

# DUCK DIVE



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## BEFORE YOU DIVE IN

I wrote this book to music. As I went, I started making a playlist of the songs that particularly inspired me or seemed to magically fit with the section I was working on at the time. And then I started to wonder...what if the songs that helped me get in the flow of writing could help you get in the flow of reading? So at the beginning of each chapter, you'll find I've noted a song that was particularly meaningful while I was writing that portion of the book. It's just a small offering, friend to friend. I hope it enriches your reading experience.

Create your own playlist, mixtape, or record collection using the full song list in Appendix A or you can find my playlist on Spotify by searching "Duck Dive."

# *Phase One*

## **NEW**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>TIME</b>
1995	21-Jun	1:34 PM PDT

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>TIME</b>
2023	21-Jun	7:57 AM PDT

## DUCK DIVE

*Listen: "Back To The End Of The World"*  
by Jim James, Teddy Abrams,  
Louisville Orchestra

### ONE

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When your name is May, people tend to assume that you were born in the fifth month. But people tend to assume a lot of incorrect things.

#### EXHIBIT "A"

In 1582 the world skipped ten days. True story. It turns out the Julian Calendar (attributed to the reign of Julius Caesar and instituted in 45 BCE) had assumed that there were exactly 365.25 days in a year (it is actually 365.2422). Due to that flawed assumption the Julian Calendar Year was eleven minutes too long. That meant that by 1582 CE the calendar had drifted by ten days. The Spring Equinox that should have been happening on March 21, was happening on March 11. Uncorrected, the calendar would become meaningless, offering people an inaccurate representation of the lunar and solar cycles that served as guideposts for planting and harvesting, for feasting and fasting. The calendar would be saying one thing, and the sky would be saying another. This was a job for Pope Gregory XIII.

By Papal Decree, Thursday, October 4, 1582 was followed by Friday, October 15, 1582. Ten days, sucked into the void. The Gregorian Calendar reigned.

Most people assume that today will be followed by tomorrow, but sometimes the universe has other plans.

## NEW

*Listen: “Lady May”*  
by Tyler Childers

## TWO

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### JUNE 2018 CE

Friends aren't that hard to make. Not really. You bring an extra pack of Swiss Rolls at lunch. You join orchestra and student council. You remember things that people tell you about themselves. You smile, you laugh, you go to the beach when they invite you, even though you hate everything about the beach. You're friendly. You make friends. Not hard. But best friends. Now they're a whole different species. In May's experience, best friends weren't made, they were born. And if you were lucky, your best friend was someone who would come help you dig a hole in the backyard if you asked him to.

Abee pulled up the bottom of his shirt to wipe his forehead. The marine layer was just starting to burn off. The ground was sandy-ish which May deemed helpful for digging, but Abee kept reminding her that sand was still just small rocks.

“I think you need a new dream, Mays.”

“Shut up, Andrew Bartholomew Berenson.” May used his full name when she was feeling particularly feisty. She had battled the cobwebs of the shed to get two shovels, a big blue tarp, and some yellow plastic stakes out into the middle of the yard. Feisty was an understatement. The shovels were flat blades, not great for digging. The tarp was full of spider nests, terrifying. And the stakes were plastic, not exactly construction strength. But May was determined. They were going to build a pool, right here, right now. This was their summer plan.

“Please refer to me as *Andraus Bar Talmai Berenson* if you insist on using my full name.” Abee could play this game too.

“Okay, *Manly-Son of Giant—who is Son of Bear Man*, please shut up.” May would not be bested. She had been helping Abee get ready for his bar mitzvah, and while he was an obliging Hebrew student, May found it all utterly fascinating—in Abee's name he carried the story of three generations.

“We *can* do this.” May was adamant.

## DUCK DIVE

“I hear you, and I retort with a—can we though? Can. We.” Abee let it hang for dramatic effect. May was having none of it.

“Yes. Well, if you grew some muscles, it would be easier, but yes, we can.” May didn’t have time for this second guessing.

“I have plenty of muscles, thank you very much. Mom just bought me some new shirts yesterday cause I grew three inches this year.”

“Hate to break it to you, but tall doesn’t equal strong.”

“Do you have someone else who can help you dig this hole?” Abee ducked as he said it, knowing full well May wasn’t above throwing the next shovelful right at him.

May looked up, he was right, she should be nicer to him. “No. Just you and your long, skinny arms. Sorry. But it’s already too hot and if dad won’t put a pool in or buy one of those that you put on top of the ground, we are going to make our own.”

“An above ground pool, here...I’m pretty sure there are laws against that. And have you ever heard of someone digging their own pool?” Abee preferred teasing her to picking up his shovel again.

“No, but there are probably a lot of things I’ve never heard about. Just keep digging, okay?”

“I heard some people saying that there is this thing called the ocean right down the hill there. Think of it as one of those infinity pools.” Abee knew he shouldn’t bring up the ocean, in her ten years she had never once actually gone swimming in the ocean. Well, maybe she had gone with her dad at some point when she was a baby. But May didn’t go now.

“I didn’t know you started doing stand-up...and no, I’d rather not.” May delivered, *rather not* in the exaggerated English accent they were experimenting with that week, graciously attempting to deflect any tension that talk of the ocean would bring. It wasn’t Abee’s fault she was so weird.

The restaurant, May’s family’s restaurant, attracted tourists from all over the world. Well to say it more truthfully, the ocean and the views attracted the tourists, the restaurant just happened to be on the cliff that offered the views of said ocean. This week a big group of important looking English people had come rolling up in dark green Range Rovers. Everyone here had Range Rovers, but these were fancy even for Malibu. They had found the restaurant very charming. It was charming. It was actually a pretty great place to grow up, pool or no pool.

May’s posture slackened. She let her shovel fall to the ground. She wiped her sweaty hands on her bare knees and grinned her crooked smile at him.

## NEW

Abee rolled his eyes. “I know, Mays. I was just kidding. I’ll go get the pointy shovel from my house —it is your birthday after all.” Abee’s voice trailed off as he walked across the yard.

He was her very best friend.

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It took Abee a while to find the good shovel. By the time he got back, May was gone. But Abee had watched enough *Odd Squad* and *Spy Kids* over the years to put a few clues together. May’s no-good shovel was on the ground. A piece of the wooden handle, about the size of a carpenter’s pencil, had splintered off. It was also on the ground a few inches away from the rest of the handle. A splattering of blood dotted the wood, the shovel, the whole general area. The honeycomb pattern from the bottom of May’s shoes was pressed hard into the sandy ground, and her strides became longer as they reached the house. She had been impatient, pushed too hard on the shovel, broken the handle, and presumably cut her hand.

Abee found her on the couch. Her right hand was wrapped with a kitchen towel and propped up on her head. “You have to elevate to stop the bleeding,” May said calmly. Abee nodded and plopped down on the couch next to her, like they’d been-here-done-this a million times before. Abee grinned. May had turned on *Spy Kids: All The Time In The World*. Sometimes it felt like their brains were connected. Timekeeper was monologuing about living life forward. Abee would dig a pool or he would watch this movie for the thousandth time; he was just glad they were together.

May was staring at him. The stare that meant she wanted something.

“Will you go get me a blanket?”

“The Juni and Carmen one?”

“Obviously.”

“I’ll be right back. It is your birthday after all.”

She was his very best friend.



## DUCK DIVE

*Listen:* “Ready or Not”  
by Shakey Graves  
and Sierra Ferrell

### THREE

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#### JUNE 2023 CE

There was Dad, in the kitchen, where he always was. Dressed in his white, double-breasted chef’s jacket, with *Shep Thomas, Chef de Cuisine* embroidered in small cursive script across the right side. The restaurant might look quirky, but the kitchen, her dad’s kitchen, was the real deal. Shep got his first Michelin Star a few years ago, and rumor was that this year it might be two. He was making a yellow dal for family meal tonight. Everyone loved when Shep cooked family.

“Pad-May, my queen. What’s cooking?” This was his favorite pun. May had moved beyond being annoyed by this comment. She was even past just accepting it. May had now reached the stage where she realized she would actually be sad if he stopped saying it someday. The pot Shep was stirring smelled of coriander, cumin, and Kashmiri chili. May watched as he added a dash of salt.

“Yellow dal, Dad. That’s what’s cooking.” The pun was meant to be instructive as well as funny. May had answered correctly and then quickly went on to offer the obligatory run down of her day. “And my day of sitting in a hard chair listening to people try to inspire me to memorize some facts was good. It was a perfectly good-ish day. And guess what, it is sunny and 72 degrees again, who wouldn’t have a good day. The blondies are still blonde, surfing is still cool...” May would have continued, but there was a spoon hovering in front of her face. It smelled even better up close. It tasted even better than it smelled. Buttery, tangy, warm, what had she been talking about?

“I’m good, Dad. Really though, I am. And school’s almost over. So, there’s always that. And you have sauce on your shoes.”

“*My* shoes, impossible.” Shep’s eyes gleamed. He loved this. He loved his kitchen. He loved her. “Can you take the Joshua Tree room tonight? Abee has a game, and the summer tourists are coming early this year, apparently. We were buried last night. I’ll pay you extra. Unless you have finals to study for. Are finals still a thing?”

## NEW

Shep was very chill as far as parents went, but sometimes he would remember to say parent-y things.

“Yeah Dad, finals are still a thing, I’m good though. My schedule is wide open believe it or not. And don’t pay me extra, this will all be mine someday anyways. God knows Abee can’t cook or think or...what can he do, why do we keep him around?” May grabbed a cloth to wipe the counter, absentmindedly, automatically.

“Abee’s great at bringing in the blondies with their dad’s credit cards.”

“Well, you’re not wrong about that.”

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The restaurant was the best and the worst. There had to be more to life than feeding other people all day, every day. But May actually *did* love cooking, and she knew, even though she hated to admit it, that one day she would follow in her dad’s footsteps and she would be thankful for every minute of it. Malibu had more than a few bright, white, crisp, kind of Asian, kind of Scandinavian, made for tv restaurants. Duck’s was not that kind of place. And *Duck’s* had been around long before *Duke’s*. It was admittedly confusing for the tourists.

May’s grandpa opened Duck’s in the 70’s. No one was exactly sure what year, let alone what day. It was kind of an accidental restaurant. Grandpa Gene chased his endless summer to the cliffs of Malibu, where in between sets he found a bungalow that was for sale. They were all bungalows back then. He used his newly come upon inheritance to purchase said bungalow and at night after the sun had gone down, everyone would come back to Duck’s. Duck was Gene’s nickname in the water, and it followed him on land. Duck dive or bail, the eternal conundrum of the surfer. Gene would always duck.

In the kitchen of his bungalow, Gene would magically throw some things that had come out of the ocean into a pot with some things that had come out of his garden and people would eat and laugh and smoke and drink until the wet air chilled them to the bone and they were forced to let the day be done. May suspected there was more than just nicotine and beer being passed around on those nights, it was Malibu in the 70’s after all, but Grandpa Gene never talked about that.

Then one night, somebody put out an empty coffee can, Gene swore it wasn’t him, and people stuck a few dollars in before they left. The can kept showing up on the counter, people kept showing up to eat, and so on some random day, in some year

## DUCK DIVE

in the early 1970's, Duck's was born. The full name, when Gene finally got around to filing papers with the county, was Duck's Dive.

The origin story wasn't even the most interesting thing about the place though, at least in May's opinion. Because, as Grandpa Gene told it, one day a young woman who also loved to surf—but loved Gene's chowder more—started showing up, and one night as the others crawled out into the mist, Gloria stayed. And Gloria stayed the next day, and the next. And then one day Gloria and Gene stood out on the sand, surrounded by their friends, and promised to love each other always. Gene spread out a whole clambake right there on the beach. Gloria sang her favorite song by the Carpenters, and nobody went home that night. They never got around to filing any papers with the county. Gloria kept her name.

And then as the haze of the 70's started to clear, they realized they needed more room. Duck's was growing, and so was Gloria. More people were coming to the restaurant, a lot more people. Gene took out a loan to build a real kitchen and add another room for seating. Gloria sketched out a design for a room that was deep blue, with can lights tucked behind faux rocks shining up at three giant papier-mâché humpback whales hanging from a lofted ceiling—Gloria had half of a fine arts degree from Berkeley. Gene loved it. Everyone loved it. People loved California kitsch, and Duck's delivered on the kitsch. Duck's would grow five more times over the years. Gloria only grew that once. She gave birth to a baby girl they named Amy. Though Gene, who was half French from his father's side, would always call her *Aimée*.

Duck's was Gene and Gloria's life, but Amy was their world.

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May's favorite room in the restaurant was the Hollywood room. The Hollywood room had a giant circular table that sat twelve, or fifteen if the people really liked each other. There was a Lazy Susan in the middle of the table and in the middle of that sat a bust of James Dean. May thought the bust was better than the one at Griffith Observatory. Her Nonna had made this Jimmy.

Nonna Gloria died before May was born, but Grandpa Gene made sure that May knew every little detail about her. Gloria loved to cook, and sing, and read poetry, and drink coffee. In kindergarten May's teacher read the class a book about an Italian family, the kids in the book called their grandmother *nonna*. May wasn't

sure if Gloria was Italian or not, but the pictures she had seen of her resembled the drawings in the book. No one ever told her she should or shouldn't, but that day May decided that Gloria would have wanted to be called nonna too.

As much as the restaurant was meant to memorialize the spirit of California, for Grandpa Gene it also memorialized the spirit of his lost loves. May knew he sat in the Hollywood room late at night with a martini and talked to Gloria. It always looked like he was talking to Jimmy.

One wall of the room was painted with a giant mural of the Hollywood sign and Grandpa Gene had tacked real wooden letters “H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D” to the wall to make it three dimensional and then lined the letters with lights. The other walls were covered with autographed Polaroid's, headshots, and posters of all the celebrities who had come to Duck's over the years. Dolly in a pink satin suit, a young Tom Hanks, Paul and Joanne, a poster of Brittany from the “...baby one more time” era, Miley, Jack Nicholson, Barbara Streisand, a young Leo (Oh Leo). May liked to walk around the room and touch all the pictures of the red heads, Lucille Ball (south wall, center-center), Carol Burnett (right next to Lucy), Molly Ringwald (south wall, left-center), Conan (as you turned the corner to the east), then on to a picture of her Dad and Prince Harry (that was a recent addition), a clipping from the *Malibu Times* that featured her mom and grandparents (it was black and white but she knew her mom had red hair), and she'd always end with Robert Redford in his cowboy hat (Grandpa Gene always called him Bob). Hollywood loved a good red head. May knew every inch of this room. On summer evenings the ocean breeze would come across the deck and in through the west facing French doors. Grandpa Gene said he often caught whiffs of Chanel No. 5 on those nights. It was Gloria's signature scent. May never told him that at any given moment at least half of their guests were probably wearing Coco's most famous fragrance.

But tonight, May was covering the Joshua Tree room. As the restaurant was added onto over the years—each room a new homage to some part of California—an atrium popped up in the middle of the sprawling bungalow. Gloria gave the atrium a Saltillo tile floor, filled it with teddy-bear cholla in giant terracotta pots, hung air plants in macramé baskets, painted the walls a shade of desert rose, and strung twinkle lights across the open ceiling. She was ahead of her time. Joshua Tree was easily May's second favorite room.



## DUCK DIVE

May found a clean-ish white button-up shirt and slipped on her black Vans. Dinner service started in thirty minutes. Luckily the restaurant was just across the yard. Winding her way through the kitchen she slid silently onto the bench next to Louis, their head server, just as her dad was describing the halibut that was on tonight's menu. May rushed through her yellow dal, as everyone else headed to their stations. May hated to rush, it was so good. Just as she was about to stand up, Abee popped his head around the corner. Abee's black hair was wet and somehow perfectly tousled. He had been surfing.

"I thought you had a game tonight, that's why I'm working for you." May was only slightly perturbed.

"I do. It's a make-up from when we couldn't get to Carp a few weeks back. I just smelled dinner and thought I'd grab some for the road. Keep it quiet, I don't want my mom to see me and ask me about my Pre-Cal test. It was no bueno. My Spanish test though...well also no bueno." Abee quickly ladled the yellow mush from the pot into a deli container. The cartoon shark on Abee's gym bag winked at May as it jostled around on his shoulder.

"Three more days and we're free. What are we doing this summer?" Abee looked back to catch her reaction. They both laughed.

"I'm leaving for Portofino on Saturday, did I not tell you?"

"Oh yes, yes, and I'll be doing a summer program at Oxford. See you in September. Really though, I'm not gonna let you hide in the kitchen for two months, Mays. This summer is going to be our best one yet." Abee was stuffing a spoon in his back pocket, one of the nice ones.

Abee had said *best*. May couldn't help but hear *last*. Next summer Abee would graduate and he'd be getting ready to head off to—somewhere. May shook her head as if to clear the Etch A Sketch inside. He was half-way out the door now.

Abee looked back at her. "Hey, birthday bonfire next week? I'll tell some people, you tell some people. I'll try to not catch anyone's hair on fire this time."

"Sounds like a plan. To be safe I won't invite..." May stopped and turned, she could hear Louis calling for her. She looked back. Abee was gone. "...anyone with hair."

He was still her very best friend.

## NEW

*Listen: "Mother, Mother"*  
by Rayland Baxter  
and Dylan LeBlanc

## FOUR

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May generally had good self-esteem, she was happy enough with the way she looked, her red hair and freckles made her unique in a literal sea of blondes. She knew that she'd be able to go to culinary school, maybe even in Paris. May wasn't ever going to be homecoming queen, but she had plenty of friends. And what probably made her feel more confident than anything else was her birthday.

Well not the actual day, she didn't remember that obviously, but the date and the time. May was born on June 20, 2008 at 4:59 p.m. PDT, the precise moment of the summer solstice. Not a minute earlier, not a minute later, but the exact moment when the tilt of the earth put the northern hemisphere as close to the sun as it could be.

As far as omens went, this seemed like a pretty good one. The word solstice comes from the Latin words *sol* for "sun" and *sistere* for "to stand still." Solstice is the time when the sun appears to stand still for just a moment before the world keeps turning and another cycle of life begins.

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On June 20, 2008 at 4:59 p.m. PDT Elise Berenson gave birth to her best friend's daughter. She was named May Vere Thomas, and her hair was as fiery as a Malibu sunset, just like her mother's had been. The sun stood still for more than a moment that day.