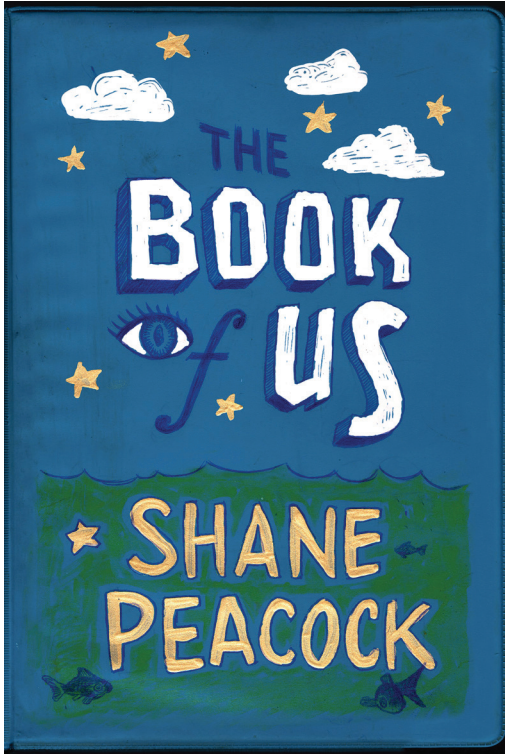


Excerpt from *The Book of Us*
by Shane Peacock



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Prologue

The truth is, I am writing this to impress you.

Maybe all novels are like that.

This is my gift to you: a story about two people who are no longer together, because one of them made a big mistake. He will not give her up, though — not ever.

What follows is what really happened¹, right up until the ending, which is a mystery to me. You will create that part ... and I will add it as the last chapter.

¹ *I had to make up a few minor things, though, since this is, after all, a novel.*

CHAPTER ONE

Big mistake

Late in the summer, late in the afternoon, late in the game that it seemed he was surely going to win, Noah Greene destroyed everything. It only happened because he was certain that Miranda wasn't there. No, that isn't strictly true. It was actually because of other things, things inside him, not just in his head or his heart but deeper, in his soul.

From the interior of the little portable change room, plastic and hot, he could hear the waves breaking against the shore, the seagulls and children shrieking, and the dull hum of adult conversation, but they were all just distant noises pinging around in another world, an outside reality. He could hear Rosie and Walker, Constance and Bruce, no more than the flip of a Frisbee away, but it was the irresistible words of the young woman who was in there with him that were real. They were penetrating his brain.

“I like you, you know, a lot.”

Everyone wanted Lisa Ann Bordeaux. All the guys, that is, or at least most of the guys — the guys who liked girls; and some of the girls wanted her too — the girls who liked girls. It was said she would do things that not many others would do, but not with just anybody. Brown eyes, shaggy blond hair, discriminating in the right way. She was cool. Amazing one-on-one, when she decided you were it.²

² *I don't mean to objectify Lisa Ann in any way. I hope this doesn't. I'm just saying what everyone saw, you know, from the outside.*

Noah was it that day.

Ten minutes earlier, he had not even known Lisa Ann was there, anywhere on the beach. It was only supposed to be the six of them.

“Where’s Mir?” asked Constance.

Back in those days, Noah always thought her haircut should be short and severe. It was long, though, and luxurious, hanging down past her shoulders in shining black ringlets, a perfect contrast with what she called her white colonial skin. He also thought the fact that Constance wore makeup didn’t fit, but she did, lots of it.

“She said she’d be here at six,” said Noah.

“5:33:33,” said Bruce, head down at his phone, lisping through his braces. “Thirty-three minutes and thirty-three seconds after five o’clock, August 27, in the year of Anno Dom —”

“We get it, Brew,” said Walker. “She’ll be here in a bit less than half.”

“She can get here whenever she wants,” said Constance. “You guys can’t tell her what to do.” She looked at Noah. “Boyfriend doesn’t mean ‘master.’”

Walker frowned and shrugged his shoulders.

“Uh, not saying any of that, Connie.”

“Constance! Stop calling me that ... Walkie!”

They spread their beach towels out on the sand. Rosie had a hamper full of food. She had volunteered to bring the whole dinner.

“I made some of your favorites, Noah.”

He could never figure out how she knew what he liked. He must have let it slip some time and she had memorized it, seized on it like the combination for her lock.

Rosie set the butter tarts out first, laying them down on her big blue towel beside what she called her “stumpy legs,” which were

bulging as she knelt to unload the hamper. She wore her cut-offs long, nearly halfway down her thighs.

“Thanks,” said Noah, looking away from her for a change room. He tossed his backpack down and dug around in it. “Forgot to wear my swimsuit underneath.”

Bruce had worn his to the beach. It was a loud, stars-and-stripes item at least a size and an era too snug, and he hadn’t bothered to wear pants over top. His body was ninety-nine percent dark skin and one percent swimsuit. But the others were just now wriggling out of their clothes. Walker Jones was standing to take down his jeans and reveal his knee-length, one-color orange, Nike-swooped suit that he had carefully chosen at the best store for the beach in town. Constance lay down and emerged out of her black track pants in her gray one-piece, pulling it down at the crotch and the back to make sure nothing was exposed. Noah stood up and looked around. The portable change rooms were bright blue and spaced on the beach about a hundred strides apart, all unisex.

Rosie soon had all the food out and stood up too, the shortest of the group. She looked around. Noah was maybe three feet from her. She could reach out and touch him. She pulled off her tee, doing that thing the attractive girls do when they cross their arms at the front and pull upward. Rosie didn’t count herself as attractive, so it felt like an act. She didn’t have the balls to shake her hair when she unveiled her suit top. There wasn’t much to her hair anyway, dark brown and in a ponytail. Her eyes caught Noah looking around. He wasn’t noticing her. She took off her jeans, wondering if he’d see that, sliding them down with a wiggle, but not bold enough to turn around to do it, butt to the fore.

“Are you sure you want that one?” Rosie’s mother had asked her when she’d purchased her swimsuit a few months ago. “It’s kind of small.”

“And kind of red,” said her little sister. “It will look like a light on the beach, beckoning the boys.”

Rosie had rolled her eyes at her, but she'd bought the suit anyway. It actually wasn't very revealing, not that she thought she had a lot to reveal anyway. It was that it wasn't quite her style. Whatever her style was. She promised herself she wouldn't be self-conscious in it, but she was, the instant she was exposed. That was how she felt. Exposed.³

Noah was turned the other way. He'd spotted the closest change room and from where he was standing could tell that it was unoccupied, the image of the green traffic light evident in the handle you slid across once you were inside.

Rosie could feel Walker's eyes on her and Bruce's too. She wasn't sure if their attention⁴ was a compliment or not. Boys got weird about bikinis. You would think they'd never seen a girl in the flesh before, or at least in a lot of flesh. Noah wasn't weird about it, at least, not about her standing there in one, exposed. That was understandable, though. He had Miranda. Just months ago, it was all different. He hadn't seemed like he was in her league. But then, what boy is, really? Rosie had known something most girls didn't, though. Noah Greene had always been in Miranda's league. He was in all of their leagues. She could have told anyone that.

“I'm gonna change,” he said, walking toward the blue cubicle in the hot sand with his bathing suit in hand, which Rosie had known was loose-fitting but tight in the right places, perfect on him ... and red. He didn't turn back to her at all when he said it, didn't

3 Rosie told me all this: about what she was thinking, her swimsuit, even the boy's torsos thing that comes later, turned red when she did. I am not pretending I know what goes on in a girl's head.

4 Constance explained a thing called the “male gaze” to me. Interesting stuff. This is my version of that, I guess.

turn his brown eyes on her or sweep back his longish, light brown hair the way he always did when he looked at you and started a conversation. He did pull off his shirt, though, as he walked. There was something about boys' torsos, certain boys, that made Rosie look.

So, it was just the five of them there at first. The spring on the change room door creaked, Noah stepped inside and the door slammed behind him, and he slid the image of the red light into place. Occupied.

"No rude comments about the girls or I'll brain you," said Constance, settling onto her blanket, not even glancing at Walker when she said it.

"How about I put on your sunscreen, Connie?"

"I'd rather ask Heinrich Himmler."

"Nazi figure," said Bruce. "Second World War; Reichsfuhrer of the Schutzstaffel, the SS, and the Geheime Staatspolizei, known as the Gestapo; architect of the final solution, destruction of the Jewish people; perhaps more ruthless than his leader, DIE Fuhrer, Adolph Hitler, father's original name Schicklgruber, erstwhile crappy painter, racist, good speaker. Himmler began as a chicken farmer and —"

"I think we get the picture, Brew. She'd prefer that I didn't apply the sunscreen."

"I'll do it," said Rosie.

Walker looked the other way, across the beach. He was staring again, but it was more intense than when he had glanced at Rosie. Miranda was coming and he had spotted her a mile away. Constance looked up too. Rosie turned. Miranda was like that. People always noticed her arrival. All the girls knew she deserved it too. She was gliding toward them in her quiet way, wearing a yellow

sarong wrap over her suit, a book in hand, a thick one, of course.⁵ All four watched her approach.

None of them saw Lisa Ann Bordeaux.

The spring on the change room door magically made no sound and neither did it slam as she let it close. In a breath, Lisa Ann was in there with Miranda Owens' boyfriend. That status was a big part of his attractiveness, that and the fact that Noah Greene had been revealed over these last few months to be exactly what Rosie Gonzalez had always known he was.

The change room, that place where you took off your clothes, was barely big enough for one person.

"Hi," was all Lisa Ann said to him at first, but there was a world of meaning in that word.

Miranda had begun to run when she saw her friends, somehow negotiating the sand as if it were a vulcanized track. She could fly. She seemed to get to them in no time. Three hugs and a nod at Walker, the thud of her book down onto her blanket, and she wanted to know about Noah.

"Where is he?" she asked with a smile, fixing her short, strawberry blond hair. Rosie was always amazed at how sensible, humble, and attractive she was, all at once. It seemed impossible. Miranda wasn't perfect. Her nose was a little too long, her figure probably too boyish, maybe a bit taller than many girls wanted to be, but there was something about her that drew you to her and shut up all the boys the instant she was nearby. It was some sort of charisma. It was in her sparkling, pale blue eyes, and in the way she moved, and it came from somewhere inside her. Miranda popped her sunglasses up, undid her sarong in one motion, letting it fall, and put her hands on her waist.

"Changing," said Constance, sounding bored and nodding to-

5 Pretty sure it was The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt. She loved that book.

ward the little blue building.

“Oh,” said Miranda. “I’ll surprise him.”

She heard their voices as she approached, male and female inside the tight-quartered change room. His voice had become special to her; Lisa Ann’s was distinctive too, like an alarm to other girls.

Miranda froze. She listened. Then she turned away, her face grim and down, her feet churning through the sand again, back toward her friends. As she moved, the door of the change room sprang open, loudly this time. Lisa Ann came tumbling out first, Noah behind her, his shirt and bathing suit still in hand, shoving her, though wrapped up in her too. Her hand still gripped his arm. She was dressed in a flowery little bikini.

“Get away from me!” he said to her.

Constance, Walker, Rosie, and Bruce stared. The first with a frown, the second with a riveted boy-stare at the flower pattern, and the other two in confusion.

“Come on, Noah,” said Lisa Ann.

“Get away from me!” he shouted again.

Miranda turned on him. “EXACTLY what I was going to say!” she cried and marched away again, seizing her blanket and her sarong and beginning to move faster.

“Mir!” said Rosie. “Your book!” She picked it up and held it out to her friend.

Miranda stopped, hesitated, took a few strides back, ripped the book from Rosie’s hand and started to run.

“Miranda!” shouted Noah. “Nothing happened! I promise you! I was trying to get away!”

Constance glanced at Lisa Ann, then back at Noah. “Poor boy,” she said. “Under attack and helpless.” She glared at him. “CREEP!”

“Nothing happened!” shouted Noah again after his vanishing

girlfriend. People were staring now.

“Nothing happened?” said Walker. He gave Lisa Ann Bordeaux and her bikini another look. “Really?”

“SHUT UP, WALK!” Noah turned back toward Miranda; an expression of terror appeared to grow on his face.

“A boy and a girl in a change room together,” said Bruce. “One in a small bathing costume, the other partially clothed.”

“Are you all right, Noah?” asked Rosie. Her voice was barely audible.

“Are you serious, Rosie? Is HE all right?”

“Nothing did happen,” said Lisa Ann with her hands on her hips, “unfortunately. Just a bit of fun, no big deal.” She shrugged and began to walk away. “I think it’s what he said,” she said over her shoulder.

“What did you say?” asked Constance, her eyes now blazing at Noah.

Noah caught up to Miranda on the boardwalk. He reached out and grabbed her arm. She instantly whirled on him and tore herself from his grip.

“Do not touch me!”

“Nothing happened! I know it looks bad that we were both in there but she —”

“You don’t get it, do you? Guys don’t get it, and I thought you were different!”

“What?”

“What you said! Do I have to spell it out? Though it’s more than that too!”

“What did I say?”

She glared at him.

“I don’t want to ever see you again, to hear your name, to even

look at a book you've read; and you will certainly never, EVER touch me again! Do you understand me, Noah, you jerk?"

His face fell.

"Mir?"

"Leave me alone for the rest of my life!"

She stalked away. He stood there desolate for a moment, his world collapsing. When Miranda said something, she meant it. He felt tears coming. Then he remembered something she had said once about girls walking away in anger from boys in movies and the guys running after them, doing whatever it took to get them back. "I know it sounds stupid, but I love the idea of a guy running after me in that way."

He ran after her, his heart pounding. He couldn't believe how desperate he felt. It was as if his life, his very existence, depended on her taking him back. By the time he caught her again, she was off the boardwalk and out on the street near an ice cream stand. There were lots of people around. Everyone seemed happy. It was as if they were aliens. It was as if he were in a movie, a horror story. This time, when he reached out for her, she actually shoved him away, pushed him hard with both her hands on his chest, thrusting him back with Miranda Owens' undeniable power.

She wasn't even crying now. Her face was red and there was hatred in her eyes.

"I ...," he sputtered, trying to look optimistic, trying to bring her irresistible smile to her face. "I ... I'm running after you ... calling you back."

"Fuck you, Noah Greene."⁶ She didn't move when she said it, didn't flinch. She stood there and stared right at him.

He felt panic invade him. He dropped to his knees.

"I beg you," he said. "I love you."

⁶ *That is a direct quote.*

“Oh, please, that is not possible. No one says what you said about a girl and loves her. You are a fraud. That’s what you are to me: a fraud! You lied to me in the past and I ignored it, but now THIS! You had to be different, Noah, different from other guys. You HAD to be. But it turns out you aren’t.”

This time, she started to sprint. There wasn’t a girl and only a few boys in the school who could catch Miranda Owens. Noah got up and ran after her for a while, crying now as he moved, his sense of well-being wrapped up in what would happen next. She ran along the sidewalk and cut dangerously across the main street almost into the path of cars. On the other side, ripping past pedestrians and familiar stores where they had shopped together, she glanced back a few times to see him chasing her. He kept trying to keep up, though his body would barely obey him, and by the time she reached the neighborhood two blocks from the far side of town, a block from her own, he stopped. He leaned on his knees, gasping, sobbing, wounded, embarrassed, and desperate. He thought she looked back for an instant right at the end, one last time, before she disappeared, but he wasn’t sure.

Miranda Owens, THE Miranda Owens, the most amazing person he would ever meet, the most amazing love he had ever known and would ever know, had run out of his life.

It was because of what he said.⁷

7 Obviously can’t reveal this quite yet — I’d be a dunce if I let it out here. It’s coming though.