

*I've got a home in gloryland that outshines the sun*

*Way beyond the blue*

-traditional

It was the summer of 2010, and Evan Barker was biting balloons and kicking over folding chairs in Matt Nelson's backyard when he found out Jason had killed himself.

The balloon-biting and chair-kicking was part of a self-righteous tantrum over seeing Cody Markowicz kiss Andrea Waters earlier that evening. The tantrum was part jealousy, part post-adolescent frustration, part gloomy intoxication, and part rage on behalf of Andrea's besmirched dignity.

He was roaring drunk, and he found the balloons popped easiest and most satisfyingly when he sank his front incisors into them, like a beaver with a ball. He would rip one from its string, sink his teeth in, feel the puff of escaping air, throw the remains to the dirt like a used condom, then grab another one and repeat.

There were rows and rows of balloons strung along the deck, pink and white, hung festively for Matt's younger sister Tiffany's birthday party. Evan tore them from their strings, chomping away.

When he was out of balloons to bite, he walked over to the rows of folding chairs set up in front of the deck and began kicking them over. Some folded up and fell to the dirt with a muted clang, some fell over on their sides.

He'd seen Cody lean down and peck Andrea on the lips upon their earlier departures. Andrea had been going around saying her goodbyes, giving friendly hugs to everyone and saying, "See you soon." Evan had relished his hug, blissfully enjoying the brief sensation of her torso against his and her arms around his shoulders. Hugs were the only female contact he'd ever had.

Andrea—a demure social butterfly who worked as a secretary at the Triple A—had walked over to Cody, who was a square-jawed, tow-headed former linebacker who worked for his dad's HVAC company. Cody had hugged Andrea tightly, and then, as they were letting go, he'd leaned in and kissed her. It was so quick and so casual it seemed as though Cody had done it almost on accident. Andrea herself had seemed quite flustered. As far as Evan knew, they weren't involved in any official way, and he hadn't even seen them so much as talk to each other that entire afternoon.

Once the deed was done, Cody walked off to his car without a word, and Andrea had fixed her bangs and walked in the opposite direction to her own car. Evan didn't think anyone other than him had noticed the incident.

Something about the exchange had made Evan very angry, and not just because of the jealousy he felt. Andrea was pretty and smart, with an open friendliness to her that most women seemed to have grown out of by twenty, and he'd been hoping to make some inroads with her that evening. But the hours had passed and he hadn't had the balls to even talk to her very much, and then she was leaving, and then Cody had kissed her like that. Like it was nothing. And he'd gotten away with it. Cody was no prize himself. Why did he, of all people, get to do things like that? If Evan had pulled that kind of move, Andrea probably would've screamed.

A couple hours and several shots later, with Tiffany off to her boyfriend's basement and Matt's parents safely tucked into their California king-bed upstairs, Evan was wandering around Matt's sizable backyard fuming to himself when he'd come across the rows of balloons tied to the deck. He'd snatched one and tried to pop it, squeezing it between his hands. It swelled outward like a bladder, refusing to explode. He growled in frustration and bit into it. It burst out of existence. He felt better. He seized another and his game began.

Evan's friends sat around a hearty bonfire, farther down the hill that comprised Matt's backyard. They were all drinking from various bottles of liquor.

"The fuck are you DOING?" he heard his friend Rob Van Gilder call up, as the racket from Evan's chair- kicking reached them.

"Nothing," Evan called back down.

His phone began to buzz.

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>Be Evan.

>Be several summers back, freshman year of high school.

>Be at Rob Van Gilder's birthday party.

>Party is at the Mill Pond inside Island Lake State Park.

>Seventy percent of this communal body of water is surrounded by grass and swamp and woods, but there's a sandy beach on the southern end that's heavily populated in the summer months.

>Rob has elected to hold his low-key fourteenth birthday party here, and the only chaperone is his laid-back mother, who sits at the picnic table and discreetly sips tequila out of a water bottle.

>Evan is both ecstatic and nervous as hell about being here. Because, as it turns out, there are girls at this party.

>Rob's girlfriend Becky and Josh's girlfriend Monica have brought their friends Allison and Nina.

>Girls usually aren't at parties Evan goes to. But then, Evan doesn't really go to parties to begin with.

>He's never had a date, never asked anyone out, never gone to a dance with a partner, never had the courage to speak to any girl about such things, nothing.

>And now here they are in their swimsuits--bikinis for Allison and Becky, and one-pieces for Nina and Monica--lounging on their towels and sunning themselves while chatting and flirting with Rob and Josh and Matt.

>Evan isn't sure why he's been invited, as Rob and he aren't exactly close buddies. He has a sneaking suspicion that Rob's mother had something to do with it. She's the one person that's talked to him the most, asking him about school and his parents and his older brother, who's going to be a senior next fall. Evan even sat up front in the van on the way over.

>Evan brought his swimsuit but he's insecure about his fleshy white midsection and so he stays at the picnic table with Rob's mom. He bullshits with her and eats Fritos and drinks bottled Coke while Rob and the others cavort on the sand.

>They've been there since one or two o'clock, and everyone but Evan has been in and out of the water several times.

>Becky is a friendly sort and she gave Evan a hello hug when he was dropped off at Rob's house. But aside from quick introductions, none of the other girls have talked to him the whole afternoon, and he doesn't have the sack to go and join the conversation.

>Evan munches his Fritos and sucks his Coke down. His bare feet drum apprehensively on the grass below the bench.

>Rob and the others get up and head for the water, Josh and Matt charging ahead and belly flopping in with tremendous splashes.

> Rob calls up to Evan.

>Hey Barker, come down here, we need four on four.

>Rob's mom looks at Evan and smiles. She's a well-aged lady with bleached hair who still goes tanning once a week.

>Get down there, tiger, she says.

>Evan tentatively walks down the scorching sand, leaving his shirt on.

>He takes two steps into the waves and stops in the shallow end with his arms crossed.

>Rob and Matt and Josh have formed a triangle with the girls in the center. Now they open up to form a square with Evan at the fourth corner.

>What are we doing? Evan asks.

>Rob holds a small nerf football.

>We're playing four-way catch, he says. Bros against hoes.

>He tosses the ball to Evan.

>Evan fumbles a bit but regains his composure and quickly tosses the ball to Josh.

>No balls for you, Josh taunts the girls.

>The girls feign offense and charge towards Josh but he flits the ball back to Rob.

>The girls all pile on Josh and he sits down in the water hard, arms and legs a-tangle.

>The game appears to have no specific purpose other than the guys keeping the ball away from the girls.

>Becky and the others form a rowdy clump and stomp through the knee-deep water, sloshing it up white and wild as they advance on whoever has the ball.

>They tackle Rob when he fakes a throw and nearly get the ball away from him but he tosses it to Josh and Josh tosses it to Matt and then Matt tosses it back to Rob.

>Evan stands shin-deep in the water, arms still crossed, wind in his hair, watching and gradually wading in farther, keeping the square of males closed around the noisy females as the struggle shifts the eight of them into deeper waters.

>He notices everyone nearby is shooting irritated glances at the rambunctious teenagers.

>He's now waist deep and his t-shirt is getting wet.

>He begins to contemplate retreating back to the picnic table as the girls pile on Rob again.

>Finally, the girls split up. Becky guards Rob and Monica guards Josh. As Allison and Nina converge on him, Matt has no choice but to toss the ball up and over to Evan.

>Evan snatches it out of the air and waits for Allison and Nina to charge him, but both of them just stop and crouch down in the water with the waves lapping at their shoulders.

>Evan holds the dripping ball in his outstretched right hand.

>It's so cold, says Allison. She shivers.

>COME ON, NINA, GO GET HIM, yells Becky.

>Nah, I'm good, says Nina, wiping water out of her eyes. I need a breather here.

>She doesn't look at Evan.

>Allison wrings her hair out. Becky and Rob and Josh and Monica wrestle with each other.

>Becky breaks free of Rob and sashes over to Evan. She makes a swipe for the ball but he dodges her easily.

>She misses and falls to her hands and knees.

>Allison and Nina still don't make a move for it. They stay crouched in the water.

>Is there any more potato salad, Nina asks, looking up at the picnic table where Rob's mom sits, checking her Blackberry.

>Here, Barker, says Rob, clapping his hands for Evan to throw him the ball.

>Evan lobs the ball to Rob.

>Instantly, the game is back on. Becky leads the charge and soon Rob is submerged in a frothing frenzy of white.

>Monica leaps to the surface, the ball clutched in her right hand.

>I got it! I got it! I win! I win!

>Josh snatches the ball from behind and chokeslams her into the water.

>Evan stands there and watches some more, the bottom of his t-shirt soaked. He's cold.

>The game goes on.

>Evan continues to stand there, his arms clasped around his manboobs. He waits for them to pass the ball again but none of them are even looking in his direction.

>They splash deeper and deeper until they're up to their necks. Evan doesn't follow and the square is broken.

>Evan feels a number of the nearby beachgoers looking at him, wondering what he's doing standing there in the water by himself, and after another few moments, he slogs up the shore, back to his place at the picnic table.