

The Happiness Thief

Nicole Bokat

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The Happiness Thief is a psychological thriller in which a woman confronts the truth about a horrific car crash.

In Nicole Bokat's psychological thriller *The Happiness Thief*, a woman grapples with the mental fallout of her mother's death.

When Natalie was a teenager, her mother was killed in a car crash. Decades have passed, and the memory faded and blurred. But Natalie is nagged by one constant thought: that she is the reason her mother died.

Then Natalie's husband's infidelity throws her life into disarray. Isabel, her stepsister, offers her respite at a happiness conference in the Cayman Islands. After the conference, Natalie and Isabel hit something with their car. When there's no sign of what, or who, was hit, Isabel is quick to usher Natalie away. The women return home, where a cryptic email pulls Natalie into a spiral of doubt about what truly happened that night.

This is a methodical novel, following with care as Natalie reels from one trauma after another. There are tantalizing clues about what happened on her trip; even as they come in, Natalie attempts to maintain normalcy. A cycle of paranoia ensues. Jeremy, a journalist who's working on an exposé of Isabel's manufactured happiness conference, and who has trauma in his own past, becomes Natalie's ally. As they grow close, concerns about his involvement in the Cayman Islands incident arise. Natalie assumes some risks in initiating a romance with him, but also finds solace in their relationship.

Natalie is a timid heroine because of her past trauma. The prose evokes melancholy when it focuses on her; she's described as being coated in sadness like an oil. The trauma of her mother's death impacts everything about her, and the text reinforces that heavy sense of despair at every opportunity, as with unsettling descriptions of living room furniture threatening to topple and the floor and seeming to waver like heat waves. Elsewhere, Isabel comes across as sinister and charismatic: she is careful about her words, and subtle in her attempts to gaslight Natalie and manipulate her actions.

The story's initial focus on the early car crash builds into a tantalizing mystery around whether Natalie misremembered events or is at fault. The second crash and its subsequent developments throw Natalie's recollections, and Isabel's trustworthiness, into doubt. The identity of the email sender, and Natalie's attempts to discern the truth of both crashes, result in tension; each reveal builds suspense. It is obvious that Natalie's memories are incomplete; the explanation behind this leads into a powerful conclusion.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (May 25, 2021)

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