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# Young Widower

John W. Evans

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# YOUNG WIDOWER

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# Young Widower

A Memoir

John W. Evans

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*This book is lovingly dedicated to Emma, Chloe, and Chase,  
in Katie's memory.*

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While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, “Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house: And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”

—Job, 1:18–19

Do we derive our comfort from the hope that you will hear us?

—Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.10



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<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
How Lives Go On	1
There Are No Words	17
Losing the Marriage	27
Young Americans	39
The Legend of a Life	53
Flush	85
The Number Line	101
The Circle Game	115
Erasing the Room	127
Cognitive Bandwidth	141
Tying the Knot	151
Rehearsals for Departure	165
Alone to Tell Thee	177

## Contents

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## Acknowledgments

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## How Lives Go On

The year after my wife died, I compulsively watched television. I needed distraction, to be entertained. What I could not stream online or order through the mail I sought out at the local video store. I was living in a suburb of Indianapolis, about a mile from a strip mall where I could rent, in a pinch, midseason discs of *The Wire*, *The Office*, *Friday Night Lights*. I got to know the clerks by name, then their shifts, finally their tastes. Once, I tried to make a formal complaint against the corporate headquarters regarding the suspicious and perpetual absence of the fourth-season finale of *Battlestar Galactica*. It seemed unjust that the universe would conspire to deny my knowledge of its fictional origins. I worked up a

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good head of steam before leaving, distraught. I went back a few days later, during a different shift.

On my walks to the store, I listened to my wife's favorite songs. She was a huge country fan, especially mid-'90s radio country: Garth Brooks, the Judds, Randy Travis. As a child she had lived in rural, then exurban Illinois, attended college in central Minnesota. I didn't particularly like the music, but I enjoyed that it reminded me of her and also how the emotional range of the music never ran too far from the middle. The walks, however long, seemed to go more quickly.

My wife's death was violent and sensational. She was killed by a wild bear, while we were hiking in the Carpathian Mountains outside of Bucharest, where we had lived and worked for the last year of her life. She was thirty years old.

More than five hundred people attended the wake, held in her hometown. A cantor from the church led a John Denver sing-along, and several people spoke. A large dose of anxiety medication tempers what else I remember of that night. We formed a receiving line at the front door. We shook hands, hugged each other, looked down the line. Many of those arriving were strangers to me. As the night went on, my brother snuck me away to the basement, where someone from the funeral home had set out cookies and punch for the kids.

Numbness is a central feature of my first memories of that year. I learned to pantomime the real emotions I expected to feel, and that I believed were expected of me, until I felt safe with them. In this way I began to grieve. Every few weeks my doctor recommended a new activity: journaling, writing letters to my wife, going for walks in urban areas, getting a part-time job. In successively more direct ways, I engaged with the circumstances of my wife's death, then with my witnessing of it, and, finally, with her absence in the world.

At night, in my small room off the garage, I wrote out the sequence of my wife's death over and over. I sought an emotional directness more nuanced and honest than what I could manage in conversations with family and strangers. To anyone who might listen, I tried to express how and why I grieved. In my journal I tried to make sense of my own limitations as a husband and witness. As though I might take a kind of self-cure, I tried again and again to tell myself the end of a story interrupted by my wife's death.

I have three soft-cover notebooks in which I wrote daily accounts of my life during that year. The journal is a matter of will and record. I wanted to survive grief. I feared I would lose, with time, the intensity of my reactions. A therapist said we were personally and creatively redefining the context of my emotional experience of the world. I said it like this: What next? What now?

One of my part-time jobs was to tutor a high school student for his SAT exam. His parents were Nigerian. His mother, especially, had high expectations for his performance. Our relationship became cordial, then friendly. Finally, she asked me why I was living in Indiana. I knew how to answer the question in a vague but sufficient manner, enough to satisfy the social obligation while not sharing too much—*I am living with family while I sort out some job opportunities*—but with her I decided to speak frankly. Her response was complete, empathetic, and overwhelming. She said if I lived in Nigeria no one would mistake what I was enduring. In Nigeria there were complete rites of grief, ways of marking oneself to identify the loss; there were familial and social obligations and a period of time during which I would dress one way, speak another, eat a special diet, live in a specific manner and place. I explained that I was an American; our rituals and traditions of grief are private, self-sustained, piecemeal, and, ultimately, individual.

But that wasn't entirely right. If it was easy to substitute silence for strength, then it was also convenient to imply that certain uncomfortable facts should be declared or announced and so only said once. I should want my grief to end, as unmistakably as my wife's life had ended. To do so seemed polite, decent, and expected. How long would I live in Indiana?

My wife was born Kathryn Irene Garwood LaPlante. She was named for her maternal grandmother, Kathryn Garwood, and when we married, she took my last name. Kathryn Irene Evans. Katie.

I have in mind a memory from the last year of Katie's life. We are sitting on the balcony of our gray high-rise post-Communist-bloc apartment, overlooking one part of downtown Bucharest, drinking beer and eating cookies from a shop near her work. Katie is wearing fleece sweatpants and her brother Ed's red Indiana hoodie, circa 1986. The sweatshirt is frayed around the edges and collar. Her dark brown hair is pulled back. Her skin is bright and pale.

Katie has spent a Saturday morning at the office negotiating aid payments with the Romanian Orthodox Church. She is managing the country's first HIV/AIDS education program—I will say this with great pride when anyone asks—but the church insists on coupling the outreach with an existing domestic violence curriculum and so has doubled her workload while diminishing the impact of both projects. She is telling me about a colleague appointed to her office by the church, who treats the appointment like the sinecure it is. She looks tired.

That afternoon a long line of mourners leads a wooden casket on a horse-drawn cart through a park across the street. We take turns holding our digital camera out over the balcony, trying and failing to capture a close-up of this sprawling, seemingly endless procession. Is it a cultural celebration, a holiday? Is the dead person a dignitary, a celebrity? Are the processors family members? Designated mourners? We know nothing about the rite or its situ-

ation, but it is the first time we have seen such an event, so to us the occasion is significant, even romantic for its intrusion. Katie makes a note of it in her journal.

I can keep the memory of that afternoon fresh and at the front of my mind for a short while. I can run it backward and forward, focusing on one aspect, then another. I can take the scene wholesale and imagine watching it from the rooftop of the Athenaeum, on the other side of the park. The Athenaeum, with its domed mural of two thousand years of Roman, then Romanian, history, made into a single narrative. I can make an argument about Katie's work, the season, the city, our life together that year, that afternoon. Still, something distinct from my initial experience remains uncertain, however well I tell it. To whom am I telling these stories? What need do I have to make any argument?

On the day of her death, Katie will have read every poem I wrote during our time together. Many of those poems tell stories about us: as Peace Corps volunteers in Bangladesh, our families and friends, our work, teaching in Chicago, attending graduate school in Miami, moving for a year to Romania. Katie will have predicted which poems teachers and colleagues will like best. She will have suggested, time and again, that I speak more directly and clearly about experience and avoid petty ornamentation. We will have talked about her favorite poems—B. H. Fairchild's "The Blue Buick," Catherine Bowman's "Spice Night"—as models of the elegant and heartfelt writing we both admire.

A few months after the funeral, in the nature preserve where we scattered Katie's ashes, I read the parts of "The Blue Buick" that she admired most. "The Blue Buick" is a long narrative tribute to Fairchild's memory of a young couple whose arrival and stay transform his world and inspire his eventual departure for California. I turn off my phone and sit Indian-style on the ground, self-conscious. It is cold, sunny. The words are hard to distinguish in the glare. I mumble when strangers approach on the path:

She made a kind of smile that wavered at the end.  
Life's been simplified for us. It's simple now.  
But of course she was talking to herself, not me.  
And I was thinking, this is it, how lives go on,  
this is how it happens, what I do not understand.

I wonder whether this homemade rite honor Katie's absence or merely expresses my desire to understand it. I am trying not to articulate my grief in crude distinctions: then and now, here and there, she and I. The fact of Katie's death and her absence. Already Katie is becoming an object of grief, an occasion. I cannot avoid it. The Katie I address in the nature preserve will listen. She must. She is not there.

The morning after Katie died, my brother and sister flew from Chicago and New York to Bucharest. I met them at the airport and felt both ashamed and relieved to cry as they walked out from customs. That afternoon I tried to explain the shame and the relief to a psychiatrist at the embassy. How I had stayed up the whole night next to Katie's body, knowing she was dead, afraid to sleep. The doctor spoke in clear and simple phrases. We talked to each other in the broadest terms about death, bears, grief, mountains, travel, country music. I did not know this language yet. It was new, confusing, powerful. I tried to tell him a story about Katie, and as I spoke, I heard again her crying for help as she died, and I could not distinguish her voice from my own.

A week after the funeral, I moved to Indiana to live with Ed's family. I planned my day around their routines and gradually established my own. My two nieces left for their middle school at seven and returned at three. I got out of bed around eight. My nephew, the youngest, had just started kindergarten. Most mornings Ed's wife, Beth, walked their son to the bus stop. Some mornings,

through the window, I would hear Ed starting his truck. He worked long hours as a contractor, and went rock-climbing every few weeks in Kentucky. Beth worked from home most mornings, but often we talked in the afternoons, ran errands together, and made lunch.

When it turned cold, I bought an electric blanket. My cats did not get along with the family pets, so I closed them into my room. All winter they sat under my desk lamp. In the spring they sat in the windowsill. Ed made bonfires in the side yard. That reminded me of mountains. On Katie's birthday we flew kites. At Christmas I drove to a friend's home in Vermont. One weekend I took a whiskey-tasting course at the local liquor store; Katie had liked Johnnie Walker, but I chose Glenmorangie. I took medications intermittently—orange sleeping pills, white anxiety pills. I developed a dry night cough, got strep, bronchitis. I convinced myself I was dying. I called the family doctor and demanded a TB screen. The test was negative. He suggested an allergy pill: I was allergic to my cats. He prescribed more sleeping pills.

Late mornings I heated oil in a pan until it smoked, poured in egg substitute to the rim, covered the top with cheese, flipped it, browned the cheese, and smothered the omelet with barbecue sauce. I ground four level tablespoons of Kenyan Special Blend and brewed coffee in a French press, then sat at the kitchen table and read the local paper. One day my name was mentioned in an editorial arguing for the construction of roundabouts to replace suburban traffic lights. I had talked to a woman outside the hardware store next to the franchise coffee shop at the strip mall, where I bought my groceries in the chain supermarket. I walked out from the cul-de-sac, down the street for six blocks, turned to another street, crossed the highway divider, and entered the parking lot. It took forty minutes to walk to the strip mall. It took seven minutes to make breakfast.

Some weekend evenings that first summer, I walked the kids across the state highway to the ice cream parlor. We counted cars,

played games on the sidewalk, and waved at neighbors. We timed our crossing with stoplights at the exit ramps. At the height of rush hour cars would line up seven and eight deep. We ran to the divider, across traffic, and up the embankment. I carried my nephew on my shoulders, so that he could keep pace. We arrived as-the-crow-flies to our destination and chose among forty-odd flavors, then stood at the bright pink-and-blue plastic counters, with double and triple scoops. We walked out into the heat, back across the highway.

On a blog about Katie I tried to say simple, direct things about grief, loss, and absence. I annotated photographs for friends and family. I responded to comments. I posted links to Katie's favorite songs, movies, and books and asked anyone who might synchronize witness and understanding to fill in the gaps. If there was no consistent perspective from which to render the memory of Katie's death or to remember the feeling in our marriage, then I could at least wonder earnestly about this quiet and understated observer who hoped he might one day become the ringleader, the unifying presence around which everyone now gathered to remember and grieve for Katie.

Wasn't Katie still my wife more than someone else's high school friend or college roommate?

A life that Katie and I had started six years earlier was the beginning of the life I lived now in Indiana. I said it over and over in therapy, but I wasn't sure there was a continuity at all. In-laws were no longer in-laws. Minor anecdotes anticipated a different life. A home in a city where I had never before lived contained photographs of a childhood Katie, whose ashes were clumped in the soil of her hometown in a different state. I would never again visit the country where she had died. I could make no permanent life anywhere. I wanted no life after our life.

*Don't put the horse before the cart, the therapist said. Take it in small pieces, one at a time.*

Much of Katie's life went missing from what I wrote on the blog and said to other people. Friends, family histories, secrets, fights: I did not actively exclude them, but I did not invite them into conversations, either. A polite consensus simplified certain silences. I told myself that what I omitted protected a fragile recovery; that I was not exploiting Katie's death, but rather being noble in the face of adversity; that I was distinguishing the occasion of my sorrow from its origin. The silences, I believed, somehow protected other people from *what they should never have to know*. But that was nonsense. To begin the story in Indiana rather than Romania meant I wasn't just putting the cart before the horse; I was insisting that, really, I had been pushing the cart all along.

We had gone with our friend Sara to Busteni, a few hours north of Bucharest, to celebrate my thirtieth birthday. Our guidebook said there were hostels on the ridge with rooms to let. At the trailhead we met a Romanian on holiday and two Israelis celebrating their honeymoon. We hiked together all day in clear weather: trails, waterfalls, rockslides, switchbacks, lakes. We arrived at the first hostel about an hour before sunset. There were no vacancies, but the kitchen was still open. We ate a dinner of pork soup, pickled vegetables, stale bread, and cold beer. Katie and I took a picture by a kilometer marker showing the highest point of the peak. Then we set out in two groups—me and the Israelis at the front; Katie, Sara, and the Romanian following—to walk the mile or so to the next hostel.

Just after dusk, at a long turn in the path, we noticed that Katie's group had fallen behind. The Israelis went ahead, while I waited at a stream. Glacial ice was melting on the ridge, and there was enough water to make crossing in the dark tricky. When Katie's group didn't come, I hiked back up the trail to find them. It was darker now. I followed one trail, but it led in the wrong direction. I doubled back toward the first hostel, whose light I could see in the distance. Near



the kilometer marker, I found pages from our guidebook strewn on the ground, next to Katie's backpack and shoes. I yelled her name. I tried to walk in circles, remembering an old Boy Scout trick about not getting lost. From about twenty yards off the trail Katie called back. *Don't come closer. Find a gun. Get back quickly.*

The trail was rocky and hard to follow at night. I kept losing my footing. I fell. I got up. The second hostel also had a porch light. A group of tourists standing under it were waving at me. The Romanian, they explained, had escaped the bear and run ahead of me to the hostel. Now they were watching for other survivors. Sara was running down the trail, too. She was just behind me. Katie was alone on the ridge.

Inside the hostel the owner refused to give me his rifle. With so many witnesses, he kept insisting, he would be fined for discharging a gun without a state permit. His business would be ruined. I tried to buy the rifle with American dollars. I offered to trade my passport for it. Instead he called for a hunting patrol from a nearby village.

I stumbled back to the trail. Three men staying at the hostel followed at a distance. It was hard to find the kilometer marker again. When we saw the bear and heard Katie's cries, the three men ran. I stood now ten, maybe fifteen yards from Katie, shining my flashlight across the ridge. I had a better view of the bear: large, brown, straddled over Katie, dipping its head back and forth across her torso, with white fur on its front paws and muzzle.

I sat up all night with Katie's body. Three doctors from nearby cities arrived to certify her death. They defaced Katie's body with various crude tests—eyelid check, stethoscope, CPR, reflexes—that only confirmed the obvious. I remember that as each took turns compressing her chest, I could hear ribs crack. I wondered how the eventual autopsy would distinguish this trauma from the bear attack. Probably, it wouldn't.

I understood immediately that there would be a funeral, an obituary, explanations, maybe at some point accusations, clarifications, and misunderstandings. I don't know why I was thinking about it. I imagined it: standing in the first few pews of the church in Illinois with the faux-gothic exterior and uncomfortable wood benches. The spread of food in the basement after the service. In a diner across the street, people who grieved for Katie might ask questions, then decide to blame me, hate me, or feel genuinely sorry for me. I was a witness now and a young widower. I did not know any witnesses of bear attacks or young widowers. Someone thought to cover Katie's body, and as the night went on, I started to fear it. Whose body was under the tarp? Katie's body was under the tarp.

In Indiana my taste in television evolved. I became suspicious of representations of suffering, especially gratuitous violence. What was the point of imagining bloodlust and apocalypse, if not to enjoy it? I preferred alternative logics—superheroes, universes, Texas—and comedies. They rejected finality. I found comfort in their repetitions. What did it matter that I was real and the people I watched were not? I felt present by proxy in constant variations on redemption: charity, sublimation, self-actualization. Even the most iconoclastic and antinarrative shows—*Seinfeld*, *The Larry Sanders Show*, *Lost*, *The Sopranos*—eventually grounded relationships in longevity, delivered moral comeuppances, and established continuities where none seemed to exist. Successful series—*X-Files*, *Battlestar Galactica*—generated spinoffs. Writers pursued in new series the subject matter, stylistic flourishes, and ideas that had interested them in previous ones. A habit of continuation had the ironic effect of making it *feel* like my favorite shows never really went off the air, when in fact it was the stories themselves that repeated and therefore resisted closure.

Sometimes, after I returned a disc or checked out a new one, I stopped in at the chain bookstore across the street. I poked through

tall displays of bestsellers and new releases, then the poetry and magazine racks, and finally, inevitably, the self-help aisle. It seemed to be the largest section in the store. *Personal Growth—Grief* targeted a demographic three, four, and five decades older than my own. Wistful elders looked out plaintively from dust jackets; they seemed to reach out to each other, around me, across titles and spines. Sometimes just a hand filled the cover, or a nature scene, a gravesite, a blank white page marked with the singular, patronizing jargon of consolation. *Coping. Grieving. Making Sense.* I tried to imagine the subsection where I would find some particular instruction after Katie's death:

Personal Growth—Grief—Animal Attack—Bear—Coward

Personal Growth—Grief—Young Widower—Survivor—Hopelessness

Personal Growth—Grief—Youth—Widowed—Blank Slate—Free

Personal Growth—Grief—Violence—Witness—Failed Husband

I bought books and did my best to read them. It was reassuring, even comforting, to see their titles stacked neatly on my bedside table each night. I might glean, without intention, some cumulative wisdom. With enough time I could pursue recovery. For now my room was filled with dubious comforts: sleeping pills, anxiety pills, allergy pills, earplugs, antacids, a humidifier, a white noise machine.

Ed, ten years Katie's senior, was nearly her physical twin: slender framed, square jawed, dark features and those same light blue eyes. Friends and neighbors remarked on the resemblance constantly, though at first I didn't see it. Ed didn't *really* look like Katie to me, but he told many of the same family stories. He smiled, paused extra beats for jokes, and shuffled across rooms with Katie's easy grace. Sometimes, when he did not act like Katie—his voice inflecting in slow turns between words, his sense of humor less sharp—I was surprised to feel disappointment at the divergence.

Those first weeks in Indiana, Ed and I went everywhere together, out for walks, to movies, to the city park near his house. We drove his truck to new neighborhoods to do advance work for his tuck-pointing business. Everywhere, chimneys stood in disrepair, magnificent houses with satellite dishes and two or three exposed joints worn through. The recession was a boom time for home repairs: people did what they could to stem the loss of their home's value. On the roofs, Ed explained, he could get a better sense of the damage. We wrote down addresses, so that Ed could return the next morning, or week, to pitch an estimate.

At night we sat on the back porch smoking clove cigarettes, Katie's favorite. The sugared filter was sweet on my lips, the nicotine strong and heavy in my lungs. My head seemed to lift a little from my shoulders, and it felt good to say everything I could think to say, to talk about Katie and not hold anything back. I saw no reason to know things about Katie and not share them with the people who had loved her.

The late-summer Indiana heat relented a little earlier each night. In the dark I could see less and less of Ed, but I heard his voice. Really, we both knew something about Katie that the other person did not. We traded these stories like two kinds of currency: Katie's childhood for her adult life and ambitions. The gap between us was something to narrow. Already close, we made a new bond of getting to know Katie better through each other's eyes: the little sister with whom Ed grew up and the wife who had been my best friend.

There was another side to this proximity. Each time we talked, I stemmed the low-level, persistent guilt for how much I still loved Katie's family and for how my enjoyment of that connection seemed only to intensify in the days and weeks after her death. We grieved together. We grew closer. If the guilt was tangible, real, and unavoidable, then so too was the affection. I worried what would happen if I ever became, in their eyes, unsympathetic.

I had wanted to survive Katie's death in Romania; now, in Indiana, something beyond grief insisted still on survival, as though I were courting some second life, free of the obligations and structures of the first. It might never be so certain and stable, or insulated and naïve, but it would be entirely my own. Anything might happen next. I was grieving but healthy. I had been married before and liked it. A certain undeniable hopefulness twinned with the sense of debt, proportionally, as though each should only magnify the other.

Perhaps Katie's death protected me now and made me a kind of talisman to the people I loved. The sheer improbability of the circumstances of her death could make all of us exempt, I thought, by association, from such future calamity. More and more, it seemed, I could hardly remember that night myself. I had gone up one side of the mountain with Katie. I had come down the other side with her body.

After fights, or to get a rise out of me, Katie was fond of singing the chorus to Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game." I understood that she meant to explain something about her feelings and also to draw a contrast between the trauma in her life and the absence of trauma in my own. In high school she had rolled a conversion van on a rural highway and walked away with minor injuries. After her parents divorced, she had lived with her grandfather during the end of his life. One brother had died suddenly, while we were in the Peace Corps, from complications following a common illness. Katie's sister had lost a daughter in childbirth. Loss was, if not an entirely common experience, then something to anticipate and expect. Katie found little to admire in its denial.

On my desk in Indiana, I arranged a few objects. A roll of candies that Katie liked. A framed photo of us on the ridge. Her St. Christopher medal. At the strip mall one day I purchased a large

pumpkin-spice candle. The next time I sat down to write, I arranged the objects into a new order. I lit the candle and moved our photo off to the side. I didn't like that emphasis. So I switched them. I taped loose photographs on the wall. The metal on a tulip engraving that Katie had given me for a birthday present began to peel. I stacked some pocket texts on top of it. I took rocks from the garden to prop everything in place. Before her last trip to the Republic of Georgia, Katie had left a miniature plush Paddington on my pillow. I turned him so that the tag (*Please look after this bear*) faced toward me. Over time I added to the arrangement. I took to tending it a little each time I sat down to write. A map of Bucharest. Some letters and a bandanna. Individually they were bric-a-brac and hodge-podge. Together they were a place made sacred by association. A shrine.

*Katie is not the intellectual experience of a grieving mind.* I wrote this over and over in my journal, but it was not quite right.

I had no shrine in my home until I built one. For a while I added to it.

I will not rebuild the shrine. It was a temporary and important place for acknowledgment. I have other places now more permanently sacred to me: Indiana, Katie's hometown, the nature preserve where we spread her ashes. One I can begin to approach now, if only on the page and in memory: a mountain ridge in Eastern Europe. I hope to never visit it again. I wrote most mornings in Indiana my confusion, then my guilt, Katie's work and life, the story of our marriage, and finally my memory of that day. The shrine grew with what I added to it. And it is lost forever.