

**I  
LOVED  
YOU IN  
ANOTHER  
LIFE**

David Arnold



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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 heavens 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."



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

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: ??

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 here we are.

"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 split in half, 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.

# SHOSH

## namesake misnomer

"THIS PLACE SMELLS LIKE A hot shoe. Like that summer foot smell, you know? Peel off your socks and just . . ." Shosh made a little pffff sound, exploding one hand—to demonstrate a cloud of noxious odor released into the air—while propping her phone on her knee with the other. "At least last time, I had one of those interview rooms to myself. You should see this waiting room, it's a shit-show."

"But you're not under arrest?" asked Ms. Clark.

"No," sighed Shosh. "Just detained."

Aside from the smell, her main gripe with the Iverton police station was the seating situation: the leather padding stuck to her legs so every time she shifted, it sounded like a low-key fart, and even though she was entirely innocent, she could hardly blame the chair, as doing so only made her more culpable in the eyes of the room.

And oh how they roved.

Onscreen, Ms. Clark helped her kid—an adorable three-year-old named Charlie—crack an egg on the rim of a bowl. "And you're okay? Other than the hot-shoe thing."

"I am okay. Other than the hot-shoe thing."

There was no word for what Ms. Clark was to Shosh. From day one in freshman drama, when she'd walked into the room to find her teacher standing on a chair in the tree pose, eyes closed,



chanting the word *balance* over and over again like some bizzarro Benedictine monk, it was clear Ms. Clark wasn't a typical teacher. And whether because of Shosh's talent, drive, or something else altogether, Ms. Clark took her under her swanlike wing for the duration of high school.

Part of Shosh was there still.

"I haven't seen a poem in a while," said Ms. Clark.

Shosh raised one eyebrow, then slowly rotated the phone a full 360 degrees. "Yeah, I've been a little preoccupied. Or maybe you hadn't heard."

"Frost says poetry is a way of taking life by the throat."

"You hear the one about the Jedi poet?"

Ms. Clark eyed her over the large mixing bowl. "Metaphors be with you?"

"So that's a yes."

"Shosh—"

"Okay. I'll post another one, God. They're barely even poems, just mindless little—"

"Anything you make is part of you. That's sacred, okay? While the masses may belittle—"

"We be big. Got it."

As a student, Shosh's life had been theater. How appropriate then that most of what she'd learned in theater applied to life, an education her ex-teacher seemed dead set on continuing from her kitchen across town. "You'll have enough critics without adding yourself to the pile," said Ms. Clark. "But critics aren't makers. They can't touch it, not really." Then, to Charlie: "Not yet, honey, the batter is still raw."

Baffled and betrayed, Charlie said, "You let me wid cookieth."

If cuteness were a buffet, little Charlie's plate would be piled high. Between his cheeks and his lisp, the kid was a complete menace to society.

"What are you making, Chuck?" asked Shosh.

Charlie stuck his face right up to the phone: "Blueberry flip-jackth!" And Shosh wanted to melt into the screen, become part of this tiny, beautiful family.

"Et voilà!" said Ms. Clark, popping the tray in the oven as Charlie disappeared from the room, a cloud of flour in his wake.

"Listen—" Ms. Clark relocated the phone to another part of the kitchen. "You've got plenty of people in your life to point out your fuckups. So I'm just going to be here for you. But don't think for a second that means I endorse your behavior or that I'm not going to urge you to get your shit together, Shosh. Speaking of which, I'm still in touch with the dean at USC—"

"No thank you. I told you, I'm done with that."

Ms. Clark sighed, and it killed Shosh to think how much time her teacher had invested in a future that was now nonexistent. Letters written, phone calls made, relationships formed, all on Shosh's behalf—all for nothing. Shosh sometimes wondered if her decision to forgo USC hurt Ms. Clark more than it hurt her.

"One thing about her?" said Ms. Clark.

Neither of them could remember when it started, but their calls always ended with Shosh recalling a specific memory about her sister.

"She named me," said Shosh.

"I didn't know that."

"I came home nameless from the hospital. Mom and Dad

couldn't agree what to call me, and after a day or two, Stevie was calling me *Shosh*. She was two, it's not like she was stringing full sentences together. When they asked where she got the name, she said she dreamed it."

Silence for a second, as Ms. Clark's piney-green eyes began to water, and just as she opened her mouth to say something—

"*Stevie Bell?*"

Shosh's phone slipped to the floor—"Shit." She bent down, grabbed it, and looked up to find a police officer scowling at her.

"Are you Shosh Bell?" the officer said.

In life, Stevie and Shosh had often been confused for each other. Since Stevie's death, that confusion seemed to have seeped into Shosh's brain: it wasn't the first time she'd heard her sister's name when someone said her own.

"Yes," she said. "I'm Shosh Bell."

"Your CDW's here. Also, your mother."

Onscreen, a worried Ms. Clark said, "What's a CDW?"

"Court-designated worker," said Shosh, wondering when she'd learned the shorthand of this place. "Gotta run. I'll text you."

Shosh followed the cop to the desk up front where two women awaited with faces like shadows: Audrey the social worker (or Aubrey, she could never remember which) and the one and only Lana Bell.

Shosh looked at the social worker. "Hello . . . Aubrey?"

"It's Audrey."

"Hmm, but what if it isn't?"

Audrey was not amused.

Shosh turned to her mother. "And . . . you are?"

The day before her sister died, Shosh stared down a grocery aisle, eyes glazed. “Everything looks the same.”

“The illusion of variety,” said Stevie. “No matter how many options we think we have, it’s just different versions of the same crop.” She grabbed a box of granola off the shelf, reviewed the ingredients on the back. “Corn.”

“Wait, really?”

Stevie tossed the box in the cart and, in a feat of lackadaisical virtuosity, waved her arm in the air like a ringmaster presenting lions jumping through hoops of fire. “Corn! Far as the eye can see.”

“How do you know this shit?”

Quietly, as if the lower the volume, the more legit the claim: “I saw a documentary.”

Stevie and Shosh Bell were two years apart and entirely inseparable. From the soccer fields of their youth, where Stevie had lied about her age so she could play on Shosh’s younger team, to every dance floor since middle school, which they’d proudly attended as each other’s dates, they were a package deal, and everybody knew it. Where one went, so went the other—including a grocery run.

“What is this?” Stevie reached into their cart, pulled out a wedge of cheese wrapped in red wax.

“What is what,” said Shosh.

They’d been walking up and down aisles for the last fifteen minutes, tossing items in the cart, checking things off as they went, trying (and failing) not to think about corn, how the corn had been transported, transformed, transmogrified into literally everything everyone everywhere ingested, so by the time they reached the cheese section in the deli, it was as if they’d been stumbling through a corn-swept desert, only to arrive at a sensible, nutritious oasis.

"This." Stevie held up the cheese wedge like a prosecutor presenting an incriminatory piece of evidence. "What is this?"

"Gouda."

"Um. No."

Shosh held up the list. "It's in your handwriting. See?"

"I meant *no*, as in *this* isn't *gouda*."

Shosh grabbed the cheese from her sister's hand. "It literally says *gouda* on the label."

"It's soft." Stevie picked a different wedge from the display, carefully reading the label. "Gouda isn't soft."

"I forgot you're a cheese expert."

"In another life, I may have been a fromager."

Shosh looked around the store, as if someone nearby might help explain what the hell was happening. "This feels like a dream—"

"A cheesemonger, if you will."

"—where nothing is as it seems."

"Though *fromager* has the added onomatopoeic appeal."

Shosh squinted. "I'm not sure you can do that with that word. Anyway, you're back at Loyola tomorrow. What do you care what cheese we eat?"

Stevie took the cheese from Shosh's hand. "We'll just put this back here for some other poor sap."

"Maybe I like soft gouda."

"First off, you don't, even if you think you do." Stevie studied the stacks of wedges with a glimmer in her eye, as if picking out a wedding ring or a luxury sedan. "And second, I care enough about my family to not let them eat cheese that isn't cheese."

"You know, you could probably stand to get laid."

"Here we go." Stevie picked up a long wedge of something

under a label reading EXPLORE THE NETHERLANDS. "Cave aged for a thousand days."

"It's stupid that you have to go back so soon."

"Feel that. See?"

"It's summertime, Stevie. It is the time of summer."

"That's how gouda should feel."

"We are young and fetching and it is the time of summer."

"Perfect crystallization."

"You know what you should do? Blow off summer sessions. Hang with me instead. Let's be young and fetching together, in this, the time of summer."

"Rock hard. A mature, nutty flavor that melts in your mouth. And you know what the secret ingredient is?"

"Thinly veiled sexual innuendos?"

With more reverence than was necessary, Stevie placed the gouda in the cart. She turned to her sister, put both hands on either of Shosh's shoulders, and aside from the hair—Stevie's leaf-brown curls, Shosh's explosion of dark waves and sharp bangs—their faces were mirrorlike.

"Time, sister."

Digging deep, Shosh found the only true thing: "Don't go."

"You know I'd love nothing more than to spend my summer with you. But summer session means early graduation. Which means I can join you in LA sooner rather than later. Right?"

In the next aisle, Shosh tossed a can of Cheez Whiz into the cart, and Stevie called her a barbarian, and thus they proved the primary tenet of the charmed life: it's only charmed so long as you don't know it is.

The following day, Stevie loaded her Prius with freshly washed clothes and a pan of their mother's lasagna, and when the sisters hugged, they said, "Love you," and that was it. There was no need to say goodbye; they would of course talk on the phone that night . . .

According to the police report—which had been given to her parents, and which Shosh had snuck into the bathroom, snapped a photo of, and memorized soon after—the man's name was Phil Lessing. Having been fired from his job that day, Phil Lessing had decided his best course of action was to get hammered at the local bar. There, he wove for himself a sad little cocoon, until, ready to emerge a fully formed hazard, Phil picked up his keys, stumbled to the parking lot, and climbed behind the wheel of his built-to-last Ford F-150.

Shosh never knew if the details helped or hurt. Did she want to know that the F-150 had proved its slogan, not a scratch on it, while Stevie's Prius sat in the median like a crumpled ball of tinfoil? Did she want to know that her sister's eighties-fab Velcro watch had somehow landed a solid fifty feet away from the accident? Did she want to know that first responders couldn't immediately differentiate between blood and marinara from the exploded pan of lasagna?

Without her sister, Shosh devolved into something aimless. Like one of those bioluminescent bristle worms floating around in the pitch-black of the seafloor: if there was purpose in life, she couldn't feel it; if there was direction, she couldn't see it; her sister had been her natural habitat, and when that was taken away, she was forced to create a new one. And so she spun her own sad cocoon. Her father had quite the collection of whiskey in the basement. Their freezer was an oak tree, bottles of vodka stashed like acorns in winter. She

was far from the only imbiber in the family; these medicinal nooks were forever replenished, and if her parents asked questions of her, they'd have to ask questions of themselves.

She could still feel Stevie's hands on her shoulders, the way each of them got lost in the eyes of the other. "Time, sister."

Caves, cocoons, crystallization: time changed things on a molecular level. Maybe Shosh just needed a place to spend a thousand days, and like a Dutch gouda or a birdwing butterfly, she could emerge some extraordinary new thing.

Or just whole again would be enough.

Shosh leaned her head against the passenger-side window of her mother's car. Her hair was only half-dry from this morning's plunge in the Abernathy pool; her clothes and coat still smelled of chlorine. Through the window, downtown Iverton passed in a blur, and she imagined some other version of her life, one where she lived in a cabin in the mountains, by water, under snow, Finland or Norway maybe, somewhere cold.

The radio was on. The same sad song she'd heard this morning by the pool.

"I came a different way this time," said her mom. "Cut across Pasadena, shaved five minutes off the drive. Isn't that funny?"

"What's funny?"

"I know the fastest route from our house to the police station. What a hilarious joke."

If Shosh was tornado couture, it was no secret where she'd inherited the tornado: Lana Bell had always been a bit of a mess, prone to leaving things behind and forgetting to shower for a few



days. She was a first-grade teacher, though, so it had always been a schtick that worked. Her class was exactly the quirky house of whimsy you wanted for your first grader. But ever since Stevie's death, that whimsy had soured into something darker, the kind of empty-eyed volatility that compelled people to cross the street.

But then, the Bells were a family of shadows now, weren't they. Human negative space.

"I don't know what to do with you," said the shadow-mother.

Forehead against glass, Shosh watched a bird drift high in the sky.

"Are you going to tell me why you drove that boy's truck into your friend's pool?"

"She's not my friend," said Shosh, trying to decide if this was the same kind of bird as the one she'd seen at sunrise.

"Do you have any idea how bad this could have been? If someone had been hurt, or if someone else had been with you in the car? Aubrey says we're lucky they're not pressing charges—"

"Audrey."

"Whatever! Damages are coming straight out of your account, you can bet on that. I don't even—we're all *dealing* with it, you know? It's not just you, Sho, we are all fucking hurting here, and I just can't—why would you do a thing like that?"

No. Definitely not the same kind of bird.

"I want to live in Norway," Shosh said quietly.

A beat, and then: "Are you *drunk*?"

Shosh said yes, most likely she was, and as the shadow-mother railed, the juvenile delinquent bird-watched, and this was her life now, not a logical scheme but a bizarre convergence of beings doing

things. You got blood on your hands, a bird would be better, sang the voice on the radio, apparently omniscient, and it didn't matter if she was sober now, later, or ever. How could it? How could anything matter when she'd never gotten a goodbye?

This word nobody wanted, but everyone needed. This word that apparently hurt to say, but she knew the truth: you only think goodbye is painful if you've had a chance to say it.

That evening, as the Bell family ate takeout in front of the TV, Lana Bell asked Jared Bell if they could switch cars the following weekend. "I have that teachers' conference in Milwaukee," she said, and Shosh's dad agreed without comment.

"Is something wrong with your car?" Shosh asked her mom.

"Sound system's been out for months. No way I'm making that drive in silence."

Later that night, Shosh lay awake in bed, staring into the rotating blades of her ceiling fan. And as she imagined soaring songbirds and Norwegian snowdrifts, she hummed the melody of a song that had followed her all day, a song that fell over her now like a warm quilt. A song she was beginning to think might exist only in her head.

## PARIS

• 1832 •

SHE CAME FROM THE NORTH with a song in her heart and blood on her hands. The former was a steady murmur of revenge; the latter, proof of sins committed in its name.

All around, pushing and vying, porters and coachmen shouting in garbled tongues. Watching those around her, she understood the men were asking about luggage and passport. Sølvi stretched out her empty hands. “Paris,” she said, that great dream of a word her only possession.

A coachman shook his head, pointed to the ground—“Le Havre”—then pointed to some vague spot on the horizon. “Paris.”

Exhausted, penniless, Sølvi turned to face the endless ocean, the port abuzz with people boarding and debarking monstrous vessels. She stood in the shadow of the ship that brought her here—its constant sway sure to haunt her sleep for years to come—opened her mouth, and draped the cold commotion around her in the warm quilt of song.

Étienne often wondered if he was alone because he painted, or if he painted because he was alone. *Tant pis*, he thought. *Je peins parce que je peins*.

I paint because I paint.

Mornings found him in the galleries of the Louvre, working on copies with other students. Étienne lived in a comfortable one-bedroom apartment near the Sorbonne, left to him by his deceased parents. Where he'd once found gusto in life—lunch in the Garden of the Tuileries, sunset strolls across the Pont Neuf—he'd recently succumbed to a deepening sense of aimlessness. The most mediocre work of art could hold his interest far longer than any person he knew; he was bored of everyone. And when you are bored of everyone, it is only a matter of time before everyone is bored of you.

Boredom was impossible on an empty stomach. Having smuggled herself to Paris in the back of a stagecoach, it had only taken a few days for Sølvi to discover that the one she'd come to kill—her horse's ass of a father—had been dead for years.

She spoke no French, had no money, but she was a quick study. Soon, she was singing in the streets, learning which cafés abided her presence, which hotels catered to those who might flip her a coin. At night, she huddled among the rats and itinerants, but during the day, she sang. No longer a song of revenge, hers was a song of the north, of places frozen and familiar, of dancing lights in the sky, and though no one understood the lyrics, her songs haunted the hearts of all who heard them.

One night, quite late, Sølvi found herself following a bird out onto a bridge. A northern bird like her, she'd decided, entirely at ease in the cold. Careful not to disturb the creature, she hopped up onto the ledge beside it, thinking nothing of the height or the freezing Seine below. "Hej," she whispered, reaching out a hand, and whether she began singing then, or had been singing all along,

she wasn't sure. It was a song like no other, a birdsong, a wildsong, as if she were many Sølvis, singing various parts in harmony.

They sat like that, bird and woman, muse and originator, their voices carrying across the river, until—

“Aimez-vous aussi les oiseaux?”

He hadn't meant to startle her. Drawn first by her voice, then by her appearance—perched on a ledge, clothes tattered, white-blond hair whipping around in the wind—Étienne was utterly beguiled for the first time in recent memory.

Sølvi searched his eyes. His face was pleasant enough, but the eyes of men were synopses: she could read them and know exactly what they were about.

“Aimez-vous aussi les oiseaux?” he asked again.

Days later, she would translate his question using the book he'd bought for her. *Aimez-vous aussi les oiseaux? Do you like birds too?* And she would smile and stumble through her response in French: “Oui,” she would say. “J'aime les oiseaux.”

But for now, she pushed her hair out of her face, touched her chest. “Sølvi.”

He smiled; the bird flew. “Étienne.”

In the coming weeks, they spent every moment together. He painted her in his apartment, the contours of her body alive in his brush. She sang as she posed; songs of the north melted into songs of love surpassing language, and in this way, they learned the language of each other's bodies: nights became days, they slipped in and out of bed, in and out of clothes, and as they painted and sang, their plural became singular, each soul more itself in the presence of the other.

Their love was a strange new metallurgy: before, they were iron unrefined; in each other, they found fire.

The tattoos were Sølvi's idea. She'd seen a few in prison, though Étienne would never know this. (Some places, you don't return to, even in memory.) His most recent painting of her—standing naked by the window, giant feathered wings sprouting from her back—had put the notion into her head. Her French was better now, though still rudimentary; when she told him the idea, he'd asked why they should brand their bodies, seeing as they were neither criminals nor royalty. To this, she threw off the bedsheets, climbed on top of him, leaned into his ear, and said, "C'est pourquoi."

It was reason enough for him.

They found a man in a cellar who possessed the proper tools and training. He warned of great pain and long healing. In response, Sølvi opened the book she'd brought—*Histoire des oiseaux*—and pointed to the bird she'd chosen for them.

"Ç'est de la folie," said the man.

"Oui," said Étienne, sitting in the man's chair, placing his hand on the table. "Une folie à deux."

That spring, as Sølvi's French continued to improve, and the tattoos were almost healed, she fell ill. What started as cramps and vomiting turned to convulsions and unbearable agony. Étienne rushed her to the Hôtel-Dieu, a hospital on the Île de la Cité, and by the time they arrived, he also was unwell. For months, whispers of cholera had spread through Paris like wildfire; now that the disease was here, it spread even faster. From adjacent beds, Sølvi and

Étienne grew sicker by the hour, as all around, the Hôtel-Dieu filled with those like them.

“Sølvi.” Étienne reached toward her, flapping his hand weakly. A single wing trying to fly. She met his hand in the middle. The two wings joined, the bird became whole. Étienne smiled—then dropped her hand suddenly, turned, vomited on the floor.

In quiet, broken French, she told him the story of a girl who’d been abandoned, abused, locked up. She told the story of a high window, birds perched between the bars, and how this girl imagined herself in their company, coming and going as she pleased. Each night, the girl drowned the wailing misery of that place in song, swearing revenge on the ones who’d left her there to die. And when a chance came her way, she took it. And when a boat came her way, she took that too. She knew little of her true past, but there was a word, a place, tucked in the depths of memory: *Paris*. And so the girl had come to kill her father, only to find that he was already dead. And the place in her heart that was once filled with vengeance had been filled with surprising, surpassing love.

“Fin,” she said, the story done. But Étienne’s eyes were glassy and unblinking.

Above their beds, the sun shone through a high window, the sky more blue than blue. And as she wondered what awaited her in death, if she might travel beyond the blue, a new song entered her heart, not of vengeance or love but a promise. Her head dropped to one side, facing the shell of Étienne. “*Je te trouverai*,” she sang—I will find you—and the soul inside breathed its last as Sølvi of the north.

# PART TWO

NOCTURNE



# EVAN

## Kafkaesque

I WANT TO TELL MAYA about Mom. I want to tell her about the bird in the park, and what happened at the party last week, and I don't know what she could possibly do about any of it, but telling her things is the whole point, isn't it.

"You seem . . ." Maya tilts her head, studies my face in a way that makes me wonder what I seem. ". . . cheerful," she says.

An unexpected wrinkle.

"Do I?"

"Yes."

I shrug. "It's Tuesday."

"Ah. E.T. and Jet's?"

"We've done E.T. seven Tuesdays in a row. I'll be making a case for *Wall-E* or *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, and as far as pizza goes, obviously Jet's is the superior slice, but I need to peruse the weekly coupons. Might be a Domino's week, depending."

"Papa Johns usually has good coupons."

I do this thing where I flare my nostrils, and people everywhere know I mean business. "Sure, okay, Papa Johns. I mean, I've got this old racist bike tire in my garage. We could melt some cheese on that, save the money."

I sit in the silence that follows the thunder of a joke cracked

with confidence: therein lies a strange, terrifying vulnerability.

We talk about school, inevitably, how my first week of senior year is going, obviously. I've got two classes with Ali, landed the good AP teachers (i.e., the teachers whose eyes and voices haven't run out of batteries yet), plus, a second year in Creative Writing with Mr. Hambright. All told, I should be ecstatic. I should be doing cartwheels. But talking about the final year of high school always leads to talking about what happens *after* high school, and these days, I'd rather crack jokes that don't land than talk about What a Bright Future I Have.

When it's clear my heart's not in it, a heavy hush falls over the room.

Outside, a cloud drifts in the sky; inside, shadows travel across the carpet. One slow exodus follows another.

I've never understood people who are uncomfortable with silence, but I have to think they weren't very comfortable in the first place. The absence of noise is the presence of mind, a body's place to breathe. Silence is a big part of what we do here. Some days, our sessions stretch out before us, a vast and remote wilderness where no conversation could possibly grow. Some days, I'm like, *I literally have nothing to talk about*, and we'll talk about nothing, and I still feel better than before we started. Most of the time, though, the hour starts and talk blooms, radiant and surprising, and by the end, I am half my size and full of air, in real danger of being blown away by a mild gust of wind.

That's what therapy is, I think: working toward zero gravity.

"Coming up on the one-year mark," Maya says.

"Hmm?"

“Almost a year since your dad left. How’re you doing with it?”

“I don’t know. Better than Mom.”

“In what way?”

“At least I can talk about it. I can say out loud how much I hate him. She tries to pretend it’s no big deal.”

“She ignores it,” says Maya.

“She belittles it.”

“How so?”

When you think about it, most families boil down to the same core elements: geography (this is our house); biography (this is who we are); and philosophy (this is why we’re here). More than a foundation, it’s a mutual agreement. A code. So when someone you live with leaves, it’s more than a departure; it’s the arrival of a new code. Our family coped with this code in different ways: Will retreated into his own world; I started having storms; and Mom . . .

“She calls it their *inversary*,” I say.

“She calls what what, now?”

“The one-year mark of Dad leaving. As in *inverse anniversary*.”

“Ah.”

Mom is a champion, I tell Maya.

She says she knows.

Dad sucks a wad of fuckballs.

She says nothing for a second and then asks if I’ve had any recent storms.

“Not for weeks.”

“That’s great, Evan. I’m really proud of you.”

Through the window, I see a bird land on a branch; in one of the adjacent rooms, someone starts playing music, the same song

I'd heard in the park that night, and in Mom's bedroom the morning after.

"Evan?"

I want to tell Maya about Mom. I want to tell her about the bird in the park, but for some reason, when I think about that night, my brain becomes a feather, my thoughts become chirps, and my mouth, a useless little beak.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks.

Another aimless cloud shifts in the sky; I watch the slow exodus of shadows across the carpet, recalling that day in infuriating detail.

"The formation of the earth," I say.

When Dad told us he was leaving, I thought he meant his job. When I realized he meant us, I asked the only logical question: "Why?"

"It's like . . . Pangaea," he said, and I wondered if he'd always been such a bullshitter, or if this was a more recent development. "Remember? That school project I helped you with? The world is always changing, Evan. Over time, and for no real reason."

Outside, the shining sun lied about what kind of day it was.

"So you're leaving for no reason."

Dad sighed, as if I were the one who'd ignited this garbage fire of a conversation. "It's more complicated than that."

It wasn't, though. Dad had a reason, and that reason was a brunette called Stacey. According to Facebook, Stacey had a gap in her teeth, a poodle that looked like a wilted potato, and a nearly grown son called Nick. Nick had a job at Staples and a longtime girlfriend named Ruth. Ruth was an Uber driver and had a way of smiling at

the camera like she was about to eat the lens. This was the family he'd traded ours for.

But I wouldn't learn any of this until later.

On that day, I listened to Dad bloviate about Pangaea, confusing his own shitty life choices for inevitabilities, while Mom hovered in the kitchen doorway, an oversize glass of wine in hand, as much a part of the conversation as she was a part of the room.

"What about Will?" I asked, hoping Dad could spot the question under the question: *What kind of monster willingly says goodbye to such a cosmic gift of a child?*

Dad's eyes darted to the top of the stairs, and for a split second, I worried Will was sitting there, that he'd overheard everything. But he wasn't. In a move I then understood to be well orchestrated, he'd been sent to a friend's house for the day. "Your brother will be okay," Dad said, and then dove back into how much he loved us, how nothing would change that, how it wasn't our fault, as if the notion that I was to blame had even crossed my mind.

As he talked, he shifted around on the couch, and I thought, *We'll have to get a new couch.* And when he sipped coffee from his favorite NASA mug, *We'll have to get new mugs,* and on the bookcase over his shoulder, I spotted the first-edition Salinger he'd given me for my sixteenth birthday, which, of course, would also have to go. And it occurred to me that a home isn't just a house or the people you live with—it's the things those people used. Things have a way of taking on the lives of those around them, so when someone in the house betrays you, it's a betrayal multiplied in perpetuity: your favorite book turns to drivel; coffee in space-related paraphernalia, undrinkable; couches, unsittable. And when the betrayer walks out

the front door for the last time, you'll have to dig a tunnel under the house, or exit through the chimney, because fuck that door.

"I know it's a lot," Dad said, sitting on a couch that was dead to me. "Talk to me, Ev. What are you thinking?"

In my head, I counted to twenty. Slowly.

Mom stood in the doorway; she took a prolonged sip and then winked at me over the glass, and it was hard to know if I'd always loved her more than Dad or if our current situation had already rewritten my entire history.

We both knew how much he hated silence.

After another leisurely ten-count, I ambled over to the bookcase, pulled down the first-edition Salinger. *Catcher* was fine and all, but give me the Glass family all day, every day. I had an older copy of *Franny and Zooey* in my room upstairs, but *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* had always been my favorite, worth showcasing in our living room library. It had meant a lot when Dad gave it to me: proof that he knew what I liked and wanted to make me happy. When I'd first unwrapped it, I knew it was old—it was a used library copy, no dust jacket—but didn't know it was a first edition until he told me to check the front page. And when I thanked him, it had been the kind you offer when you feel truly seen.

Only now—

Looking back, I couldn't help wondering about a few details. Like the blue notes in Mom's voice when she'd recently read about the used bookstore that was going out of business. Or how the wrapping paper, which I'd so eagerly torn away, had been immaculately applied, even at the corners, and when I tried to think of a time when Dad had wrapped a gift, all I could come up with was

him paying someone in the mall to do it for him.

“The decay of radioactive elements,” I said quietly, staring at the faded cover in my hands as the knowledge of its origins washed over me. And I wondered how many other prized possessions contained two stories: one within, one without. “And leftover heat from the formation of the earth.”

When I looked up, Mom was crying in the doorway, but smiling too, and words like *tectonic* and *mantle* and *core* came to mind, and I knew we’d be okay.

“I’m not sure I follow,” said Dad.

I handed him the book, willing him to feel the extra weight of his story. Of history.

“Pangaea,” I said. “When your whole world breaks apart, there’s always a reason.”

# SHOSH

## dispatches from frozen places

SHOSH STARED AT THE FISHGRAY sky, listening to the song it sang for her. When her mother walked in, Shosh didn't turn around. The way she saw it, knocking was a prerequisite for acknowledging entry.

"Shosh. My God. One of these days, you're going to fall right out the window."

Not long ago, Shosh realized that the windows in her room aligned with the height of her bed. Naturally, she'd pushed the bed right up against the wall, so now, when she opened the window, she could recline on her bed with her legs hanging outside. Some nights, she lay there, inches from the open air, watching the stars come out. A few times, she'd watched the stars disappear into light as the sun rose.

"Your dad ordered takeout. It'll be here in twenty."

"Okay," said Shosh, and she thought *gray*—fish-hued or otherwise—wasn't the right word for the color of the sky.

Was *bleak* a color?

"Sho—"

"I said okay, Mom."

Shosh sipped from a can of Diet Coke—half of which had been replaced with vodka from a large handle she kept under the bed—



and listened to the soft click of the door closing behind her, the sound of Lana Bell's sock-footed mope down the hallway.

In the days following the incident at Heather's party, her parents had mostly ignored her. They both had work, and as she'd already graduated, they really didn't know what to do with her. In another world, her room would have been packed up by now, her car full of clothes and desk lamps and various dorm room sundries. She should be crying and hugging her parents, pulling out of the driveway, heading into the bright lights of a promising future on the West Coast.

Shosh took another sip, stared at the sky. She had a sudden image from years ago, a children's Sunday school class, maybe, of angels and trumpets and clouds parting. And she wondered if that was where this music was coming from, some perverse version of the divine.

Over the last week, she'd heard no fewer than three distinctly different songs, as if the ongoing disaster of her life required a soundtrack. She couldn't deny they were the perfect accompaniment: ethereal and weepy, they seemed to follow wherever she went, an audible rain cloud. Sometimes she could make out lyrics, but more often than not, they were muted and faraway, to the point where she occasionally wondered if there was a logical explanation—music from a neighbor's house, maybe, or a glitch on her phone.

As if her phone were listening, it buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out to find a text from Ms. Clark: *Still waiting, Ms. Frost . . .*

In the pie chart of Shosh's life, her biggest slice had always been acting. Music was a close second, but as some combination of the

two had indirectly ruined her life, she was done with all that now. Weeks ago, when she'd told Ms. Clark as much, her teacher had said, "So what will you be making, then?"

Shosh had been half-drunk at the time, sitting on a nearby park swing. "I don't understand the question."

"It's pretty simple, Shosh. People like us make things. When we don't, we fill that part of our soul with lesser things. Vodka, for example. So what I'd like to know is—what will you be making? I don't require much, but I can tell you, the degree to which I have the patience for these late-night drunk-chats directly corresponds to your answer. So think carefully."

"I'm not drunk."

"Double down, then. See where that gets you."

After considering for a minute, Shosh had said a single word: "Poetry."

It wasn't acting, it wasn't music—as far as she could tell, no one could say for sure what it was. One thing she knew now and wished she'd known then: being an artist was hard; being a poet was damn near impossible.

Sipping in her window, she flipped over to Instagram and scrolled her saved "winterscape" photos. Recently, she'd seen a picture from a suggested account of a rural bungalow in Norway, and before she knew it, she'd followed that account and a dozen like it. Now her feed was full of cabins in snow, resting precariously atop craggy mountains, wedged between enormous evergreens, washed-out frosty palettes, all of which seeped the essence of a word that was both direction and place: *north*.

Alas, the remote wilderness was idyllic only so far as Instagram

allowed it to be. Obviously, she couldn't pack up and move to one of these snowcapped cabins—no matter how much her Thoreauvian heart wanted to—and so why not turn them into art?

For this particular couplet, she chose a balmy orange cabin buried in snow, awash in the faint glow of dusk. The sky was something deep—not purple, exactly, but what purple was always trying to be. A mossy tree hung over the scene, its branches frosted white like the beard of a giant. “There is a place we like to go,” she whispered, and even though the words sounded familiar, she typed them onto the screen, just as the second line came to her . . .

there is a place we like to go  
where secrets hide in trees of snow

Positioning of text was key. Top-of-frame, casually off-center, just the right font. In the bottom corner, she typed **cabin couplet #6** and hit post.

There were many things in Shosh's life that she could not control. Like how many times her parents would have to pick her up from the police station, or how many bottles of vodka would mysteriously dwindle from the freezer, or how many vehicles she might drive into pools. Only time would tell. But she could find beautiful cabins in her feed, couple them with mediocre poetry, and hit post like a motherfucker. As far as obsessions went, it was easily her least toxic.

# EVAN

## storms

I SCROLL THE JET'S APP, study each coupon like it's an algebra assignment. If the eight-corner cheese is \$12.99, can we swing breadsticks at \$4.99, given  $x$  = taxes, and  $y$  = delivery, tip, and convenience fees?

"Convenience fees," I say to no one, to my tiny kitchen, and look: I'm a big believer in the idea that words matter. You can't just slide one word in front of another to make it mean what you want. Like a pleasant root canal or a boisterous funeral, all the positive qualifiers in the world won't make your fee convenient.

The front door opens, the familiar sound of Will's backpack hitting the floor, and in seconds, he'll round the corner in that red hoodie he wears every day, eyes bright and face flushed from the bike ride home. We'll discuss dinner plans (Jet's versus Domino's), entertainment plans (E.T. versus literally anything else), and then spread our homework on the dining room table until the glories of Bubba Night begin.

"Jet's coupons are pretty meh, bud," I call from the kitchen. "We can do breadsticks and pickup, or no breadsticks and delivery—what do you think?"

But he doesn't respond. Instead, I hear the sound of his footsteps clamoring up the stairs, his bedroom door opening and

closing, the internal machinations of my brain, wheels spinning at this unprecedented turn of events.

At the bottom of the stairs, I look up toward the top landing, which is a pretty accurate sampling of the rest of the house: cramped; discolored carpet; walls in desperate need of a new coat of paint. Across from Will's room is the door to my bedroom, with a half bath wedged between the two. Whatever pieces of the house changed when Dad left, the upstairs has remained blissfully ours.

Bubba Night started years ago, when Will was two, and things were still things, good stuff around every corner. Dad's poker night fell on the same night as Mom's group exercise at the Y, and suddenly Tuesday nights became "Bubba Nights" (bubba being Will's word for brother). I was young, but old enough to be in charge for a couple of hours. Every Tuesday night, we'd order pizza and watch a movie and basically have the run of the house for the evening.

Things are different now. Dad turned out to be less of a "dad," *per se*, and more of a dog with his head hanging out the window of a moving car. The YMCA is a luxury of the past, and in the year since Dad left, Mom picked up a second job tending bar at El Sombrero, a Mexican restaurant down the road from our house. We used to be frequent patrons of El Sombrero, but no longer. (See: luxuries of the past.) All this to say, even though Will and I have the run of the house every evening, these days, the sanctity of Bubba Nights remains intact. Tuesdays have always been, and will forever remain, pizza and movies and magic.

At the top of the stairs now, I knock lightly on Will's door.

"Come in!"

My brother's room is a permanent mess of stuffed animals,

Dog Man books, LEGO sets, train tracks, scattered Minions, and Star Wars figurines. “Hey,” I say, and even though I can’t see him, I know exactly where he is.

In the corner, from somewhere in the depths of an oversize cardboard box, comes a muffled “Hi, Evan.”

Last year we got a new refrigerator, and honestly, I’m not sure who was more ecstatic: Mom, over the automatic icemaker, or Will, over the giant box it came in. After raiding the house of every flashlight and roll of aluminum foil, and then attaching those items in strategic places on the refrigerator box, he wound up constructing a very impressive rendering of E.T.’s spaceship. Much to Mom’s dismay, he then took a Sharpie to either side of his new spaceship and drew two large words right on the walls: PHONE and HOME.

The kid would live in a refrigerator box if we let him.

“Will, would you mind exiting the spacecraft for a second?”

A prolonged rustle from deep within the belly of the cardboard rocket. Eventually, his little head pops out a side window: wispy white skin, shaggy brown hair that I still can’t figure out which way to part, bright blue eyes and long eyelashes that induce something akin to Love at First Sight in most everyone he meets. To look at Will is to experience firsthand that people are generally good, that life is a beautiful gift. Right away, you know he’s a sweet kid, a soft, too-good-for-this-world kid, and I’m not just saying this because he’s my favorite human on earth (he is), but there’s a light in his face, a look that somehow feels happy and sad all at once, heavy and featherweight, like a candle burning from the bottom of a well, and he may leave a mess wherever he goes, and occasionally forget to stop talking, but I love him more than anything loves anything else.

“There you are,” I say.

“Here I am.”

“I missed you today, bud.”

“I missed you too.”

And suddenly, I notice: No Band-Aids.

I try to hide my surprise, pretend like the absence of Band-Aids is no big deal. “I don’t know if you heard me about the coupons. I’m thinking we skip breadsticks tonight, and spring for delivery. Not really in the mood to go pick it up, you know?”

I wait for something, anything, but he just stands there, looking at me, wearing zero Band-Aids.

Time to level up.

“Plus,” I say, “I’m really in the mood for E.T. tonight. Feels right, don’t you think?”

Will tilts his head. “I thought you said you needed a break from E.T.”

“I changed my mind.”

To be clear: Will keeps Reese’s Pieces in his desk, wears a red hoodie every day, and is probably the only second grader who rides his bike to school. It’s only a block and half, but still, it took some convincing before Mom agreed. The straw that broke her back was when he declared, “I’m an E.T. kid, Mom. E.T. kids ride bikes.”

E.T. kids ride bikes. How do you argue with that?

“What do you think?” I ask. “Should I cue up E.T.?”

He does that thing where his head sways a little, and he closes his eyes, as if everything rides on the answer to this question. “No . . .” And then, quietly: “I’ve already cried today.”

He gives me a half smile, ducks back inside the spaceship; I just stand there, heart in my shoes.

After a few seconds of listening to him rustle around inside his

giant cardboard box, I say, “Okay,” and then follow that up with the only thing I’ve got in me: “I’ll be right here.”

There’s this scene in *E.T.* where the kid, Elliott, cuts his finger on a blade. A little pinprick of blood. He holds it up and says, “Ouch,” and *E.T.* raises his own finger, all lit up like a firefly, and heals Elliott’s cut just by touching it. In the background, Elliott’s mom reads *Peter Pan* to Elliott’s little sister—Tinkerbelle is dying, and the only way to save her is to clap your hands and say you believe.

A week after Dad left, Will walked out of the bathroom covered in Band-Aids. Mom and I were concerned, obviously, but he acted completely normal, as if being covered from head to toe in tiny bandages was a perfectly reasonable way of life. In the year or so since, he’s only referred to them a handful of times, and never as Band-Aids, always as “ouch-shields.”

I’m not afraid of big love. And maybe it’s weird for a seventeen-year-old to think this way, but sometimes I worry what kind of dad I’ll be. I worry because a dad should love his kid more than anyone else on the planet, and as far as I’m concerned, that position is filled. I worry because, when I hug Will, I feel the fragility of his life, and I imagine him as a tiny-boned bird in the middle of a raging storm, and I wish I could save him by clapping my hands and saying I believe, but I can’t. I wish I could tell him his ouch-shields will protect him, but I can’t do that either. The truth is, fragile things rarely fare well in the world; more often, they farewell to it.

Storms start in the gut.

Overwhelming dread, as tangible as they are unpredictable.



Then, slowly ascending from stomach to chest, swelling in size and scope, rooting me to the ground, stealing my breath, my motion. From there, storms explode in every direction, a sudden detonation extending through my shoulders, arms, hands, tingling and alive in nightmarish ways, and my face is hot, my heart pounding—

Breathe . . .

Just to breathe.

To feel myself existing.

What is real, what isn't.

In my own room now, I shut the door, and all around, air turns to mist; crossing the floor to my bed is an exercise in endurance, more like swimming than walking. I sit on the edge of my mattress, my heart an arrhythmic firework as images of Will come in flashes: he's in his refrigerator box; he's drawing at his art table; he's consumed in the fevered frenzy of creating something new. His haphazard drawings, the way he staples pages together to make a book, the way he loves the things that he loves, like a drowning person loves a life buoy, how he thinks lemonade is called "lem-olade," and between the absence of Band-Aids, a pass on E.T., and skipping out on Tuesday rituals, something is *wrong*, something is *wrong*, something is *wrongwrongwrongwrongwrong*—

Breathe . . .

Feel myself existing.

Storms beget storms: having one leads to having one leads to having one leads to having one—

Breathe . . .

"Five things I can see," I say, and look around the room: dusty

guitar in the corner, one; Dad's old record player, two; Grandad's older radio, three; yard-sale couch, four; sketch pad on the bedside table, five. "Four things I can feel." Bedsheets, one. Computer, two. Phone in my pocket, three. Charcoal pencil, four.

Three things I can hear . . .

Two things I can smell . . .

By the time I pull a mint out of my bedside drawer (*one thing I can taste*), the storm recedes, the fireworks end, the skies of the room begin to clear.

I stay where I am, waiting. Some storms come in waves. Some hit you hard and leave you wrecked in their wake. Too early to know which kind this one is.

When they started a year ago, I was having them all the time. Back then, Mom was on the phone constantly—with my doctor, and eventually, with Maya. It was a season of listening, of learning new terms: *grounding techniques*; *decatastrophizing*; *mindfulness*. Maya has been teaching me to speak storm, teaching me how to respond so they don't come as often or hit as hard.

One of the first things I told her was how the term *panic attack* felt wrong. "In what way?" she'd asked, and I explained how *panic* felt too feeble a word, and *attack* felt too familiar. I said, "It shouldn't be called what it is, it should be called what it *feels* like." When Maya asked what it felt like, I said the only word I could think of that came close to describing the vast uncontrollable nature of what was happening inside my body: "Storms." Maya nodded, and said, "We'll call them that, then," and that was when I started trusting her.

Exhausted, I fall backward on the bed, stare up at the slowly

rotating blades of the ceiling fan. I wonder about the absence of Band-Aids and what that might mean. I wonder what in the world I'm supposed to do with my night, seeing as this is my first Tuesday alone in years. And I wonder if there is more than one kind of storm: some that look like panic attacks, and some that look like refrigerator boxes.

# SHOSH

## rogue amphibians

THE STORIES OF FROG AND TOAD were among Shosh's earliest memories. Unlike the countless characters, movies, and plush playthings that went from *obsession* to *attic* in the blink of an eye, Frog and Toad remained steadfast bulwarks of the sisters' relationship through the years.

"I'm totally Toad," Stevie said late one night, around Thanksgiving last year. Per family tradition, they'd spent three days gorging themselves, not just on food, but on the entire Star Wars movie collection. Now, in an effort to cleanse the palette, they were sprawled in bed, halfway through one of the earlier seasons of *Project Runway*.

"Get the fuck out," said Shosh. "No way you're Toad."

"Toad is next-level thirsty."

"Exactly. Which is why I'm clearly him."

They had the entire Lobel collection, knew every story by heart, but their favorite was called "Alone." In it, Toad arrives at Frog's house one morning to find Frog gone, and a note from Frog explaining that he wants to be alone. Distraught, Toad searches for Frog and, after finding him on a rock in the middle of a river, hustles home to pack a picnic of sandwiches and iced tea. When he gets back to the river, he orders a turtle to carry him to the rock. The turtle wisely points out that if Frog wants to be alone, perhaps Toad

should leave him alone, which of course sends Toad into a tailspin, and just as he starts yelling apologies to Frog for all the annoying things he does, he falls off the turtle's back and into the river. In the end, Frog tells Toad that he woke up feeling happy, and that he just needed a minute to sit and think about how charmed his life was. The final lines of the story are, "They ate wet sandwiches without iced tea. They were two close friends sitting alone together."

"I've committed to move wherever you land for college," said Stevie. "That is some pathologically thirsty shit. Extra Toady."

They'd had some version of the same conversation for years, like a video game you never finish, just save your place, come back to later. As far as which sister was more like which anthropomorphic amphibian, it only mattered inasmuch as the tattoos they were planning to get: one sister would get Frog; the other would get Toad; each tattoo would include the words *alone together*.

"Frog is a Jedi master," said Shosh, sitting up in bed. "I'm barely Lukin' it on a good day."

"If George Lucas handed out superlatives, I'd get Most Pathetic Padawan."

"If Jar Jar had a kid with Salacious Crumb, and that kid got drunk? That's me."

"I'm as useless as Darth's cape."

"Why *does* he have a cape?"

"Why does *anyone* have a cape?"

"People in capes are phonies."

"You know who's not a phony? Arnold Lobel."

Shosh kissed two fingers, then threw them heavenward. "May he rest in peace."

“Sneaking in the quality queer content since 1970.”

Onscreen, Heidi Klum had just wrapped up a three-minute soliloquy about her own boobs when Stevie paused the episode. “You ever think about the beginning of ‘Alone’? Frog wakes up and decides he wants to spend time on a rock in a river. And what’s the first thing he does?”

“Leaves a note,” said Shosh.

“It’s not like they had plans. But he left a note. Because he knew Toad would show up.”

It often felt as though the sisters were hiding under the same blanket, living their lives in a secret world no one else could see.

A few minutes later, during one of Tim Gunn’s patent teary-eyed speeches, one sister said, “Tim Gunn is totally Frog,” and the other said, “The most Frog,” and when that episode ended, they let the next one begin, and though neither of them said it, they knew it didn’t matter who was Toad and who was Frog; all that mattered was their secret world under the blanket, and the certainty that even when they were alone, they were alone together.