

2016

Should I Still Wish

John W. Evans

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Praise for John W. Evans's
Young Widower

Winner of the 2014 Foreword Reviews
INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award

“In this honest depiction of his deceased wife and their loving but complicated marriage, and in his willingness to end his story without easy redemption, Evans avoids the predictable arc of many memoirs. . . . Thanks to honest and sadly beautiful books like *Young Widower*, we are at the very least helpless together. We can't go on, we'll go on.”

—*Los Angeles Review of Books*

“A tragic story told with such grace and artistry that the complex exploration of grief is finally revealed as redemptive. The honesty of John Evans's writing is unfaltering and deeply impressive.”

—Kevin Casey, author of *A State of Mind*

“While the haunting account of the day Katie died is especially riveting, it is the unfolding and cathartic grieving process that underpins and elevates this heartbreaking tale.”

—*Booklist*

“For those times when life is bitter and unreasonable, there are stories like John's—books that accept the ugliness of both death and survival and remind us to be grateful and angry and preciousy alive.”

—*Books J'Adore*

“An urgent, palpably emotional account of coping with extreme grief.”

—*Kirkus*

“Though the tragedy of Evans’s title is borne out, his memoir brims with maturity and authenticity, and it should find a ready readership with those who have lived through incredible loss. *Young Widower* is both a loving tribute to a cherished spouse and a testament to survival.”

—*ForeWord Reviews*

“This book brims with unforgettable images and moments, but Evans’s greatest achievement is allowing readers to see his wife, Katie, as he did—not as a saint or as a martyr, but as a passionate and dynamic and flawed woman whom he deeply loved.”

—Justin St. Germain, author of *Son of a Gun*

“A riveting and devastating chronicle of the tragedy that brutally ended a life and a marriage, and the aftermath of grief. Told with uncompromising candor and poetic precision, *Young Widower* is an unforgettable memoir of unrelenting beauty.”

—Patricia Engel, author of *The Veins of the Ocean*

SHOULD I STILL WISH

AMERICAN LIVES

Series editor: Tobias Wolff

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Should I Still Wish

A MEMOIR

John W. Evans

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
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Set in Garamond Premier by John Klopping.
Designed by N. Putens.

*for Walt, Sam, and Monty,
who might wonder,*

and

*for Cait,
always*

Thence issuing we again beheld the stars.

—*Inferno*, Canto XXXIV

Remember this, I remember telling myself,
hang on to this. I could feel it all skittering
away, whatever conjunction of beauty and
improbability I had stumbled upon.

—Patricia Hampl, “Red Sky in the Morning”

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SHOULD I STILL WISH

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Leaving Indiana

I left Indiana and drove toward happiness. I meant to get far to one side of the map. In two or three weeks, I told myself, my car would take me across the Mississippi River, through the Badlands, into the Rockies, and out of the High Desert, arriving finally to hills at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, golden in late summer, where I would sublet a small apartment from the friend of a friend and begin my next life. That I could name the place, *San Francisco*, and had been asked to go there for work meant that no one would fault me for my leaving. I was thirty-one years old, healthy, and still reasonably flush with insurance money. I had someone else's home to squat in, and a reason besides death to continue living in the world.

I had lived in Indiana with Ed and his family for a year and seven weeks. The night before I left, we went to dinner at the Italian restaurant. We drank expensive cocktails and ordered the specials. I made

a toast and picked up the bill, fought back tears and tried the usual small jokes, and of course, it didn't feel like nearly enough of a gesture of thanks, and nothing at all like an end. For every new way we had imagined to say good-bye that summer, from the impromptu mall photo booth visit to the movie-plex binge on romantic comedies and space epics to our last-last trip to Baskin Robbins, in letters and collages and a terrific block party where neighbors inscribed with good wishes a *Far Side* anthology while we mixed cocktails in a cake mixer and sang the back catalog of Billy Joel, the prospect of my absence seemed only to stunt the emotional asymptotes, lengthening our days as we approached my departure date. Surely, we agreed, un-tacking the wall calendar and boxing my books, I wasn't *really leaving*. All this time, I think we meant, I hadn't only been their sad interloper.

All summer, I had sent letters and packages to a post office in the Sierras. Cait lived in San Francisco, but she was spending the summer at her family's cabin. We were old friends from the Peace Corps. Cait had come to our wedding and, three years later, to Katie's funeral. In the first months after Katie's death, Cait had mailed care packages from the Bay Area: sourdough bread, Pride pins, a *Hang in There, Kitty* picture book, a jar of fog. "This jar smells like mustard," my niece had said, frowning. A few weeks later, she swiped it from my desk and stuck it under her bed. Now, a carpenter named Dave was rebuilding the cabin deck. Sometimes when I called in the middle of the day, he and I would talk about the marmot slowly eating its way through the cabin walls or the free movie playing that week at the firehouse. When Cait called back in the evenings, I would disappear into the back room or yard. Some nights, I walked to the end of the subdivision and back, home and back again, running down the details of my day, the last hours since we had spoken, listening to her voice as the streetlights came on in sequence and around corners, lighting the path through the park where, on the Fourth of July, I held my finger in my ear and watched the sky hold the shapes of electric flowers that changed colors as their centers disappeared. Cait said she liked the print of the Barton Hays strawberries that I had sent from the

Indianapolis Museum of Art. So there really *was* fruit in the Midwest. Had I read *Cannery Row* yet?

After our good-bye dinner, at a bar down the street, I drank beer with Ed and his friend. It was muggy, even for August. Water beaded our pint glasses. We talked about mountain biking, rock climbing, road trips, and finally, California. How long would I stay there? Where did I want to live next? I took the map out of my pocket and opened it on the table. We traced the route, agreeing it would be a beautiful drive, whether I went north through the Badlands, as I planned, or south through Kansas City, my hometown. South, we agreed, was probably faster. North would have the better trails. Before last call, we drank a shot of Katie's favorite whiskey. Through the window of the bar, the cars lit up, shook off the rain, and disappeared. The family that had taken me in and loved me after the great tragedy of my life, entirely and without hesitation, would tomorrow head back to school. In a few weeks, my room off the garage would become again the office.

The next morning, I made breakfast and drove my nieces to the bus. They waved from their seats, crowding near the back, smiling and waving. Wasn't this my year of grief and tragedy, as I had planned it, finally coming to its end? Already, the parents of the other children on the bus had gone back inside their houses. The street was quiet. Even my hybrid engine, idling, did not turn over. I watched the bus to the end of the block, where its hazards stopped flashing. The safety stop closed shut. The driver made a wide turn out of the subdivision. I pressed a button, pulled a lever into gear, and rolled silently through the light.

*

As the car picked up speed, my body felt lighter. I could not quite name the feeling: nostalgia, but also a familiar resolve, tinged with frustration, to push on and past and through. With Lucinda Williams, I passed Lafayette. Katie had always called Ed from the Purdue University overpass to say that we were less than an hour away from Indianapolis. Past Remington, I cued up the Judds, Susan Werner,

Randy Travis: three hours of freight traffic and soy fields, truck stops with diners, and the Tippecanoe war memorial, all the way to Hobart, the one last small-big town east of the Skyway where, four years earlier, Katie and I had married.

I hadn't been back to the County Line Orchard since, though it occurred to me, as I passed the retro-chic gold-mirrored façade of the Radisson, bronzing the highway with its long shadows, that I might go one last time. The place would be quiet out of season; in the middle of the week, almost certainly between weddings, with no apple blossoms pasting the ground and no show tractors baling hay. But the lacquered trellis in the loft of the barn, wrapped in tea lights, might look again at least as quaint as I remembered it. The stain on the wood would still dull the rafter lights. A year after the wedding, Katie had sent the wedding planner two deep-dish pizzas from Gino's East, frozen and packed in dry ice, delivered by private driver, to say thank you for making the day beautiful and memorable. It had cost us, what, a hundred dollars? The gesture had seemed so extravagant. Katie had thought of it right away: the planner's favorite Chicago haunt. Did she live still in the house down the road? Did she know about Katie's death? Would she at least remember the pizza? There was a clearing about halfway through the orchard where the owners staged antique tractors. With me in ridiculous two-tone Doc Martens and the elegant suit my father had picked out, Katie and I had taken our wedding photos there. Twined with branches and run through the machines with purple and green ribbons—our wedding colors—the place, in memory, might again seem the beginning of a long and happy life.

Widower. All year I had hated the word. I tried not to use it in conversation. For a while I had even insisted: *widow*. *Widow* seemed more quietly distinguished. Thinking I misunderstood the convention, someone had written after the funeral to say that I was misusing *widow* by not adding the *-er*. I shot back an impromptu near-thesis about the virtues of gender neutrality in a liberal age, as though any sense of the political governed my reluctance to join the world's team

of failed husbands. Really, I hated how collective and indistinct the word made us, as though I had only to stand at the wall and welcome the next hysterical sap to say that this was how it was now. A part of our life was over. We had not stopped its ending.

I-465 made a circle around Indianapolis. All year, it had been my rim-and-spoke way station to the world, the place from which I could leave for a time and go anywhere else, before gradually drifting back. Always, I came back. I had only to pick an exit, drive fast, and when I was done—tired, or lonely, or simply feeling I had run out the clock—I raced back to my beautiful and temporary home, where I felt loved and safe. I had mostly gone east that year, to see friends and family. I had been to Vermont and back, Virginia and back, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York City, and always, back to Indiana. I knew the sequence of exits from the interstate in both directions by their neon signs: Gas & Food, Mega Shops, A Better Tomorrow. At the northernmost exit, the numbers reset. A short ramp doglegged into pasture and industrial farms. The larger interstate merged from all sides, pointing in one direction toward Ohio, the other toward Illinois.

Through construction lanes I followed heavy trucks overfilled with gravel. Every few miles, our logjam broke, and a fine dust of pellets rattled my windshield, blowing a sour tang of coal and fire through the vents. Fields on both sides of the interstate were green, still, but at the end of the season the color had dulled a little. The corn had begun to split. Could I really stop here and still leave Indiana? All year, I had wanted to stop. I had told myself I would do it. Now, I did nothing and waited. Already, I was past the orchard. Merrillville was a blur. Hobart was miles back. I kept pace with the luxury sedans and sports cars. They knew to watch for cops. A few lengths back, I matched their speed for a mile or so, but always, the faster cars opened the gaps between exits and quickly sped away.

*