh?*

It was everything.

# THE ABSOLUTION OF BRADY STEVENSON

BY FATIMA RO

(excerpt)

When Brady Stevenson moved out of his childhood home, he took his old Coke-bottle glasses but left his wrestling trophies behind. The awards remained as they were for nearly a year—stuffed into the corner of Brady’s closet, along with fallen wire hangers, unmatched socks, and an unopened package of Fruit of the Looms that were a size too small, given to him by his nana, who always thought of him as two years younger than whatever age he happened to be.

The day of the move, as Brady lifted his boxes into the U-Haul, he wished for that—to be two years younger. He would do everything over again, both the everyday minutiae and the heartache; he would pick dirt from under his fingernails, sit through the same class lectures on Poe and the Earth’s layers and the divine right to rule, and he would even suffer again through the trauma of losing his neighborhood friend to leukemia. He’d relive it all so that he could un-live one night, the night that led to loading a U-Haul with almost everything he’d ever owned.

But Brady knew better than to wish for impossible things; it made him remember why he was wishing for a do-over in the

first place. He swore off remembering as he pulled the rope and slammed the U-Haul shut. This vow lasted as far as the corner of Yardly Drive, when he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the side mirror.

▶▶▶  
**MIRI**

*Do you remember when you first learned about Fatima's new book?*

Do I remember it? The sound of Soleil screaming over the phone is still ringing in my brain.

*She called you about it?*

Yes. She was on summer vacation with her cousins in California. Right away I knew it was something serious because it wasn't a text, it was a call, and she was three thousand miles away.

*Oh.*

So she calls me. I'm in the parking lot of Party City picking up decorations for my aunt's baby shower. I answer. Soleil's in the car with her cousins driving down Pacific Coast Highway, and she's screaming at the top of her voice. I swear to god she nearly shattered my eardrum. She was like, "Oh my god! Oh my god! Fatima stabbed me in the back! She betrayed me! She wrote all about me and Jonah in her new book! Oh my god!"

*Wow. How'd she find out?*

She and her cousins were listening to the radio in the car, and Fatima came on and gave an interview.

*Oh, man.*

Fatima said the book was due out next April, and that it was about a prep school kid who keeps a dark secret from his girlfriend.

*Soleil must've been out of control.*

I stood there holding a dozen pink and blue balloons, and I told her, "Don't lose your shit, Soleil. Fatima wouldn't do anything to hurt you. I'm sure it's fictionalized." But the calmer I was the more hysterical she got. She said, "I'm texting you a link! She screwed us over! That's why she left town. We shouldn't have trusted her. She got her story. Then she didn't need us anymore. And now she's publishing it and it's going to be evvverywhere!"

## Stranger Than Fiction

The True Story Behind the Controversial Novel

*The Absolution of Brady Stevenson*

SOLEIL JOHNSTON'S STORY, PART 1 (continued)

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SOLEIL

DOES THIS SOUND FICTIONALIZED

TO YOU, MIRI????!!

[publishersweekly.com/newbookdeals/july/4098899900](http://publishersweekly.com/newbookdeals/july/4098899900)

Senior Editor Yannik Olstad at HarperCollins has acquired the sophomore YA novel by *Undertow* author Fatima Ro. In *The Absolution of Brady Stevenson*, 17-year-old Brady transfers to an elite private school in order to escape his shameful past. When he unexpectedly falls for Morley Academy honor student Sunny Vaughn, Brady must decide whether or not to reveal his dark history.



## PENNY

I was out getting gelato with my friend Natalie Singh. I had hazelnut in a cup, and Natalie got black forest on a cone.

*Good memory.*

I remember everything from that moment. Soleil's name popped up on my phone. She was calling from vacation, and we basically only ever text, so I picked up. She was freaking out, saying Fatima was on the radio. "Fatima wrote about *us*! Her new book—it's all about *us*!" she was screaming. I was like, "Oh my god, cool! We're gonna be, like, famous!" But then Soleil said, "No, Penny. She wrote about me and Jonah. We were inside/out with her! We told her everything! Everything! Think about what you told her!" That's when I started to cry like a little kid with my ice cream. Natalie kept mouthing to me, "What happened? What happened?" I'll never forget that. And now I can never eat hazelnut gelato again. I really loved hazelnut gelato. [sighs] Fatima ruined everything.

*THE ABSOLUTION  
OF BRADY STEVENSON*

BY FATIMA RO

(excerpt)

*For my people.*

*You know who you are.*

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