

WHAT IF THE HOKEY POKEY REALLY IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT?

A Novel for Young Adults

By

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Today is the first day of the ^{rest} *wreck* of your life.

Dear Diary,

I have composed a Top Ten List of Favorite Ways to Die:

10) Blowing an air bubble into a vein or artery, I forget which. Mr. Hefner, my science teacher, says this method is clean and effective.

9) Falling asleep in a snow bank (ideal, sure, but not very colorful).

8) Throwing myself off the top of a moving Ferris wheel at night, after taking a huge dose of Ibuprofen.

7) Eating myself to death—Dutch letters, double cheese pizzas, and Ben and Jerry's Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough ice cream, washed down with DQ piña colada blizzards. I wonder if you can actually puncture the stomach organ if it fills up too fast. I'd hate to think the death-part comes from your colon exploding—*eeeuughh*.

6) Going on *Wheel of Fortune* and when it's my turn to guess, screaming out obscenities until the network censors have to take me out with high-powered rifles.

5) Breaking into a humane society and releasing all the animals, then throwing myself into a meat locker and freezing to death. My suicide note will claim a victory for animal rights.

4) Going on a hunger strike and dedicating it to all my fat sisters in the women's movement.

3) In James Bell's bed. With him or without him, it doesn't matter.

2) Diving into the Caribbean and being carried off by an adventurous and friendly dolphin, one who doesn't know the limitations of human beings (like how long they can stay underwater without coming up for air).

1) Laughing. You can't tell me there hasn't been at least one person in the world who hasn't laughed so hard they've cashed in from a heart attack or choking. This would be the #1, El Supremo way to go. Clare and I have often come close to dying from laughter, so I would probably have to enlist her help. Ethical problems might arise.



ENTHUSIASM!

Life's E-Ticket:

ENNUI. (Look it up, you won't be disappointed.)

Dear Diary,

Clare told me she would never participate in my suicide, even if it *was* a mercy-killing. It goes against all her principles, especially the Catholic ones. Wouldn't you know.

Speaking of dying, you, dear Diary, were the only thing worth shelling out for at our dead neighbor's estate sale. Considering all the hours I logged with Isabelle, you should have been free.

Dear dead Isabelle. I learned the meaning of "irony" at her bony knees. Isabelle's house reeked of Clorox, but the lemon drops she offered me were always coated in dust and cat hair. Pretended to be kind, but managed to be vicious. For example, she once asked ME "Have you ever *really* met a fat person who's happy?" Knowing how close she was to packing it in, I chose not to take it personally. (Anyway, I'm not THAT fat.)

Isabelle had a couple of other abnormalities. For instance, she kept a human skull—said to be her husband's—in a canning jar in her garage. I never got to see it, which just about kills me because I knew her better than any of the stinking neighborHOODs who did see it. Jonah G. had a key to her garage because he shoveled her walks, but I refused to pay him a dollar to see MY friend's dead husband's skull in a jar. I will always be bitter about this.

Isabelle kept track of every single book she ever read in her life. The Record, she called it. I asked her what the point was, and she said, "Why, so I don't forget them, of course," sounding annoyed. She would sometimes set out a saucer of dusty lemon drops for me to suck on while she read off the names of books she'd read. "*Rebecca, by Daphne du Maurier, Peyton Place, by Grace Metalious...*" It reminded me of the Oscars, for some reason.

But Isabelle is dead, and Diary, you too were headed for the compost pile. Fortunately, I spotted you lying by a ratty pile of *National Enquirers*. Writing this will help me retain my cursive hand. Naturally, I can't write squat in a digital diary for fear my mom would download it. Hiding you from her will be my life's biggest challenge so far.

Wouldn't you know, my mother has locked herself out again. She's been screaming at me for ten minutes to let her in.

Later wid 'ya.



Focus on YOU today.

Dear Diary,

Okay, if you insist. My name is Nora Van Zan Bergen, half-Irish, half-Dutch. My Irish grandmother hates my last name, and my Dutch grandmother hates my first name, not realizing it is a famous Irish writer's wife's name (according to my pretentious mother).

I'm no longer suicidal about it, but it still reminds me of some dumpy-looking potato-picker from North Dakota. *Nora from North Dakota*—now there's a sexy title for your next book. Would Taylor Swift be as famous if she had a name like Nora Van Zan Bergen? Doubts collide and burst in my brain.

It doesn't matter anyway. For privacy's sake, I will hereafter go by the name of Piccolo Poggioli. The last name comes from some reporter on NPR who signs off in this breathless, sing-songy voice like so—"This is SYL-VEE-AH PO-joe-lee, reporting from Rome."

As for the first name, I used to play one of those tiny instruments, but quit because a) I sucked, and b) I couldn't shake the feeling that it made me look like Porky Pig.

I am still a virgin, which is not so unusual if you've never had a boyfriend. Most of my passion was spent on horses until I got too fat and they became hostile.

But perhaps the most significant thing about me—hope you're sitting down—is that I DO NOT HAVE A CELL PHONE. My mother—a wannabe Amish hippie, tightwad, freak of nature—does not “believe” in them. She thinks they destroy your concentration and imagination. I told her I was willing to risk both, but no dice.

I'm out of tears on this last one.



Enthusiasm is the elixir of life.

Dear Diary,

Again with the enthusiasm—BORing. Looked up “elixir” and was not impressed.

Rudy's turn. My father grew up in a teensy boring Dutch town in Iowa called Pella. He describes it as “a numbing vista of tulip beds and fake windmills.” We used to go to the Tulip Festival every year until my mom said she couldn't hack the excitement any longer.

I wish they wouldn't always mock it because I love to go there. My grandparents may be boring, but they are sweet (and clean). Better still, the Jaarsma Bakery makes the most fantastic Dutch letters—flaky loops filled with almond paste. Once I had a dream in which my hair was nothing but long strands of Dutch letters, curling up in stiff, sugarcoated S's, like some Scandinavian housewife on steroids.



Look in the mirror and who do you see? A beautiful, talented human being.

Dear Diary,

I see someone who resembles a giant wad of flesh-colored bubble wrap.

On to my mother, who is only marginally better. She is Chicago Irish, something she's always held over my dad. Yes, they have famous hot dogs, museums, gangs and housing projects, but does that make her culturally superior? I think not.

Once she told me, “Nora, you are Irish, it's obvious,” which I took to be a reference to my full cheeks. “You don't have to claim your Dutch bloodlines. What did they ever do besides scrub the sidewalks wearing little coffins for shoes?”

My dad always tells the story of how he could have run off with the creamy-faced Tulip Queen—“I know she wanted me bad”—but instead went for the Black Irish Judy Killackey. “Mistakes were made,” he'll say jovially, looking first at my mother and then me.



A squirrel is scenery. A blowing leaf is scenery. You don't have to live in Malibu or the Rockies to find beauty in the world.

Dear Diary,

The Sioux City Stockyards is scenery. The Sergeant Floyd Monument by the sewage treatment plant is scenery. The Green Hills Shopping Mall is scenery. You don't have to live in Malibu or the Rockies but it sure as hell helps.

I can hear the whole thing through the heating grate in my room. This one seems to be—on the surface, anyway—about recycling.

“So you're saying the whole world should go to hell because *you* can't be bothered. I must be married to the only Dutchman on the planet without a sense of social responsibility.”

Judy, Judy, Judy. Why take him seriously? He's a lightweight, This is a guy who actually *does* love Raymond. He still watches reruns of the big dork and chuckles. My mom won't watch it because she heard Raymond's wife is a wingnut Republican in real life. If you can call that a real life.



You are a collection of precious moments.

Dear Diary,

Speaking of precious moments:

A Treat for Young Goddesses:

Take one tub of full-strength Cool Whip, stir in half a pkg. of milk chocolate chips. If no chips are available, M & M's will do nicely.

This dish should be eaten from the plastic Cool Whip tub in private, preferably low light, for maximum enjoyment. Pure ecstasy.

Perhaps instead of a foreign news correspondent, I will become a cookbook author—my generation's Rachel Ray. My mom said that Rachel does “mediocre cooking for mediocre people.” What a snob—even P. Diddy likes Rachel Ray.



Here's heart-pounding news: You are Fabulous!

Dear Diary,

Possibly, but I doubt it.

All week I've been picking up weird vibes from James Bell, who sits next to me in Geography. I can only describe it as a kind of sexual force field. I know that sounds unlikely, given my fifteen (eh-hem) extra pounds, but there you have it.

Today I could hear him breathing hard from about two feet away, and I don't believe he has asthma. Our desks are across a narrow aisle from each other...a mental torture I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy (though maybe Annette). I tried to use my hair as a veil to block him out, but it may have turned him on even more. He scooted his desk a few inches forward so he was in viewing range again (at least his warty hands were—*gag*).

When I finally snuck a glance at him, he was looking right at me! What blue, soulful eyes he

has, what a sweet little pug nose. Normally I prefer a more ethnic look. But James Bell manages to convey intelligence despite these humdrum features.

If all I ate was celery, would I eventually have the body of a stalk of celery?



If Life's a cup of coffee, don't accept decaffeinated.

Dear Diary,

Coffee is for posers.

So. Geography class. More strange shenanigans from Mr. Bell (you are never leaving my room, so I won't resort to cutesy pseudonyms).

First he mock-tripped me when I was returning to my desk. I blushed beet-red, though only a week ago I would have told him to stuff it. How to interpret the strange, flustered look he gave me? Perhaps, like many males, he struggles to hide his half-formed feelings. Or perhaps he just sought comfort from the drone of Miss Hanno's psychotic ramblings.

After she ran out of things to say, she told us we could bring something to drink during tomorrow's movie. James raised his hand and asked, in his most innocent voice, "Can I bring a nonalcoholic margarita?" She hesitated, like she hadn't quite understood his request. Next, everyone was shouting out the names of their favorite nonalcoholic (and alcoholic) mixed drinks.

I yelled out "Virgin Mary!" forgetting that you never use a word like "virgin" around a bunch of middle school kids, e.g., immature ignoramuses. They about had a nervous breakdown giggling, which explains why the Human Life Cycle teachers are volunteers who are constantly being replaced.

Hanno, per usual, exhibited zero control over the class. How did this woman ever decide to become a teacher? She admitted she couldn't think of any reason why we shouldn't bring *nonalcoholic* highballs to class. We were completely psyched.

Principal deGeeter soon got wind of our cocktail party. I could hear the freak-out in his voice when he made the intercom announcement later in the day. "You are only allowed to bring drinks into class that can be purchased on the premises, blah, blah, blah." I guess we'll have to resort to getting drunk on A & E chocolate milk again. Big whoop.

Hanno will be in a foul mood.