

AUGUST FALLING

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Other novels by Les Zig

Just Another Week in Suburbia

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This isn't a love story.

It involves love, and things related to love. But it's not neat. It's not easy. And it's not straightforward.

Life rarely is.

Love never is—at least not how I've known it.

The problem is it's so easy to get loaded up with preconceptions. Somebody might seem like the sweetest person alive on first impression. *Oh, they're so nice!* They *could* be a serial killer, but they *seem* nice. People are judged as sweet or kind or arrogant or any number of things based on that first impression alone.

A narrative might even evolve, like with that woman in the booth across from mine—sixty-something, robust, brows peaking in disapproval, and wearing a dress that has a floral pattern better suited to curtains. Just another of the cafe's everyday patrons.

Opposite her sits a kid, can't be more than eight, the comical scowl on his round face directed at a forlorn sandwich, a bite taken from one corner.

The woman is stern—probably the kid's grandmother. Doesn't do well with children. Her own daughter got knocked up straight out of high school—no, in the last year of high school—and had to drop out. Now, her daughter's future is ruined and she works some factory job while Grandma has to

take care of the kid. And Grandma doesn't like it. She thought she was done with kids.

A young waitress slinks over, her uniform of black shirt and black pants too tight, an affront to whatever etiquette the café requires. Grandma's face is hard. A smile would see that face crumble until all that would be left is the dilution of Grandma's life—an accumulation of missteps, failure to take the chances she should've, and bundles of regret.

Or that's what I imagine.

'That sandwich okay?' the waitress asks.

'Could you bring him some ice-cream?' Grandma says.

The boy sits up straight. 'Chocolate?'

Grandma smiles. Her face doesn't break. Years fall from her; the hardness sheds, like a dog moulting a winter coat. 'Chocolate it is!' she says.

'I'll be right back,' the waitress says, and struts back towards the counter.

A new narrative takes hold: the woman's a doting grandma and spoils the kid, much to the chagrin of her daughter.

I lean back against the window. Outside, the afternoon traffic ambles by. Buildings are ripostes of grey, the palette of the city dreary and lifeless. The café, Charisma's, is no different—utilitarian, a strip of booths extending into a promenade with a chequered floor that makes me think of playing chess without knowing the rules. People dock at small, round tables, an array of so many different faces, so many different dynamics: the forty-something blonde in the stiff business suit, with a handsome younger man wearing exquisitely clipped designer stubble; four teenagers, three of them laughing, the fourth with a pimple so big on the bridge of his nose, it's the dampener on his joviality; a woman with an aquiline nose prattles on to her partner, flab spilling from the waist of his jeans, while his eyes follow the waitress's hips as she swaggers back with the chocolate ice-cream for the boy. People are everywhere, dashes of colour as the café grows louder, every clatter of cutlery distinct, jabbing at

my ears, until I become self-aware of the very act of sitting here, over-analysing, and I want to escape from my booth, streak past the counter, and shoot out the door.

‘You okay?’

The waitress—the one who served the boy the chocolate ice-cream. Her face is smooth and unmarked, but her deftly applied make-up fails to camouflage the crescents under her eyes. The flint in her tone and the erect, almost defensive, way she carries herself lead me to think she’s twenty-something—a bit younger than me—but she’s probably only seventeen or eighteen. Her gold name tag identifies her as Nicole.

‘Can I get you something?’ she asks.

‘Could I get a ...’ I tilt my coffee cup—mostly empty. I shouldn’t have another; I shouldn’t have had this one. It’s bloated my stomach. I pull the cuff of my right sleeve down over my wrist. ‘Um ... a tea?’

‘A tea?’

‘White.’

‘Sugar?’

‘No. Actually, do you have chamomile?’

‘Yep.’

‘Okay, chamomile. No milk, no sugar.’

Nicole drums her notepad with her pen. ‘You don’t drink chamomile with milk or sugar.’

‘Just making sure.’

‘One chamomile coming up.’ She steps away from my table.

And that’s when I see her.

I missed her coming through the door, so it’s not like the café lights up with her entrance; she doesn’t saunter in slow motion, blonde hair glowing through some golden nimbus; our eyes don’t lock, so there’s no connection that sears across the café; there are no harps, the ground doesn’t shake, Cupid isn’t hovering above my head where I could swat the fucker. There’s nothing in the moment other than one tiny detail that draws my attention.

Her tattoo.

As she leans against the counter, the hem of her pink halter and the waistband of her faded blue jeans—torn under the pocket of her right buttock—part to reveal a splotch of colours low on the right side of her back. She lifts her head to read the menu above the window to the kitchen, then places her order with a balding barista. The barista's expression is probably meant to be suave, but comes across constipated. He seems enraptured with her. Once he finally trundles away, she leans forward to grab a sugar sachet out of a cup on the counter, her figure slight, butt swelling in her jeans, halter hiking up to reveal the paleness of her skin, and the arch of her back.

She straightens, glancing about, sugar sachet trapped in her fingers. Her blonde hair is tied in a girlish ponytail, face a Japanese anime character with absurdly large, doleful blue eyes that give the impression she's perpetually startled. The barista slides her coffee across the counter. She smiles, and that startled look washes away into joy.

The waitress, Nicole, blocks my view again as she sets the tea down on my table. I peer around her just in time to see the girl with the butterfly tattoo walk out. That's what I've decided her tattoo is; she'd have something delicate, but beautiful, like a colourful butterfly.

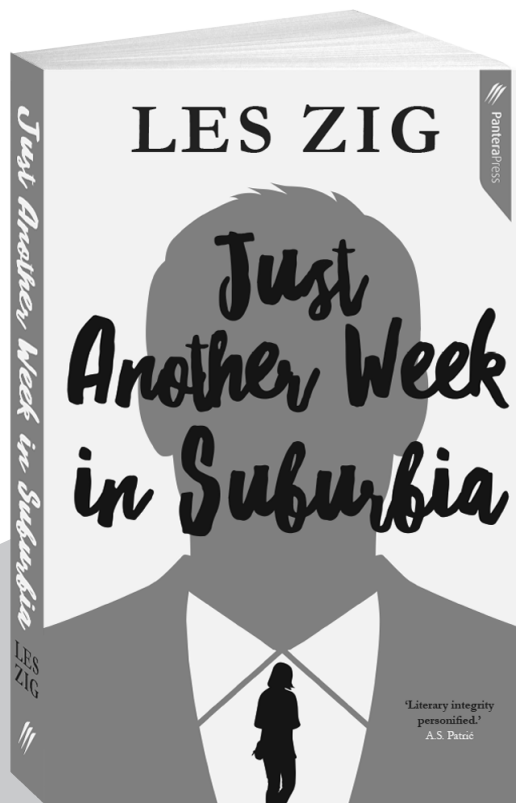
'Will that be all?' Nicole says.

I can't tear my gaze from the door.

Nicole checks over her shoulder, then leans towards me. 'Hey!' she says.

I nod. 'Thanks.'

It only takes
one moment
to fracture the illusion
of a perfect life.



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