

CIRCA

A NOVEL

ADAM GREENFIELD



Circa by Adam Greenfield

ISBN: 978-1-938349-90-4

eISBN: 978-1-938349-91-1

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Cover artwork by Abby Weintraub

Layout and book design by Mark Givens

First Pelekinesis Printing 2018

For information:

Pelekinesis, 112 Harvard Ave #65, Claremont, CA 91711 USA

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Greenfield, Adam, 1973- author.

Title: *Circa* / by Adam Greenfield.

Description: Claremont, CA : Pelekinesis, [2018]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018027102 (print) | LCCN 2018028432 (ebook)
| ISBN 9781938349911 (ePub) | ISBN 9781938349904 (pbk)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Humorous fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3607.R45367 (ebook) | LCC PS3607.R45367
C57 2018 (print) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018027102>

An excerpt from

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pages 338-348: “Grandma’s House”

“Do you have any questions?” he asked, eager to move on to something else.

Neither Henry nor Grace said anything for a minute. It was hard to know where to begin, what to say, especially since the way he had told them made it seem like the most obvious thing in the world. It would almost be embarrassing to ask a question.

“Is Mom okay? Was she really not feeling well enough to come with us or was it because of this?”

“Henry, this isn’t a conspiracy. Of course she has a migraine.”

“So, if she didn’t,” Henry went on, panic rising in him like adrenaline, “she’d be here with us?”

Grace reached across the seat and took his hand. He was trying to cope with this the only way he knew how to cope with anything. Understand the mechanics of the problem. If he could just fathom the new rules, then things wouldn’t seem so strange.

“Henry...” his father began to answer but then stopped himself. It was hard to tell if the fight had suddenly gone out of him or if it was just that empathy had gotten into him. “Let’s go see Grandma.”

Their dad used his key to let himself into the house, and Henry and Grace followed closely behind and straight to the back of the house where their grandma’s bedroom was. Familiar smells overwhelmed him, the feeling of the plush pale blue carpet beneath his feet, associations with foods he only ever ate when he was here like Tropicana Orange Juice their mother would never buy for them because it was “pure junk.” Glancing into the living room he noticed stale candy decaying in a dish on the coffee table, oil paintings

that depicted European cities in such abstract forms it was hard to tell what century they belonged to. Everything was on the verge of being classy, but not quite there. It had been their grandmother's aspiration her whole life to be a rich woman, but it had never quite happened. Comfort hadn't been enough for her, and she had worked their poor grandfather into an early death trying to make something more of their lives. Something bigger. Now she was old and ill, light as tissue paper, commanding her full-time Filipina nurse from a hospital bed that occupied a large portion of her bedroom.

Their father leaned over and kissed her papery cheek and the two of them spoke in a hushed whisper for a few moments before he walked off to the kitchen where the door to the basement was to undoubtedly once again look for a fabled trove of baseball cards he was sure had to be there somewhere. Ever since Henry could remember his father had spent all his time at the house in the basement going through old boxes, moving around dusty artifacts, once or twice even using a shovel to dig into the earthy floor.

Henry and Grace leaned over to kiss her and she smiled broadly at the sight of them.

"He's going to look for those stupid baseball cards again," she started laughing, a half snort that always brought a smile to Henry's face. "I've told him a million times that I threw those things away when he was at summer camp a long time ago. You can't tell your father anything."

She had been a very vain woman once but that was long ago. They each took a bony hand and gazed down at her face that was dotted with brown age spots, her skin so pale it was almost translucent. A thin, light blue nightgown covered her the way a slipcover is used to cover nice furniture.

"I asked your dad to bring you here because I want to make

sure you both get something from me after I die. Of course you're both going to get a little money, although," and here she snorted again, "there isn't much left. Your grandfather was sweet but lazy. You know." They didn't, but they nodded their heads. All they knew was the sweet old man who took them bowling and out for ice cream, who took them for walks through the backyard and hung a sign in the garden that said "Camellia Canyon," which, when they were small loomed like a forest of the perfumey flowers their grandmother loved to have around and kept freshly cut in vases in her bedroom, the kitchen, even in the bathroom. "Anyway," she went on, rolling her eyes, giving them a sly smile to suggest they knew exactly what she was talking about, "I want you to each take one of these pads and stick your name on whatever you want, and I'll make sure you get it one day. Okay?" She nodded at two pads of Post-it Notes and pens on the little table where she kept her magazines, Danielle Steele novels, and the TV remote.

Neither of them moved or said anything. It was a reasonable request, pragmatic even, to make sure your family got what they wanted instead of the junk you thought they should have, and it touched Henry in a way he didn't expect she thought it would.

"Nana," Grace began, but really didn't have anything else, because to do it this way made perfect sense.

"Come on," she said, slapping the table impatiently with her frail fingers. "I'm not saying I'm going to die today. But let's face it..." She snorted again and Henry and Grace both started laughing because in a way it was so morbid that the alternative was not an option. Neither had said a word yet to the other about their parent's bombshell, and now, suddenly, it didn't seem to matter much. Maybe their father knew that would be the case and that's why he had brought them here, to let their grandmother give them the relief and comedy he

wasn't able to.

"Do you kids want some orange juice?" And before they could answer she was yelling at the top of her lungs, "Leticia, get my kids some orange juice, will ya?" She looked at them and rolled her eyes, "Lazy thing." She had barely lowered her voice, and they were sure the nurse had heard it, but their grandmother could hardly seem to care less and Henry smiled at her obliviousness. He couldn't believe that she would treat someone so shitty who had her very well-being in the palm of their hands. Ignorance was indeed the epitome of living fearlessly.

The nurse brought the orange juice in, and their grandmother nodded as they each took a sip.

"Thank you, dear," she said kindly to the nurse. She couldn't help the way she was. Nobody could.

They each took a pad, tentatively, as though the very act would somehow kill their grandmother instantly. She smiled, nodded, and then turned her attention back to the television, which looked possessed with some kind of TV awards show. It was the kind of overflowing colostomy bag of entertainment she loved. All flash and beauty. It put her at ease.

Walking around the house, it took only a few minutes to realize that there was nothing here he really wanted. Trying to generate some sentimentality he closed his eyes and pictured the kind of house he wanted to live in when he grew up, the type of family he'd have surrounding himself, and none of his grandparents' gaudy and overwrought mementos really fit into the picture. In his grandfather's closet he found an old beige trench coat, the lining torn, but overall it was in pretty good shape. He wrote his name on a Post-it and slipped it into the jacket pocket. There was a cool old card table and chairs by the bay window in the living room that he could

picture himself sitting around when he was older. Maybe he would learn to play bridge like his father, uncle, and grandparents used to do when they all got together at holidays. It seemed a reasonable way to pass the time when there was nothing to say to one another, and although he didn't want to think about that right now, not with his parent's situation on the top of his mind, he knew that silence was an inevitable by-product of love. He stuck a Post-it on the table.

The dining room. They had spent countless holidays in this room with its imperial-looking chairs and monolithic white table. It was a monstrous thing and it looked more like something one would worship or circumambulate rather than eat off. A small oil painting hung at one end of the room, and although he'd seen the thing a thousand times he had never really stopped to study it. The painting showed a horse-driven carriage on a shady lane, leaves of every color sprinkled around, as though the artist couldn't decide what season he wanted it to be. A man in black with a top hat held an elegant woman's hand as she stepped onto the carriage. Neither of their faces were clear, so it was difficult to say whether they were going somewhere for fun or if it was to be a sad outing. He went to put a Post-it on the painting and was surprised that his sister had already claimed it for her own.

He took another tour around the house and finally entered the last room, which was his father's old bedroom. It had been made into a guest room ages ago, but there were still traces of the old man here and there. A lamp that had a baseball player in a batting stance as its base, crumbling paperbacks copies of *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. It was hard to picture his father getting into any of these books. Rebellion and curiosity weren't exactly the first two adjectives that sprung into mind when he thought about him. He put a Post-it on

each of the books.

Grace was sitting on the edge of the bed leafing through an old photo album. A box of keepsakes sat open at her feet with more albums and paperwork inside.

"You took my painting," he said, nudging her a little with his elbow.

"Huh?" She was barely listening.

"I said you took my painting. The one in the dining room. I wanted it. Whose *Showcase Showdown* is this anyway?"

She ignored him.

"Do you know what's weird?" she asked, her eyes continued to study the pages of the photo album. She put it down and picked up another at random.

"That we're picking through a dead person's belongings who isn't dead yet and our father is in the basement digging through the floor with a shovel? I feel like we've just broken in and murdered Nana."

"No," she said, not even giving him the courtesy of a polite laugh. "I've been going through these photo albums and they start with Dad when he was a baby, okay? He lived here until college and then went to UCLA, which is basically two blocks away. After that he lived in Nana and Papa's guest house while he was in law school and then met Mom just as he was about to graduate. They moved in together after graduation and now..."

"What?" he shrugged his shoulders. The mystery was lost on him.

"Henry, he's never lived without a woman around to take care of him. Isn't that weird? Can he even do anything on his own? Can he wash the dishes? Can he do his laundry?"

"Maybe he's planning on moving back in here," Henry said,

picking up a stack of papers from the bottom of the box.

“That,” she answered, closing the book, “or he already has someone else.”

The remark startled Henry and he looked up at her quickly and sternly.

“What?” she said, finally making eye contact. “Would that be so weird? If you really think about it, the opposite would be weirder. If he didn’t have someone else.”

As she left the room, she stopped at the door and called back to him. “You can have that painting if you want it. I don’t really care. I was just picking stuff out to be polite. There’s nothing here I need.”

He sat for a moment, taking in the possibility that their father was having an affair. Grace was right. Why was that so hard to believe? Because it was happening to him? What a stupid way to think about things. If that was the case, did it mean that cancer and miscarriages and alcoholism didn’t really exist because they’d never happened to anyone in his family?

Barely registering what he was looking at, he began to glance through the stack of papers in his hands, letting each one glide back into the box as he quickly scanned them. The smell of dust and mold wafted up at him as he leafed through these old things. Ambience, he told himself. This is what the fifties smelled like. What he saw was old report cards, a certificate of bar mitzvah, even a college acceptance letter. Jesus, his grandmother kept everything. Outwardly she didn’t seem the sentimental type. Probably just negligence. The whole house was bulging at the seams with old junk. What was the point?

The next piece of paper, though, stopped him in his tracks. It was a certificate of honorable discharge dated 1971 and the name at the bottom was his father’s.

He took the paper and ran into his grandma's room. Grace was bent over the bed and the two of them were speaking in low tones to one another, and when they saw him, they both looked at him for a second with a glance that said "this is none of your business" and went back to their conversation. It was over in a minute and Henry saw Grace walk away from the bed with a small plastic bag in her hand. She raised her eyebrows at him as she walked by and he couldn't tell from the look if he was about to be let in on the joke or if he was the joke.

Never mind. He rushed to his grandma's bedside with the yellowing piece of paper and held it out for her to see.

"Nana, what is this? Dad was in the army?"

The paper shook as she took it and held it up close to her eyes. She squinted her eyes behind thick glasses and then lowered her head so that she could see over the rims.

"Where did you get this?" she finally asked with a snort.

"In a box in Dad's room."

She put the paper down on her table and looked up at him.

"Your dad was in the army all right. The National Guard over here in Westwood. He'd go there one weekend a month and play poker and drink with a bunch of other 'soldiers.'" Almost every sense of hers had been dulled except sarcasm.

"You know," she went on, "I didn't agree with the war in Vietnam. I never thought it was a good idea. Papa, though, oy," she threw up her hands as though she were in the middle of an argument with her late husband now, "he was so gung-ho. Another great soldier, by the way. Spent World War II in Long Beach helping resupply naval ships or something. They made him an officer. What a joke!" Laughter turned into a cough and she held his arm with one hand as she pressed a Kleenex to her mouth with the other. "His bunkmate was

Clark Gable. Did you know that?”

Henry nodded. He knew it. It was an important piece of family lore that his grandfather had lived in the same barracks as Clark Gable for a year during World War II. The rabbi at his funeral had mentioned it in the eulogy right up along with all of his other accomplishments, and Henry remembered it seeming odd that the mention of it should be so important as to bring it up at the man’s burial. How was a roommate assignment an accomplishment? He resolved to never be remembered for his proximity to greatness, let alone fame, which he thought of as greatness’ juvenile delinquent younger brother.

“I also didn’t vote for Reagan. Did you know that?” Another accomplishment. “Your grandfather hated Carter so much that if I had told him I was going to vote for him again, I don’t know what he would have done. Still,” she grinned deviously, “I didn’t.” It’s the little things.

He found Grace at the kitchen table sipping a glass of orange juice and staring out at the empty street. He wasn’t sure if she had heard him walk in, but then she started talking and it was clear she was trying to work something out in her head.

“It’s weird that Dad grew up here. That he sat at this table and had breakfast and dinner every night, that this is where Nana sat, and Papa sat there,” she nodded at the chair at the head of table. “He was so happy then. So much happier than he is now. I wonder how that happened.”

“He loves us,” Henry said, taking a seat at the table.

“I know he does,” she said, her eyes back on the street where a mom was holding her little girl’s hand as the kid struggled down the sidewalk on roller skates. The little girl squealed as she went over a bump and the mom’s laughter rang out, a call and response of pure happiness. “But I think he was

happier then. Happier here.”

“Do you really think he’s been cheating on Mom?”

She shrugged.

“I think anything’s possible when you’re trying to feel something you’ve lost.”

He put the discharge paper on the table in front of her and said, “Did you know Dad was in the army?”

She looked at the paper and then up at him, a smile decorating her thinly beautiful face.

“Poker and beers? Yeah, I knew that. Me and Nana talk.”

A hole opened up in him. How long had she known? What did they talk about? What else did she know that he didn’t?

“Not about you, Henry, don’t worry,” she went on, misunderstanding the concern that must have shown on his face. “You know what you need to do with Dad? What works for me is you have to stop putting yourself in the position for him to judge you. I know why you do it. You want to be nice and accommodating and that’s why I love you so much. Because you are nice and accommodating. But really, he’s never going to respect you as long as you’re like that. He comes from such an easy place,” she said, inclining her head toward the street and then the house, “and if you don’t make it hard for him, he’ll just walk all over you like he does to everyone else. Do you understand?”

Swallowing hard, he nodded.

“Do you want a sip?” she asked him, indicating the glass of juice.

Without a word he grabbed it and took a big swallow.

From down in the basement they heard the sound of metal on metal and then their father’s voice. “Shit!” Then the stomp of his feet as he ascended the wooden steps and emerged

into the kitchen. He went to the sink, took off his glasses, and splashed some water on his face. Washed his hands. He looked so young, then, Henry thought, like a little boy washing up before dinner after a long day spent looking for pirate's treasure.

He turned and noticed them both staring at him and, smiling asked, "What?" It almost broke Henry's heart.

Neither of them answered and he put his glasses back on and suddenly he was their dad again. Stern, uptight, wrongly persecuted. He told them to get ready to go. That he was going to say goodbye to his mother and then take them home.

When he left, Grace got up and Henry saw that she was holding onto the bag their grandmother had given her earlier.

"What's in the bag?" he asked her.

She smiled and held it open for him to see. Inside was a bunch of jewelry—rings, necklaces, brooches—and he recognized every piece as things he used to see his grandmother wear. On her these things had always impressed him, made her seem as though she herself sparkled when she walked into a room. Now, though, laying together all tangled up in a bag they had no luster, as though their proximity to one another cancelled out their effect. Or maybe, he thought, she was the one who sparkled and shined and gave life to these trinkets and not the other way around. Baubles. She called them baubles as if to downplay their obvious significance.

"She gave you all that?" he asked, a little bit in awe of an heirloom that might be a superpower.

"It's not for me," she answered, closing the bag. "It's for Mom. She wants her to have the good stuff. But don't tell Dad, okay? She doesn't want him to know."

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About the Author

Adam Greenfield's short fiction has appeared in many literary magazines including *MungBeing*, *Outsider Ink*, and *Prole*. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children. *Circa* is his first novel.

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