

**WE
ARE
ALL
MADE
OF
MOLECULES**

● A NOVEL BY SUSIN NIELSEN ●

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49

Acknowledgements
Discussion Questions
Q&A with Susin Nielsen

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To Oskar -
boy, did Dad and I hit the jackpot

●

STEWART

I have always wanted a sister.

A brother, not so much. I like symmetry, and I always felt that a sister would create the perfect quadrangle or 'family square', with the X chromosomes forming two sides and the Ys forming the rest.

When I bugged my parents, they would say, 'Stewart, we already have the perfect child! How could we do any better than you?' It was hard to argue with their logic.

Then one day, when I had just turned ten, I overheard a private conversation between them. I was in my room building my birthday present, an enormous Lego spaceship, without using instructions, because I have very good spatial abilities. My mom and dad were downstairs, but I could hear their voices clearly through the heating vent.

'Leonard,' I heard my mom say, 'Stewart might finally get his wish.' I put down my Lego pieces and moved closer to the vent. 'I haven't had my period in two months. I'm chubbing up round the middle. I'm tired all the time ...'

'You think you're pregnant?' I heard my dad say.

'I do.'

I couldn't help myself. 'FINALLY!' I yelled through the vent. 'BEST BIRTHDAY PRESENT EVER!'

The next day, Mom made an appointment with her doctor.

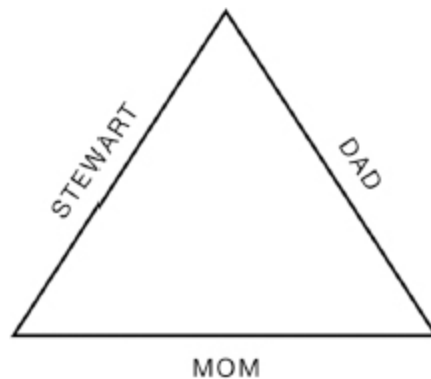
But it wasn't a baby growing inside her. It was cancer. It had started in her ovaries, and by the time they caught it, it had spread.

She died a year and three months later.

Now I'm thirteen, and I still miss her like crazy, because she was a quality human being. When I was seven, my dad and I bought her a mug for her birthday that read WORLD'S BEST MOM, and I actually believed there was only one mug like it on the planet, and that it had been made just for her.

I don't like to talk a lot about the year she was sick. Or the year after she died. My dad is also quality and he did his best, and I like to think that I am quality and so I did my best, too. But it was really hard because we were missing one-third of our family.

We had been like an equilateral triangle.



Mom was the base that held up the whole structure. When we lost her, the other two sides just collapsed in on each other.

We were very, very sad. My therapist, Dr Elizabeth Moscovich, told me early on in our sessions that a part of us will always be sad, and that we will have to learn to live with it. At first I thought she wasn't a very good therapist, because if she was good she should be able to cure me. But after a while I realised that the opposite was true: she's an excellent therapist, because she tells it like it is.

Dr Elizabeth Moscovich also says that just because you feel sad sometimes, it doesn't mean you can't also be happy, which at first might sound like a serious contradiction. But it's true. For instance, I can still be happy when Dad and I see a ball game at Nat Bailey Stadium. I can still be happy when I am kicking my best friend Alistair's butt at Stratego. And when Dad and I adopted Schrödinger the cat from the SPCA last year, I wasn't just happy; I was over the moon.

Of course, Schrödinger's not even close to a replacement for my mom. He can't have good conversations; he can't cook my favourite from-scratch chicken fingers; he can't give me back tickles or kiss my forehead at night. But he needs me, and I need him. He needs me to feed him and cuddle him and scoop his poops. I need him to talk to, even though he never talks back. And I need him to sleep by my head at night, because then I don't feel alone.

So when Dad started to date Caroline Anderson a year after Mom died, I mostly understood. Caroline is Dad's Schrödinger. He needs her and she needs him. It doesn't mean he isn't still sad sometimes, because he is. But it means he can put the sad on hold for bigger periods of time, and this is a good thing. For a long time he was Sad Dad twenty-four-seven, and I was Sad Stewart twenty-four-seven, and together we were Sad Squared, and it was just a big black hole of sadness.

Caroline and my dad have worked together in the newsroom for almost ten years. They'd always got along, but it wasn't until they were both single that they started to notice each other *in that way*. Caroline's husband left around the time my mom died. She is a *divorcée*. I'd met her a few times when Mom was still alive, at Dad's work parties. And of course I see her on TV all the time. I like her, and she likes me. Even better, she liked my mom, and I know the feeling was mutual.

But most important of all, she loves my dad. I can see it in the way she looks at him all googly-eyed, and he looks at her the same way. Sometimes it makes my stomach hurt when I think about my mom, and how, if things had been different, *she* would be getting Dad's googly-eyes, but as Dr Elizabeth Moscovich has pointed out, I can't live in the past. Caroline makes my dad happy, and this is a good thing.

Best of all, she has a daughter. Her name is Ashley, and she is one year older than me. I have only met Ashley a few times. She is very pretty, but I think she is also possibly hard of hearing, because when I try to talk to her, she either walks away or turns up the volume on the TV really loud.

Maybe she's just shy.

And now we are moving in with them. Dad and Caroline broke the news last month. Dad and I and Schrödinger are leaving our house in North Vancouver and moving into Caroline and Ashley's house in Vancouver, on Twenty-Second between Cambie and Main. They told Ashley and me separately, so I don't know her reaction, but I am 89.9 per cent happy with the news.

'Eighty-nine point nine?' Dr Elizabeth Moscovich asked me at our final session last week. 'What about the other ten point one per cent?'

I confessed to her that that part is made up of less positive emotions. We made a list, and on the list were words like *anxiety* and *guilt*. Dr Elizabeth Moscovich told me this was perfectly normal. After all, we're leaving the house I spent my entire life in, the one Mom and Dad bought together a year before I was born. Now Dad has sold the house to a young couple with a baby, which means there is no turning back. We're bringing a lot of stuff with us, but we can't bring the mosaic stepping-stones my mom made that line the path in the back yard, or the flowers she planted, or her molecules, which I know still float through

the air, because why else can I feel her presence *all the time*? It is what less scientifically minded people would call a 'vibe', and our house, even this long after her death, is still full to bursting with Mom's vibe.

I worry a little bit about that. Where will her vibe go when we are gone? Will it find its way to our new home, like those animals that walked hundreds of miles to find their owners in *The Incredible Journey*? Or will it get lost on the way?

And also I am anxious because I don't know how Ashley feels about this merger of our family and hers. I don't expect her to be 89.9 per cent excited. I just hope she's at least 65 per cent excited. I can work with 65 per cent.

This is not how I wanted my wish to come true. This is not how I would have chosen to become a quadrangle. I would far, far rather still be a triangle if it meant that my mom was alive. But since that is a scientific impossibility, I am trying to look on the bright side.

I have always wanted a sister.

And I'm about to get one.

ASHLEY

My family is FUBAR.

That's the word my part-time friend Claudia used to describe her own family at school yesterday. I said I didn't have a clue what that meant, and she said, 'That makes sense, cos you're clueless.' Then she told me it's a military term. It's short for 'Effed Up Beyond All Recognition', except in the military, they don't say 'effed'.

See, Claudia has been in a so-called blended family for a few years now. She has a wicked stepfather and two snotty-nosed little half-sisters. So she totally gets the insanity that is about to happen to me.

I am only just-turned-fourteen, so Claudia says I have to wait another two years before I can hire a lawyer and get unconstipated. Wait. That's not right. I keep having to look it up. I mean *emancipated*. According to Claudia, it means you can divorce your parents and be free of them for good. Claudia wants to divorce her family, too. So even though she's a little chunky round the middle and doesn't wash her hair enough and is not even close to my social status, she does kind of get what I'm going through.

What really bugs me, though, is that my family wasn't always FUBAR. For twelve and a half years it was perfect. My dad works at an advertising agency, and my mom

anchors the local evening news. They are both very good-looking for old people, and I'm not being arrogant but just stating a fact when I say I inherited the best from both of them. We have an almost-new silver Volvo station wagon, and until a year and a half ago we took a trip to Maui every March break. We have a big modern house with another, miniature house in the back yard that's called a laneway home. Laneway homes are all the rage in Vancouver. They're built beside the alleys that run behind our houses, where a garage would normally go. We had ours built just before my world came crashing down around my feet. My parents thought that maybe they would rent it out for a few years, then I could live in it if I went to university in Vancouver, even though my ninth-grade counsellor says I need to 'face the cold, hard truth' because a C average will not get me into university.

Again, I am just stating a fact when I say that my friends were jealous of me and my life. And I couldn't blame them in the slightest. I would have been jealous of my life, too, if it hadn't already been mine.

Then, a year and a half ago, my dad sat my mom down and said the two words that tore our family to shreds.

'I'm gay.'

None of my friends know that part. Not even my best friend, Lauren. I just told her my parents split because they were fighting all the time.

Cos, see, there are Certain People who have this idea that I'm not a nice person. This is totally untrue and false and a lie. But Certain People think I'm a Snot (at least, that's what some jerk wrote on my locker in eighth grade). Claudia told me Certain People were actually pleased when my parents split up, like I somehow deserved a little pain. I guess it is somewhat partially halfway true that I have made a few comments over the years about other people's families (like, I might have told Violet Gustafson her mother was a skank before Violet broke my nose, which has

fortunately healed so well you can hardly notice), but my comments were misunderstood. When I said that to Violet, I meant it more as an observation than an insult. But Violet and her friend Phoebe didn't see it that way, so now I call them Violent and Feeble behind their backs, which I personally think is quite clever.

So I didn't get an ounce of sympathy from anyone when my parents split. In fact, I got a lot of smirks from Certain People when they found out. Even Lauren's sympathy seemed awfully phony, which I admit really hurt. That's why there is no way I'm telling anyone the gay part. Not because Certain People are gayists (although I'm sure some of them are), but because they would *love* the fact that my so-called perfect life was built on one gigantic lie.

I guess, if I'm totally one hundred per cent honest, I'm a bit gayist, too. I didn't think I was. I mean, I love Geoffrey, my mom's hair-and-makeup guy in the newsroom, and he is gay. And I see gay people on my favourite TV shows, and they seem cheerful and snarky and fun to be around.

But it's different when your dad suddenly announces he *is* one. There is nothing cheerful or fun about that. It opens up a lot of questions. Questions that I don't really want to know the answers to. Questions like: *Did you ever really love us? Or was that a lie, too?*

My dad told my mom he was gay on a Tuesday. By Saturday he had moved out.

Not to an apartment downtown. Not to Siberia, as I'd suggested.

Nope. He moved approximately six feet away from us, into our laneway house.

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

My newly gay dad couldn't afford to get his own place unless he and Mom sold the house, which they both agreed would be too hard on me. So their genius solution: let him

live in our back yard. Like, if I look out *our* kitchen window, I look into *his* kitchen window.

At first I figured it was just temporary. I figured Mom and I would bond over our hatred of Dad, and pretty soon our combined anger would force him to move out, and we would never have to see him again.

No such luck. Not only is he still living there, but Mom totally betrayed me. First, she just couldn't stay mad at Dad. They are actually 'working on being friends' now!!!! Second, she started dating her producer, Leonard Inkster, a year ago, which I am pretty sure breaks all kinds of workplace rules. And third - as if tearing out my heart and smashing it to the ground repeatedly wasn't enough - my mom has asked Leonard to move in with us. And Leonard doesn't come alone. He comes with his midget-egghead-freakazoid of a son.

Oh my God. Their moving van is pulling up right now.

I hate my mom.

I hate my dad.

I hate Leonard.

I hate his kid.

I hate my life.

Two more years till I can get unconstipated.

STEWART

My dad and I moved in all our things in just under two hours. We were fast because we'd already put a lot of stuff into a storage locker last week. I wasn't very happy about that, but Dad reminded me that Caroline already has a house full of furniture, and we can't have two of everything. This makes a lot of sense on a practical level, and Dad and I are both very practical. But it is an interesting biological conundrum when one organ - in this case, my brain - tells me one thing, and another organ - in this case, my heart - tells me another.

So I cannot tell a lie: it didn't feel good, filling up that locker with the things that represented our entire life with Mom. Like the Formica kitchen table with gold sparkles where the three of us sat for most of our meals. Or the couch with the red-and-yellow flowers where Mom lay when she had bad days, trying to knit if she had the energy. Or the coffee table with circular mug stains all over it because Mom didn't believe in coasters. I got a little choked up when Dad closed the door, even though he promised me we could visit any time we want.

I cheered myself up with the thought that we still had a van full of belongings. Some of it was stuff Dad and I had agreed on, like the *Mother and Child* painting my mom had

done in one of her art classes. And Dad also let me pick three things just for me. I chose (1) the afghan blankets she knitted, one for my room and one for the back of our couch, (2) the big, overstuffed green-and-purple chair where she'd read me all the Harry Potter books, and (3) her collection of ceramic figurines.

Caroline was outside to greet us when we pulled up. She wore jeans and a sweatshirt, and her long red hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She is very pretty and also very nice. 'Welcome!' she said, and she gave me a big hug and a kiss, even before she hugged and kissed my dad. 'We're so happy you're here.'

Because she had used the word *we*, I asked, 'Where's Ashley?'

Caroline hesitated. 'She's in her room. She has a lot of studying to do.' I had heard from my dad that Ashley doesn't do well in school, so this made sense.

'All right, everyone, time for some heavy lifting,' Dad said. He posed like a bodybuilder and grunted, which made Caroline laugh.

The three of us unloaded the van. I brought Schrödinger up to my new room, which used to be the guest bedroom. It's big but bland; the walls are beige, whereas at home - I mean, the place where I used to live until today - Mom and I had painted my walls bright blue. I let Schrödinger out of his carry cage and put him into the en suite bathroom so he wouldn't escape while we carried everything in, or pee on the carpet.

I confess it gave me quite a thrill to realise I would have my own bathroom. At home - I mean, the place where I used to live until today - we only had one bathroom. This house has *five*! One for Caroline and Dad, one for Ashley, one for me, one on the main floor that's just a toilet and a sink, and another full one in the basement! Every single human member of this household could go at the same time and there would still be a bathroom left over.

When I closed the door behind Schrödinger, I spotted an enormous box of Purdy's Chocolates perched on the window ledge. Purdy's are the best. There was a note attached that said, *We are so happy that you are joining our family. Love, Caroline and Ashley.* I got a little choked up.

I ate six chocolates before leaving my new room. On the way to the stairs, I passed Ashley's room, which is at the other end of the hall. Her door was closed. I thought about knocking to thank her for the chocolates, and maybe even offer her one, but I wasn't sure if I should interrupt her studying. So I didn't.

The Anderson house is very different from the Inkster house, and not just because it has so many toilets. First of all, it is much more modern. Our house - I mean, the house where I lived until today - was old. It was built in the 1940s, and it was a bungalow, and the rooms were small and the floors creaked. This house is very big and very clean and very clutter-free. I would call their style *minimalist*, whereas our house was *maximalist*. We had stuff everywhere! There were books stacked on tables and on the floor, and at least one of my school projects was always spread out on the dining-room table. We must have had about twenty houseplants. Paintings and family photos covered the walls. Mom's ceramic figurines lined the mantelpiece over the fireplace and every windowsill on the main floor. Plus there was her knitting, her drawing pencils, her notepads, her long-forgotten half-full mugs of tea, her magazines, Dad's newspapers and reading glasses, his dirty socks and mine, plus my chemistry set and comics.

So I figure we're doing them a favour, adding some of our stuff to the mix; it will help make their house look more lived-in. For example, we placed the big green-and-purple armchair between their slender brown leather couch and two matching brown leather club chairs in the family room. It was a tight squeeze, but it livened up the space

immediately, if I do say so myself. I threw one of my mom's afghans on the back of their couch, which added a much-needed splash of colour. And I see at least five good spots to hang Mom's painting, and plenty of places to display her ceramic figurines.

Once, when I was out by the van, I caught a glimpse of Ashley. She was standing at her bedroom window, gazing down at us. I waved. She didn't wave back.

Maybe she isn't just hard of hearing. Maybe she's hard of seeing, too.

ASHLEY

Mom forced me to come downstairs for supper. I was in my bedroom, sketching an idea for a new outfit instead of doing maths, when she knocked. I didn't answer, so she spoke through the door. 'Ashley, I want you to join us at the table.'

'I'm busy.'

I could hear her sigh. 'I expect you to eat with us. And I expect you to be pleasant.'

'No on both counts.'

'Ashley, you're pushing your luck.'

'I never wanted them to move here in the first place. I'm a part of this family, too, and my vote didn't even count.'

Then Mom opened my door because there is no lock on it even though I have asked for one. I have *no privacy whatsoever*. 'When you buy your own house and start paying the mortgage on that house, you will have a vote,' she said. 'Until then, you will stop whining and do as you're told.'

Sometimes my mother is like the queen in *Snow White* - beautiful but oh-so-cold.

I crossed my arms over my chest. 'I'm not coming down.'

'Fine,' she said in her fake-reasonable voice. 'But if you don't, you will not get your allowance this week.'

So unfair! I am *this close* to being able to afford an amazing skirt I saw at H&M, and she knows it. 'You are so *evil*,' I said as I stood up to follow her.

'Yup. I'm right up there with Idi Amin and Slobodan Milošević.'

I have no idea who she was talking about. Probably a couple of guys from work.

When I got downstairs, the freakazoid was already at the table. I sat down across from him and gave him the once-over in a very obvious way.

He is a seriously funny-looking kid. He has a mass of thick, unruly brown hair that is neither straight nor curly. It's cut short, which only accentuates his sticky-outy ears. But even though it's short, there's still so much of it, like he has a furry rodent perched on top of his head. And speaking of short: he is. I wanted to offer him a booster seat.

'Hi, Ashley,' he said as I sat down.

'Hi, Spewart.'

'Actually, it's Stewart.' He shouted this, like I was deaf or something.

Mom came in from the kitchen, carrying a salad. She was followed by Leonard, who was carrying our favourite pasta bowl, the one with tomatoes painted all over it.

It twisted my insides, seeing that bowl in his hands. Up until now, every single thing in this house had belonged to me and my mom. But from this day forward, it would belong to Leonard and his Mini-Me, too.

It wouldn't be so bad if I could figure out what my mom saw in Leonard, but I honestly one hundred per cent truthfully could not. My mom is gorgeous, even if she has crow's-feet around her eyes that get deeper with every passing year and even if she needs serious help with her wardrobe. She is *statuesque*, which is a fancy word I learned in my fashion magazines for 'tall'. She has long red

hair and, so far, no grey. She has high cheekbones and big green eyes. No wonder she was promoted to news anchor from reporter all those years ago; sure, she's a serious journalist, but she's also 'easy on the eye', as her hair-and-makeup guy, Geoffrey, likes to say.

Leonard, on the other hand, is just a grown-up version of his weird-looking son, with the same ears and the same hair, only better styled. And while I wouldn't call him short, he isn't tall like my dad - maybe five feet ten, tops, which is practically the same as my mom. He is also scrawny; the guy has clearly never lifted weights in his life. My dad, on the other hand, works out all the time, so he has a lot of muscular definition, and his clothes fit him perfectly. And he's always been a very sharp dresser, whereas I'm willing to bet Leonard shops in one midrange store and buys two of everything he likes in different colours. He obviously doesn't put much thought into it. Also he wears trousers that show off his MPAL (Male Pattern Ass Loss, a tragic and devastating syndrome common in ageing men that I read about in one of my magazines).

I asked my mom bluntly last week what she saw in him. Her face lit up and she said, 'He's so smart. And so kind. And he makes me laugh like no one else.'

'So? Don't you want to be attracted to him, too?'

'Oh, I am. He's gorgeous. I could get lost in those big brown eyes. And his smile ... and those lips ...' I didn't like where this was going and raised my hand to stop her, but not before she said, 'I find him incredibly sexy.'

'Ewww! Enough!' I shouted.

Clearly my mother is delusional. Leonard is a huge step down. In fact, as far as I can tell, the only thing he has over my dad is that he is *not gay* - which I guess is a biggie, but still. There are a lot of *not gay* men out there, so why on earth did my mom go for this one?

'Isn't this nice?' Leonard said as he sat down across from my mom. His upper lip looked a bit moist, and I realised he