

**I  
LOVED  
YOU IN  
ANOTHER  
LIFE**

**HOT  
KEY  
BOOKS**

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First published in Great Britain in 2023 by  
HOT KEY BOOKS  
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square  
London WC1B 4DA  
Owned by Bonnier Books  
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden  
bonnierbooks.co.uk/HotKeyBooks

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-1432-9

*Also available as an ebook and in audio*

1

Design by Lucia Baez  
Text set in Joanna MT Pro  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK  
bonnierbooks.co.uk

To Wingate, whose heart reflects my glow.  
To Stephanie, whose love is my Lofoten snow.  
And to Steven Spielberg, whose answer to me was "No."

This book contains references to  
panic attacks and alcoholism.

Please read with care.

# PART ONE

REQUIEM

# EVAN

## a bird in a tree at night

MY LITTLE BROTHER PREFERS CORNERS. He likes sitting quietly in them, and I just wish people understood that sitting quietly in a corner is not universal code for *I am sad, I am lonely, please save me*. All it means for sure is that the quiet kid in the corner would like to sit quietly in the corner, and can we not ascribe our own sets of values to quiet kids in corners the world over? It's not like it costs us anything. It's not like we were using that corner to begin with. And look, I'm sure there are *some* quiet kids in *some* corners who are sad and lonely and need saving. All I'm saying is, let's not assume they *all* are. Silence and sadness are not the same things. And I wish more people understood that, is all.

"Okay," says Ali, and she holds back my hair so I don't get vomit in it, and even though I can't see her, I know she has that look in her eyes, the soft one, the one she saves for when she wants me to know I am seen. And so I ramble about quiet kids, and she knows I'm talking about my brother, Will. She knows this because she sees me.

"You won't love me after this," I say.

"Eh."

"There's no way you love me after this."

"I mean, it's mostly you who loves me, anyway."

I laugh between heaves and feel the sudden urge to plant character flags. “This doesn’t mean anything, you know.”

“I know,” says Ali.

“I’m a responsible adult, basically.”

She says, “Just breathe, Evan,” and I wonder if she was in the basement back at the party when Heather said that thing about all the important stuff in life being easy. Like how our bodies breathe on their own, even when we sleep, and how our hearts keep beating no matter what, and that’s when I had to leave the party. Were you there, Ali? Do you know why I had to leave the party? I left because the heart is a muscle. I left because of what happens to muscles that don’t get used over long periods of time, and even though that basement was packed with people, all I could hear were mottled voices, all I could feel were cruel hands, all I could see were hungry eyes.

Do you understand, Ali? I left the party because of atrophy. And if I think too hard about it now, I’m afraid I’ll stop breathing. If I think too hard about it, I’m afraid my own heart will stop beating, and then whose heart will glow to Will?

“Mine,” Ali says. “And anyway, that’s not why you left the party.”

“It’s not?”

“No. You left for the same reason you drank three and a half vodka tonics. Which, for a constitution as delicate as yours, is roughly the equivalent of injecting a shrew with enough sedative to fell a baby moose.” Ali gathers a loose strand of my hair, gently tucks it into her fist behind my head. “You got shit-faced and ran because of what Heather said about Will.”

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and stand up

straight. We're in the park down the road from Heather Abernathy's house, which is as far as I could get before my stomach attempted to annex my internal organs.

"Heather Abernathy is a sack of shit," says Ali. "And her name should be illegal, it's impossible to fucking say."

O, Ali Pilgrim! She of the soft eyes and quick wit, whose heart is pure, whose amity is fierce, and whose hammer never missed a nailhead. No one understands us, what we have. It's not in books or movies. I've never once heard a song and thought, *Oh, that's Ali and me*. When two people spend most of their time together, misinterpretation is inevitable, though not surprising, given the world's preoccupation with the Horny Teen. It's like it never occurred to anyone that I might love my best friend simply for being awesome. (And to be clear, I am routinely horny, just not for Ali.)

Anyway, they don't write about us, even though we exist all over the place.

"You okay?" she asks.

"I feel like my stomach punched my throat in the dick."

Ali nods. "I find your biologically acrobatic metaphor appropriate."

In addition to the tears, the throbbing head, the furious retching, it's also late August in Iverton, Illinois, a uniquely miserable combination for anyone prone to crotch sweat (yours truly), so yeah, I'm a blessed mess, basically.

The park is silent.

A bird sits quietly in a nearby tree, watching us.

"Have you ever seen that?"

Ali turns to look. "Yes, I have seen a bird before."



## I LOVED YOU IN ANOTHER LIFE

Right, but I read this thing once about a scientist in the seventeenth century who believed birds migrated to the moon, because all he knew was that his favorite birds disappeared at the same time every year. He even calculated how long it would take to get to the moon, which apparently coincided with migration cycles, and since science in the 1600s wasn't exactly flush with cosmic data (vis-à-vis atmospheric pressure in space), when he theorized that birds were sustained by excess fat on their interstellar voyage, and when he said they slept through most of their two-month journey to the moon, everyone was like, *Yeah, probably, that's it.*

"You're a chatty drunk." Ali looks from the bird to me. "Though most people get *less* articulate."

"I've just never seen one like this. At night. Sitting like that."

I imagine this bird soaring through the outer reaches of space, alone and asleep, and it's the most peaceful thing.

A song plays from one of the houses surrounding the park; it's quiet but full, a beautiful kind of sad. I close my eyes and listen to the woman singing, imagine the notes floating from a nearby window, bouncing around the playground equipment, the trees. Her voice is a whispery echo, intimate and tortured, and even though the lyrics are imperceptible, you don't need to perceive them to know her pain.

With some songs, the scar is obvious even if the wound isn't.

"I am concerned about you, Evan."

I want to tell her she should be. That my old life is a building collapsed, my new one a sad composite fashioned from rubble. But before I can get the words out, nausea roils again, and I must return to the bushes. Ali resumes her posture of protection, pulling back

DAVID ARNOLD

my hair as I let my insides out, and I think of the ways Heather Abernathy was wrong: breathing isn't easy, not for me; maybe I don't have to tell my heart to keep beating, but it's a runaway train these days; mostly, Heather Abernathy was wrong when she said that thing about my brother. "Heather Abernathy is a sack of shit," I say, and now I'm crying as I vomit, and Ali sort of hugs me with one arm, guards my hair with the other.

The song echoes through the park; the bird sits quietly on high.

"I'm a responsible adult, basically," I say.

Ali says she knows, and I wonder how it's possible to love someone so absolutely and hate them so entirely for seeing me so completely.

# SHOSH

## an otherwise uneventful morning

THE SUMMER SUNRISE WAS ESPECIALLY vibrant, an explosion of pinks and purples so bright, anyone lucky enough to be awake right now must feel its colors in their teeth. Or at least, that's what Shosh thought, standing by the pool, taking it all in. It was the kind of sunrise to conjure vast ideas of one's place in the course of history, of purpose, of life and death and life again: the kind of spectacle wherein an existential brooder such as herself might see the entire timeline of the universe and, upon closer inspection, recognize her own infinitesimal place in the order of things; the kind of sunrise that—

“Greta fucking Gerwig, amirite?”

Pulled from her sunrise reverie, Shosh turned to find a girl wearing a bikini and a look of perpetual indifference. “What?” said Shosh.

The girl had a phone in one hand, a beer in the other, which she sipped with the measured authority of a true sunrise beer drinker, as if to say, *Yeah, I know my way around an aluminum fucking can.*

“*Lady Bird*,” said the girl. “*Little Women*. I mean, I prefer Winona’s Jo to Saoirse’s, but let’s be honest, we’re all here for Chalamet’s hair.” She clinked her can into Shosh’s bottle as if the two were partners in crime. “You’re into mumblecore, yeah?”

“I don’t know you,” said Shosh.

“Oh. I’m Heather.”

Shosh calculated the odds of multiple Heathers at this party. “Abernathy?”

The girl smiled down at the pool. “Yeah.”

Before Shosh could think of what to say, the one and only Heather Abernathy—whose pool they were standing next to, and whose party Shosh had effectively obliterated only moments ago—began to pitch her original screenplay. “I mean yes, it’s dragons and thrones, but it’s more like if Wes Anderson invaded King’s Landing. Total fucking edge.”

The Abernathy house (not unlike Heather herself) was an orchestrated display of flash: everything was over-the-top luxurious, symmetrical to the point of obnoxious; the pool, a wide figure eight, was lit from the bottom up; there was a double-deck pergola, a garden gazebo, a cascade fountain. Most everyone had gone home by now, but there were still a few stragglers in various stages of undress, passed out or asleep like soldiers fallen in the world’s least noble battle. Shosh’s sister, Stevie, used to call them the *three-step hangers* . . . *Those who beg to hang out try to hang on, only to wind up hung over.*

A brief smile at the memory, as Shosh raised her bottle to the sunrise—*cheers*—and downed the last drop of whiskey.

“I mean, look at you,” said Heather, reaching out, rubbing the hem of Shosh’s coat sleeve. “You’d be perfect for it.”

“For what.”

“The lead.” Heather’s hand drifted up the sleeve of Shosh’s waterlogged coat. “In my movie.”

“Right. *The Targaryen Tenenbaums.*”

“You’re even funny. Plus, you look the part.” Heather’s eyes navigated Shosh like eager tourists. “Who wears a coat in August and gets away with it?”

If styles were climates, Shosh Bell was tornado couture. Currently, she wore a T-shirt that said FUCK GUNS tucked into high-waisted cutoffs, Sperry duck boots, and her favorite checked wool coat, an oversize Stella McCartney deal she’d snagged last year from a secondhand shop that didn’t know what it had. Like any reasonable human, having discovered the perfect coat, Shosh considered the item more of an appendage than a garment. As such, it would obviously remain attached to her body for the duration of her time on earth. The way she saw it, if you couldn’t say who you were with your clothes, there wasn’t much sense getting out of bed in the morning, was there.

Unfortunately, at the moment, the entire ensemble was a sopping-wet mess.

“Heard about your sister,” said Heather, turning back to the pool. “Fucking sucks.”

Shosh held up the now-empty bottle. “Is there more booze in the house?”

Heather handed her the rest of her beer. “I’m serious about my movie. We should talk. Lemme get your number.”

“I don’t really do that anymore.”

“Give out your number?”

“Act.”

Heather said that was too bad, and then something else about following each other on social, how it felt like the night had brought them together, but Shosh had stopped listening. A bird had

caught her eye, flying straight for the sunrise, and it wasn't the bird itself that demanded attention so much as the impression of the bird, the way its wings stretched out, not flapping, just a completely effortless soar. Time slowed, and the bird felt like beauty multiplied, elevated into something sacrosanct. Watching, Shosh felt herself elevated with it.

"You know Chris called the cops, right?" said Heather.

"Yeah."

When it was clear this was all Heather would get, she said, "Okay, well. Good luck, I guess," and then turned for the house.

"Hey," said Shosh.

"Yeah?"

Dripping wet, more hurricane than tornado, Shosh said, "Why do you think I did it?"

"I don't know. But you're a fucking legend now."

Only after Heather had disappeared inside did Shosh spot the small horde of faces huddled around the bay window. Mere months ago, she'd been in school with these jokers, back when her life was a rising star with LA on the horizon. But then she'd graduated, and her star had collapsed, her life a cloud of dust hovering aimlessly in space. She raised a hand as if to wave to the horde, then flipped her hand around at the last second, raised her middle finger.

Stumbling toward the pool, she could feel what a mess she was. You hit a wall, though, don't you. Reach a point where you're as much a mess now as you'll ever be, so why stop? At the edge of the pool, she crumpled into a sitting position, dangling her duck boots in the water. On the horizon, the sun was higher now, a little less rainbow fire, a little more ho-hum sun.

The bird was gone, and she felt the sadness that follows the

absence of beauty briefly known: “Melancholy,” she said. Sadness never sounded so lovely.

She tossed the empty whiskey bottle into the pool, watched it float for a few seconds before water began to fill it, drag it down. Someone in the house had turned on music. It floated through an open window, found her here by the pool, a song so perfectly sad, she thought the singer must understand her melancholy on a molecular level. In time, other voices rose over the music, stern ones carried by heavy boots. *Let them come*, she thought. The cops could inflict no punishment worse than the one fate had already doled out.

As she waited, she watched the bottle sink to the bottom, where it came to rest beside the front tire of Chris Bond’s Chevy Tahoe, which, moments ago—just as the sun had begun its explosion of pinks and purples—Shosh had driven directly, and with great velocity, into the Abernathy swimming pool.

“It looks better down there, don’t you think?” she asked the officer as he pulled her to her feet. “All lit up in the underwater lights.”

# EVAN

## the dichotomy of Will Taft

I DON'T WAKE UP SO much as detonate in slow motion.

Whatever thunder I'd unleashed in the unsuspecting park bushes last night is nothing compared to the lightning in my skull this morning. Slowly—ever so gently—I inch my way to the edge of the bed, swivel, get my feet on the floor. The clock on the bedside table reads noon. The sunshine through the window is borderline belligerent. Downstairs, Mom is either cooking or constructing a small metal house, I honestly can't tell which.

O, vodka plus tonic! Siren of Night, why must you torment me so?

Truth be told, this is my first hangover, and I have to wonder why anybody ever has a second. Like—your first hangover, okay, you don't know what you don't know. But every hangover thereafter, that shit's on you.

My phone buzzes on the floor. I pick it up to find a slew of texts from Ali . . .

Ali: G'mornin! Hi-ya! Top o' the day!  
Time to hop outta bed and sing odelay!  
The sun is shining, the birds are chirping  
The world is an oyster primed for slurping  
Get up, get up, come out and play!



I LOVED YOU IN ANOTHER LIFE

**Evan: OMG  
WTF is wrong with you**

Ali: EVAN, m'boy!  
Let me guess—you woke up this morning  
and immediately wished you hadn't

**Evan: My head feels like a roaring  
gorilla party**

Ali: How fun for you  
At least your mom isn't taking you to Target  
for . . .  
Wait for it . . .  
BACK-TO-SCHOOL SHOPPING

**Evan: Non**

Ali: Oui

**Evan: Be sure to get extra scotch  
tape 🙄**

Ali: I am a perpetual 3rd grader in her head

**Evan: You always think you have  
enough scotch tape and then it's  
gone**

Ali: I could split an atom and she'd give me  
a popsicle

**Evan: Hey  
Thank you**

Ali: ??

DAVID ARNOLD

**Evan: Last night was a disaster  
But my hair is delightfully vomit-free**

Ali: ♥

**Evan: ♥**

Ali: Have fun with your gorillas

**Evan: Two words: ECONOMY PACK**

• • •

Sharing a bathroom with a seven-year-old means plunging the toilet at least once a week. This morning's clog is especially resilient, and only after I get it to flush do I find the Post-it note on the counter. Scribbled in Will's handwriting is a single word—sorry—and two arrows: one points to the toilet; one points to the dried toothpaste in the sink.

In some ways, my brother is every bit the stereotypical seven-year-old: he is criminally disorganized, his room a shifting tectonic plate of toys; everywhere he goes, there's a trail of wrappers and snotty tissues in his wake; he leaves the house with the door wide open, leaves the lights on in every room, forgets to do his homework, forgets to take off his muddy shoes.

He's seven. So it goes.

But in other, more-difficult-to-define ways, Will is an absolutely singular human. And maybe this bathroom, more than anywhere in the house, encapsulates that dichotomy. He may leave a mess in the sink and a floater in the toilet, but he'll damn sure leave a note apologizing for both. Our trash can is usually full of Band-Aid wrappers, but (a) he paid for those Band-Aids with his

own allowance, and (b) the Band-Aids are a self-identified coping mechanism, so I'll flush down a wave of floaters, and I'll scrape a mountain of toothpaste from the sink before I utter a word of complaint.

I brush my teeth, take a quick shower, and by the time I'm downstairs, Mom is scraping the remnants of what might generously be called "breakfast" into the garbage, mumbling under her breath. "I got greedy, is what happened. Those waffles last week were a hit, and I got too big for my britches."

Aside from the Mary Taft staples—taco casserole and spaghetti with spicy meatballs—Mom is a notoriously awful cook, though it never seems to stop her from trying. Gently, I remove the skillet from her hand, set it on the counter, wrap my arms around her.

"Hi, Mom."

It's a strange thing, being taller than the person who literally made me. I don't know when it happened, and it doesn't seem right, but here I am, feeling my mother's breath on my shoulder as her body deflates in my embrace. The word *hug*, as a verb, feels inherently lonely: you can hug someone who doesn't hug you back. But the same word as a noun implies mutual participation.

She takes a breath—

I feel her arms on my back, slowly turning the verb into a noun.

"You okay?" I whisper.

She nods, pulls out of the hug, wipes her eyes. After our talk a couple nights ago, I wasn't sure either of us would have any tears left, but I was wrong.

"I tried to make breakfast." She points to the trash can.

"Okay."

"I know you had a late night. Thought it might be nice."

I shrug. “Breakfast is overrated.”

She opens the fridge, stares blankly inside. “How was the party?”

I consider the variety of analogies I might use to convey my heroically shitty night: Cheese-dust-on-your-fingers awful? Preface-your-Facebook-post awful? If someone calling when they could have texted were a night out, that was my night.

Instead, I answer with the only positive thing I can think: “Ali was there.”

“Good,” says Mom, and even though it sounds like a throwaway response, I know she gets it. Ali is the kind of friend who is also an answer.

I sit at the kitchen counter while Mom makes sandwiches. She asks about the Headlands application, if I’ve gotten a good start on my essay, which I haven’t, so I deflect; I suggest she quit one of her jobs, given the circumstances, but she won’t, so she deflects. When it’s clear neither of us is willing to budge, she says, “Can’t believe my baby’s gonna be a senior,” and I wonder at this apparent epidemic of adults not being able to deal with the passage of time.

“Guess where Ali is right now?” I say.

“Where?”

“Target. Her mom took her back-to-school shopping.”

Mom smiles for a second, and then—“Oh shit! Shit!”

“What?”

She spins on a dime, puts both hands in her hair. “I forgot about school supplies. They sent the list, and I just—damn it—I have to be at work in an hour—”

“I can take him.”

“—it’s my only morning off this week—”

“Mom. I can take him.”

Her hands fall to her sides, and her face tilts. “Yeah?”

“We’ll go today. No problem.”

She leans across the counter, puts a hand on my cheek, and gets that look on her face like her tears called and they’re on their way.

“It’s no big deal, Mom.”

“You shouldn’t have to be this good.”

“Okay.”

“But I’m glad that you are.”

“Mom? I literally have nothing else to do.”

“Thank you.”

“He’s in his room?”

“Disappeared into his spaceship this morning,” she says. “Took his cereal with him. I haven’t seen him since.”

“You get ready for work. I’ll clean up here and take him.”

After another full round of hugs and thank-yous and lost-without-yous, Mom heads to her room. Alone in the kitchen, I text Ali to see if she’s still at Target.

Ali: OMG yes

Mom won’t let us leave until we find something called a “trapper keeper”

WTF and FML

WTFML

**Evan: Grab us some tape, we’re on our way!**



Mornings like these are why I question the Headlands gap year. Applications and finances aside, I can't very well fly from Southeast Alaska to Iverton, Illinois, every time Mom double-books or forgets a shift. One thing I've learned since Dad left: when you're a single parent, the duties aren't just doubled, they're multiplied exponentially. It hardly matters that I've had my eye on the Headlands program for years, that I've been obsessed with the idea of the north for as long as I can remember, or that every time I see a photo of snowcapped mountains, I feel the unstoppable urge to draw them on everything I own. It hardly matters that Dad offered to pay for half if I get in. An absent dad who pays for everything is like a mathematician growing a tomato: Tomatoes are great, but how about you solve for fucking  $x$ ? However lacking our financial situation (and it is lacking), no amount of money solves the problem he's created by not being here.

Enter: the Headlands dilemma. Even if I get accepted—even if I qualify for the most generous financial aid package—I cannot envision a world in which I head off to Glacier Bay, Alaska, next spring, leaving Mom alone with Will for six months.

And that was *before* the bombshell two nights ago.

I put away the sandwich stuff, wipe crumbs off the counter, and when I pop the lid to the trash, the remnants of Mom's attempted breakfast greet me like some sluggish crustacean. Our house is small; I can hear her in her bedroom now, music blaring, drawers opening and closing as she gets ready for a job she shouldn't have to keep. And it occurs to me that the cooking, the loud music, the second job—all of it—are great ways to avoid the darker corners of the mind.

I LOVED YOU IN ANOTHER LIFE

Halfway upstairs, I realize the song coming from her room is the same one I heard in the park last night.

The park where I vomited because I'd had too much to drink at a party I never wanted to attend.

Maybe Mom's not the only one avoiding dark corners.