



Save Me, Kurt Cobain

By Jenny Manzer

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What if you discovered that Kurt Cobain was not only alive, but might be your real father? This nuanced and bittersweet YA debut will keep you guessing until the end.

“Utterly gorgeous. Mesmerizing. Hypnotic. I love this book.” —Jennifer Niven, *New York Times* bestselling author of *All the Bright Places*

Nico Cavan has been adrift since her mother vanished when she was four—maternal abandonment isn’t exactly something you can just get over. Staying invisible at school is how she copes—that and listening to alt music and summoning spirits on the Ouija board with her best friend and coconspirator in sarcasm, Obe. But when a chance discovery opens a window onto her mom’s wild past, it sparks an idea in her brain that takes hold and won’t let go.

On a ferry departing Seattle, Nico encounters a slight blond guy with piercing blue eyes wearing a hooded jacket. Something in her heart tells her that this feeling she has might actually be the truth, so she follows him to a remote cabin in the Pacific Northwest. When she is stranded there by a winter storm, fear and darkness collide, and the only one who can save Nico might just be herself.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *SAVE ME, KURT COBAIN*

“Utterly gorgeous. Mesmerizing. Hypnotic. I love this book.” —Jennifer Niven, *New York Times* bestselling author of *All the Bright Places*

“Raw and authentic.” —Jennifer Mathieu, author of *The Truth About Alice* and *Devoted*

“*Save Me, Kurt Cobain* rocked my world. Like a favorite song, Manzer's stunning and heartfelt words have stayed with me long after turning the final page.” —Marisa Reichardt, author of *Underwater*

"Raw emotion that will resonate strongly with teens."--*SLJ*

"Compelling."--*Kirkus Reviews*

About the Author

Jenny Manzer is a writer, an editor, and a former news reporter. She lives in Victoria, British Columbia, with her husband, son, and daughter. She loves music but never did see Nirvana play live.

Follow @JennyManzer on Twitter.

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CHAPTER 1

“ABOUT A GIRL”

The day my mother walked away, the snowdrops had just appeared. I never saw them nudging through the ground. They turned up each February, fully formed, standing there like unexpected guests. I thought the tiny white flowers looked like fairy shower caps, drooping off their thread-thin stalks. I was four. I remember touching a petal with my finger. It felt like a soft lower lip.

My mother had picked three from the backyard of the house we rented in downtown Victoria, which wasn't much: a slab of concrete, two lawn chairs, a composter, and those snowdrops. She turned to me and said, “I'm going away. But I'll be back before these flowers wilt.” She pointed to the Mason jar that held the three snowdrops. It sat on our Formica kitchen table, which was scuffed white with a faded print of black clovers.

“Can you remember that, Nicola?” she asked. Her voice was calm, more so than usual. She had ruler-straight bangs, a long, delicate nose. There was a thin gap between her front teeth that I imagined you could slide a dime through. My mother, Annalee, was as beautiful as Rose Red in my book of fairy tales. Her nickname for me was Little Early, which I assumed was because I always woke her up.

“I can remember,” I told her. She said my name with a sigh. Ni-co-lah.

On Sesame Street a girl in a cartoon remembered her shopping list--a loaf of bread, a container of milk, and a stick of butter--all the way to the store. Her mother let her go alone. I decided I could remember one thing: my mother would be back before the flowers wilted.

She hugged me and left me sitting at the kitchen table. I remember feeling her long hair, velvet soft and silky. My father, Verne, must have been at his security job at the mall. That's not important to this memory.

What's important is this: each day I sat at that table gripping my blue cup of milk as my father bumbled around making toast or slicing bananas. I watched the flowers fade and wither, and by day three the stalks were bald and dead, the petals scattered on the table.

From then on, I knew two things: I would never, ever believe anyone, and I would never again be called Nicola.

The year she disappeared was 1996. Kurt Cobain was already dead, supposedly having committed suicide two years earlier. Of course, I didn't realize the significance of that event back then. I couldn't even brush my own teeth yet, let alone mourn for a man I didn't know: the man who stole the world.

It would be easy to assume that "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was the first Nirvana song I ever heard. It wasn't. It was "Dive," from a Sub Pop compilation called *The Grunge Years*. My friend Obe, who could enter thrifting as an Olympic sport, bought a secondhand copy and played it for me. The next Nirvana song I heard was "Sliver," the one where Kurt Cobain sings about a kid having dinner at his grandparents' house who wants Grandma to take him home. I remember having this idea whap me in the face like a tree branch: if we met, Kurt Cobain would understand me. He was slight and blond, like me, and I almost always wanted to flee dinners at my grandma Irene's, which usually involved a slab of roast beef. It was Obe who introduced me to Nirvana, which is yet another reason to be glad that he exists.

Byron Oberlin has been my best friend forever. No one else applied for the job. I've known him since I was four and have always called him Obe. We met when I lent him my socks. Verne had packed a spare pair in my little knapsack and I offered it to Obe when his got soaked on the playground. The socks had shiny pink hearts on them; I suppose my mother bought them. Obe wore them, grudgingly, and returned the socks fresh and clean the next day, and I remember thinking it was nice to have a mom launder them for me. His mother sent me a Strawberry Shortcake sticker, too.

So I became inseparable from Obe, who lived a couple of streets away. Both of us belonged to the school breakfast club, which meant we received free bread with no-name peanut butter and juice because our parents didn't have a lot of money. The fact that I had breakfast at school hurt my dad's pride, I think, but he was probably glad someone else was taking care of something, even just one meal a day.

Back then Obe was content to go along with pursuits such as experimenting with the ancient tomato-red EasyBake oven Verne found at a garage sale. We churned out cakes that resembled golden hockey pucks until one day the oven fizzled for good. Those cakes tasted like a burnt, sweet sponge. We also constructed Lego spaceships and launched balloon rockets off my front porch. We rode up and down the city sidewalks on our secondhand bikes, and we mashed together holly berries to make secret poisons. We got by. I had no mother to curl my hair or make me a Halloween costume, but to be fair, most of the mothers in my neighborhood had jobs. The dollar-store costumes were cheap and shiny, made from the same thin material as picnic tablecloths.

At age fourteen, Obe finally accepted that no one was going to christen him with a cool rap nickname. (Obe rhymed with “robe,” and that’s about it, and no one called him Byron.) For a time, he pretended to like Eminem, but I caught him singing along with Destiny’s Child and Britney Spears. Then Obe and I really got into retro music together, listening to alternative bands from the 1990s. I tried to avoid the gazes of the other girls at school. I never had the money to dress in whatever the trends were, and I didn’t want to anyway.

Verne worked days, six-thirty to six-thirty, or nights, the same, so Obe and I logged our hours in class and left the school grounds as soon as the bell rang, running off to his house to eat Triscuits with Velveeta, or to my place for popcorn and strawberry Quik. My rented upper-floor suite, though drafty, was preferred, since my dad got home later than Obe’s mom. Sometimes Verne would be gone all night if he worked a late shift, but he often played the daughter card. “Gotta get home to Nico,” he’d say to his coworkers, reminding everyone that he was all I had.

The nights he was gone I often stayed awake, listening, my fingernails digging half-moons into my hands. Some nights I allowed myself a memory of my mother. I only had a handful of memories, and some were blurred around the edges. I played them over and over, remembering them slowly, And then this, and then that, as if letting a sweet lozenge dissolve under my tongue. Sometimes the memory would cheer me up, but often it would make me sad.

I once heard from a counselor that children can form memories earlier than age four--and even as young as two--but they forget them as they get older. I read more about it online and discovered that babies can’t hold on to their memories because of their undeveloped limbic systems, as if their little brains are change purses with holes in the bottom. But toddlers can store their memories, at least until they begin fading around age ten. Reading this set off sparks of panic in my chest, because we are what we remember. So I review my memories. I make sure all the pieces are there, and then I put them away again. I told Obe I would never become a serious boozehound or a junkie, because I can’t damage my brain. I don’t have much else.

By the time we reached grade nine, afternoons usually involved marathon music-listening sessions at my house. Obe would sit cross-legged on the carpet. He was amazingly flexible, thin and frail, with the posture of raw bacon. He had dramatic glasses: thick black frames and wide, round lenses that would have been distracting had it not been for his hair, which sprang from his head in wild curls that resembled punctuation. He was not adored at school, but he wasn’t tormented, either. He was lucky to be a boy, I figured. Boys don’t have to be super good-looking. They can compensate with skills.

At school I alternated between sleepwalking and having fits of anxiety when anyone noticed me. Not much worth mentioning happened that school year until October, when I got my first Nirvana album.

“Obe, let’s get out the Ouija board,” I said, handing him a glass of Coke. (It was actually cola. Verne bought generic everything.)

“Nico, not again. I’m tired of that stuff. I thought we were going to Lyle’s Place.”

Obe and I loved Lyle’s Place, a CD store downtown next to a movie theater. You could buy pricey imports from Britain or get domestic albums cheap and used. The store’s logo has a teal cartoon Martian with a half-moon smile. He was riding a spaceship. Obe and I went there all the time to paw through the discs. We never stole anything and usually scrounged enough money to buy a CD every couple of weeks, so our presence was tolerated. I badly wanted an iPod, like other kids at school had, but there was no way I could afford it.

Lyle’s Place also sold magnets, T-shirts, and other mass-produced novelties people buy to appear unique.

Once Obe bought me a button that read Jesus loves you, everyone else thinks you're an asshole. He meant it to cheer me up, but later I hid it in my underwear drawer and cried. Deep down, I feared that everyone at school did think I was an asshole except Obe.

"First the board, then Lyle's," I suggested. I liked any excuse to leave our run-down house. Obe sometimes tried to put his foot down, but he wasn't good at it. He was smart, but he didn't like dealing with details, so I made most of the decisions.

While Obe ate popcorn, I whipped out the Ouija board, which had once belonged to my mother. I couldn't stop asking it questions. I didn't need a shrink to figure out that I wanted answers about her. Of course I did.

"Okay, but just three questions," said Obe, gesturing to make his point. He'd taken to wearing fingerless gloves, no doubt inspired by something he'd read. His parents were divorced, barely spoke to each other, and Obe would almost always rather back down than raise his voice. He'd heard too many fights in his lifetime already.

"Will my mother ever come back?"

We put our fingers on the board. I could feel it hum after a few minutes, like the tiny heart of a bird. The pointer trembled, then lurched forward, moving dead center toward the YES and the NO. The pointer quivered toward the NO, then staggered in the direction of YES.

"Nico, I don't think this is good for you," Obe said. The gloves were ridiculous, gray and black.

"Who are you, Dr. Phil? Concentrate. You're bringing bad energy."

"I don't think we should mess with this stuff, Nico. The other side."

"You didn't say that when we were asking all those questions about that girl you were so hot for, Sari .??.?"

"Yeah, okay, that was dumb."

The pointer was stuck between YES and NO. I wanted to try another question. A big one. "Is Verne my real father?"

Obe rolled his eyes as the pointer shuddered toward NO. I felt something flip in my stomach.

"When will I meet my real father?"

I waited, examining my fingernails, which looked wretched. I had put black polish on them and then just let it chip off. Obe sighed. The pointer was on the move, heading to the numbers.

"One, four," I said. "Fourteen. I'm fourteen."

"You're almost fifteen."

"Maybe it means fourteen days."

"That's two questions, Nico. Let's go now."

The farther I got from my lonely house, the better I usually felt.

“What are you looking for?” Obe asked me as we walked along Douglas Street, the city’s main drag.

“I don’t know,” I said, shoving my hands in the pockets of my shorts, which I was wearing over leggings. I’d forgotten what was on my album wish list. I could feel sadness welling in me again, a cold pool.

“Well,” said Obe, who had a sixth sense for knowing when I needed a boost. “You’re a hard, angry young woman, and you need hard, angry music. Nico Cavan, do you know the date?” Obe liked to talk in a theatrical way sometimes, as if he were in an old-time movie, wearing a tux. He also did his research, checking out armloads of music magazines from the library. He always knew what I’d like.

“It’s October 5, 2006, and starting to piss rain, Obe.” I took my hand from my pocket and linked my arm with his, as we liked to do. I remember it was a Thursday, because it was right before Thanksgiving weekend.

“Oho, yes. And it’s the day you’re going to get your own Nirvana album. Bleach, to be precise.”

“Just as long as I don’t have to drink it,” I said, trying to sound bored, but I felt a shiver like icy fingers on my rib cage, like something was about to happen.

When I was small, Verne was afraid I’d plop off a slide and break a bone and he’d never know because I wouldn’t cry when I was injured. I’d just keep walking. I have a high tolerance for physical pain. What I can’t stand is minor annoyances: a thread of celery between my teeth, a scratchy clothes tag. Those drive me insane.

Verne was a security guard at the university, often working nights patrolling residences and chasing drunken rich kids out of parking lots. He mostly caught eighteen-year-olds doing stupid shit involving too many vodka coolers. He broke up the fights, got students to put their clothes back on, go back to their dorms and sober up, or called the city police if need be. One year he found that some first-years had been growing marijuana in Finnerty Gardens, an area of native plant beds near the Fine Arts building. That was a professional highlight for him.

He had a live-and-let-live attitude with me, though. “Nico is who she is,” I heard him tell Grandma Irene, who had just moved to an old-age home in Oak Bay, a swanky suburb near the ocean. Then a deep sigh. Verne, as I thought of him, was a solid appliance of a man--wide-chested and long in the body, with olive skin. My mother, I know, was the opposite: reed-thin and pale.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Linda Callaway:

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Laura Rogers:

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